



5-11-2013

Dancing With the Gods; Santeria's Historical Context in Eastern Cuba

Lauren Reed
Butler University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/ugtheses>



Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reed, Lauren, "Dancing With the Gods; Santeria's Historical Context in Eastern Cuba" (2013).
Undergraduate Honors Thesis Collection. 234.
<https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/ugtheses/234>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

BUTLER UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

Honors Thesis Certification

Please type all information in this section:

Applicant Lauren Reed
Thesis title Dancing With the Gods; Santería's Historical Context in Eastern Cuba

Intended date of commencement May 11, 2013

Read, approved, and signed by:

Thesis adviser(s) Cynthia Pratt CP May 8, 2013
Reader(s) Susan McGuire SM 5/21/2013
Certified by Judith Harper Marvel 9-16-13
Director, Honors Program Date

For Honors Program use:

Level of Honors conferred: University Cum Laude
Departmental University Honors Program

Dancing With the Gods; Santería's Historical Context in Eastern Cuba

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of Dance

Jordan College of the Arts

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Lauren Reed

3/17/13

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Early Influence	4
First Steps	5
Initial Research Goals	6
Changing Focus	7
Limitations in Research	8
Historical Context	12
The Atlantic Slave Trade	12
Ifa	13
Syncretism	19
Orisha Syncretism	20
The Orishas	22
How the Orishas Were Syncretized	27
Rituals and Practices	33
Aspects of Rituals	36
The Practices	39
Drums and Songs	43
Dances of the Orishas	45
Orishas in Social Dancing Today	48
Conclusion	51
Acknowledgements	53
Glossary	54
Bibliography	55

Abstract

Santería is a religion that originated in Cuba in the 1600's and grew out of the tensions between two ethnic groups: Spanish slave masters and West African slaves. Their religions— Catholicism and Ifa, respectively— coalesced to create a syncretism, or amalgamation of multiple concepts. This syncretism, Santería, is an extraordinarily complex religion through which adherents communicate with God and deities called orishas using prayer, music, dance, divination, and rituals. Though many claim certain truths about Santería, they are often contradictory and unfounded, making it difficult to accurately understand the religion. However, with effort, these truths can be pieced together to describe a religion completely engrained in present day Cuban society.

Introduction

Early Influence

Research begins with curiosity and curiosity often begins before we are aware that we are curious. My ten years in Spanish language immersion schools, my twelve years of dance training, my passion for diverse religions, and my interest in anthropology formed the surprisingly connected roots for my curiosity and this thesis. However, the clear beginning of this project, if I had to pinpoint it, would be a less than scholarly conversation I had with a friend over a year ago.

He asked me if I believed all dance to be innately sexual. I answered that it was not. I believed that, at times, dance can be sexual but it is not constantly and innately so. I had been dancing for many years, and the majority of my experience involved obsessing over details and it was difficult to think of those experiences as sexual. My friend and I continued our deliberation, citing examples of movement we considered sexual or not and pondering the aspects of dance that cause it to be interpreted as symbolically sexual against the dancer's intention.

Though I was not convinced, I understood his point. There was a deeper connection between dance and sexuality than my friend and I were able to perceive, some connection more subtle than literal shimmying and thrusting. The mystery of this deeper connection raised many new questions and led me on the path of inquiry to this thesis. I still do not know what this deep connection is—a personally frustrating revelation—but I can, at least, point to its value as the question that fueled research of other, answerable questions.

First Steps

My first effort to learn about Santería in an educational setting was a Perspective in the Creative Arts class at Butler University called Latin Dances, African Roots, taught by Susan McGuire. My impetus to take this course was a jazz dance class in which my teacher, Cynthia Pratt, identified a thrusting motion done on the ground as a rumba movement. It was a practical example of my curiousness of the nature of sexuality, and I decided to pursue it through the PCA course.

A few months later, I learned of a trip Cynthia Pratt took to study dance and religion in Eastern Cuba. After some research and help from James Lepore, a professor at George Mason University who leads a similar trip, I traveled to Cuba for eleven days in January of 2012. As I did not know focus of my thesis at that point, the experience abroad was an opportunity to acclimate myself, if only fractionally, to Cuba's culture. Again, this was a step of my thesis in which my interest was piqued, though I did not gather any data while I was there.

Within two weeks of my return from Cuba, I decided to continue my research through Butler Summer Institute. However, in early February 2012 the scope of my thesis was much larger than it is now. I intended to compare the correlations and differences between Cuban rumba and one of Cuba's popular religions, Santería, with American ballet and Christianity. As I proposed my thesis topic to the Honors department and prepared for a summer of research with BSI, I was grateful for the many professors who pushed me to whittle my topic down to something more manageable; my original concept was vaster than I imagined. By the time BSI officially began, my focus was narrowed to the connections between guaguanco (a form of rumba), Santería, and

sexuality in the Santería community in Santiago, Cuba. With this more manageable topic, I began my research.

Over the nine-week course of the BSI program, I researched with the goal of gathering enough material for a final presentation to the BSI faculty and the Butler Undergraduate Research Conference in April of 2013. I read primary and secondary sources to learn about Cuba's historical background as well as the intricacies of Santería and Cuban dance. I watched videos with Cuban dancing and even took (admittedly, Americanized) salsa dance classes to experience Cuban movement. I also conducted interviews with members of American dance companies and a Cuban musician. Eventually, I realized that the availability of these resources would further direct what kind of information I would seek.

I was fortunate to return to Cuba in January of 2013 on a Campbell Grant from Butler's religion department. At this point, I had completed basic research and knew enough to conduct eight interviews with Cuban dancers and singers. The interviews helped me further narrow my research topic what it was when I began writing, the role of dancing in Santería.

Initial Research Goals

Living in America presented some problems for my research. Ideally, I would have spent more time in Cuba and gathered all my interview data from Santeros who lived in Santiago. I conducted as many interviews in Cuba as I could, but my data from American interviewees was useful as a point of reference. For example, I interviewed members of Luna Negra Dance Theater, a dance company in Chicago that acts as a

vehicle for Latin choreographers to choreograph contemporary dance works. These dancers did not have any connection with Santería or guaguanco, but their insights into the nature of sexuality and dance as a community builder were useful in my exploration of Santería and dance. Through my interviews, I sought information that related directly to my thesis, but when, more often than not, this was not possible, I sought information that would help me process general themes and understand the American lens through which I was observing the interview and literary data.

Coming to terms with this necessity was natural because of the size and scope of my subjective data. My interview questions were similar for each candidate, but because the responses were all opinions based on personal perceptions, the data I collected was scattered and difficult to piece into solid conclusions. My willingness to accept interviewees and information that did not fit so neatly with my topic gave me much more material to draw from, diverse and conflicting though it was.

I also became painfully aware of my cultural biases which make impartial research impossible. Though I genuinely wanted to understand the Cuban culture and paradigm, my upbringing as a Caucasian, American female and the perspectives that accompany that background constantly affected the way I comprehended the research. I looked past my biases as much as possible and attempted to merely present information rather than unintentionally ascribe it new meaning. However, because human biases are impossible to shed, I must acknowledge my work as an exploration of Cuban culture through an American lens. More specifically, it's an exploration of Cuban culture through my personal American lens.

Perhaps the reason I was drawn to this topic in the first place was the element of mystery and the—eventually realized—impossibility of my questions. If it was not clear to me then, it is now; this research is about asking my own difficult questions and accepting answers even if they did not seem to fit. Fittingly, the lack of restriction in my interviews, my experience abroad in Cuba, and my research's application in my own life and dance career are all consistent with that mystery and incomprehensibility.

Changing Focus

My attention was drawn to this topic to explore allusions to sexual love in Santería; there seemed to be elements of Santerian rituals that American culture would define as sexual, such as certain seemingly provocative dance movements. However, it would be superficial to consider any allusions to sexual love an individual part of Santería and pursuing them would only highlight my own cultural bias while uncovering nothing about the essence of Santería. Sexual love in its literal sense (i.e. sexual intercourse) is not itself a distinct aspect of Santería; rather, as a vital part of life, discussion of sexual love is not stigmatized in within Santero circles I have researched and, therefore, allusions to sexual love are not excluded from Santería. This realization caused me to instead focus on the complicated nature of Santería with dance and allusions to any aspect of life being natural extensions of the religion. Through research, my initial choice theme of sexuality in dance faded to reveal the actual focus to be Santería itself and all its inseparable parts, leading me to a more profound study of the religion.

Even to understand the basis of Santería requires historical background of the Atlantic Slave Trade and the religion Ifa. Once the historical context, history of Ifa, and all aspects of Santería are described, it will become apparent that these parts collectively form Santería and, together, address the fragments of the religion I originally assumed to be distinct.

Limitations in Research

My research of Ifa and Santería was not without its problems; while it is certainly possible to find scholarly writing on these religions, the information found in those sources was often inconsistent so that further research obscured rather than clarified ideas. The same held true even among my interview candidates. For example, when I asked interviewees about a Cuban social dance called Guaguango, one man described it in detail as a type of rumba, but another woman insisted that the term Guaguango was not even used anymore in present day Cuba.¹ Discrepancies like this one are very common among research on Ifa and Santería. The reasons for this relate to the nature of Ifa.

Enough similarities between Catholicism and Ifa were found that they were able to interact and exchange with each other. However, one fundamental difference between them causes Ifa to have fewer consistencies than Catholicism. In Catholicism, there is a single leader, the pope, who leads those who establish the stances of the Church. While these stances, logically, mean something slightly different to each adherent, part of being Catholic includes choosing to believe in the papacy's authority to make decisions. This is not to say that there is never dissent or change Catholic doctrine, but it is difficult for changes to be made. For example, Martin Luther's rejection of the Catholic church's

¹ Sánchez Brady and Almarales Corona, interview

practices caused him exiled by the church. Such drastic measures taken against dissenters made it difficult for Catholics to deny the pope and centralized teachings of the Catholic church.

The opposite is true in Ifa. While there are revered religious leaders in Ifa, there is not a single leader of the religion and no single doctrine that must be followed by a devout adherent. Due to the lack of a centralized power and concrete doctrine, emphasis is placed upon orthopraxis, right actions, rather than orthodoxy, right doctrine.² The absence of orthodoxy in Ifa, unlike the Catholic church, encourages adherents to adapt Ifa to fit their lifestyles. This accounts for many differences in ideas and terms among adherents. It also made it easier for Ifa to adapt when it was confronted with the looming presence of Catholic slave masters during the slave trade.

Religion adapts to its surroundings, so it is not identical from country to country, city to city, and even person to person. This is especially true in African religious traditions. Returning to Brandon's assertion that African religion was interwoven in African culture rather than a distinct part of it, it logically follows that African religions would have a lot of variance. Religions that are ultra sensitive to their cultural surroundings are significantly affected by distinct traits of families and communities, causing differences in practice based upon traits of individual groups. In Ifa, these differences have become amplified over time and followed by more splits as it is passed down over generations causing significant differences in thought, much like an evolutionary tree. Though the many ways of practicing Santería have a common ancestor in Ifa, many offshoots have occurred to adapt to new surroundings. The same has

² De la Torre 102

occurred to some extent in Christianity, but the presence of a church doctrine and head figure have somewhat controlled the number of offshoots.

Additionally, any orally spread tradition is bound to be altered with each telling. Oral traditions lend themselves to be adapted to fit particular audiences, which produces further variation. While Ifa eventually compiled many of its teachings into a written document called the Corpus of Ifa or the odu, this document was not as widely available as the Bible and Catholic doctrine, and, therefore, many Ifa adherents did not use it.³ Additionally, the corpus is understood to be incomplete, only containing information about some themes and practices, and, therefore, could not be used to create a uniform doctrine.⁴ The Catholic church's doctrine eliminated the need for Catholicism to be taught from memory and caused it to be more uniform than Ifa.

This is not to say that research about Ifa and Santería is not to be trusted. By reading many sources, it is possible to understand the basis of these religions. However, there are many discrepancies that can, at times, be frustrating and misleading. Any information, therefore, must be considered carefully as one explores the history of Santería through its roots in Ifa.

³ Karade 11

⁴ De la Torre 15

Historical Context

The Atlantic Slave Trade

Any discussion of Cuban culture will necessarily begin with a background in the Atlantic Slave Trade. Of the current Cuban population, 34.9 percent is of African heritage. This demographic was first introduced to Cuba through the slave trade and, therefore, vestiges of African culture greatly impact the Cuban identity.⁵ A profitable aspect of Cuban land in the late 1400's was that it was plentiful and apt for growing sugar and coffee crops. In the eyes of Spanish explorers, Cuban land was a lucrative asset to be taken advantage of. Cuba's indigenous Ciboney and Arawak population was virtually decimated within a quarter of a century due to disease and murder by the recent Spanish invaders,⁶ and following that, the only barrier the Spanish had to face was acquiring labor to work the plantations.⁷ The first African slave labor was brought to Cuba in 1513 but the bulk of the slave population was imported during and after the 1790's when a slave rebellion in Haiti caused fearful slave owners to relocate to Cuba and require more slave labor.⁸ Slave traders continued to import enslaved Africans until 1886 when slavery was abolished, making the era of Cuban slavery longer than most other Caribbean countries and drastically changing the racial makeup of Cuba.⁹ Though African slaves were from many different areas on the West African coast, slaves from the same or nearby towns often ended up on the same Cuban plantations, thus creating the opportunity for Cuban slave communities to mirror African communities. Enough slaves from similar cultural groups were taken to Cuba that many African cultural themes

⁵ CIA

⁶ McGuire, lecture

⁷ Brandon 42

⁸ Reinhardt 246

⁹ McGuire, lecture

remained intact.¹⁰ The sense of identity that arose among African slaves in these relatively strong cultural communities allowed them to find religious identity in a new context, creating religions that are uniquely Cuban.

Ifa

In order to understand Santería, it is crucial to understand the African roots of the Yoruba¹¹ people and their religion, Ifa. Of the African slaves that were taken to Cuba, the majority originated in the Lower Guinea region, which includes present day Nigeria.¹² In the early 16th century, just before the slave trade began in earnest, this area was dominated by the Yoruban empire.¹³ Though Yorubaland was established in Western Africa, its cultural traditions originated in Egypt. The Yoruba people in Egypt migrated west between 2000 and 500 B.C.E, bringing their customs and religion, Ifa.¹⁴ They arrived in the sacred city of the Nok people, called Ile-Ife and settled there. Though the Nok people had inhabited this area possibly since as early as 65,000B.C.E and had established an advanced culture, the Yoruba took power when they settled and began a period of conquest and expansion. Led by King Oduduwa, the leader of the migration from Egypt, the Yoruba conquered and gained the territories that formed Yorubaland.

¹⁰ Thornton 195

¹¹ The words Yoruba and Ifa are often used interchangeably in older sources. For simplicity, I will use the term Ifa for the religion practiced by the majority of the Yoruba people. However, it is important to note that many sources cited here refer to the Yoruba religion and Ifa people.

¹² Thornton 189

¹³ Though African slaves brought to Cuba practiced a variety of religions, the majority of them were Yoruban and practiced Ifa. Because the focus of this thesis is Santería and its Ifa roots, allusion to African slaves will refer to Yoruban slaves who practice Ifa.

¹⁴ Karade 2

Ile-Ife remained the spiritual capital of the empire and provided a place for the Ifa to become imbedded.¹⁵

Ifa is deeply rooted within all aspects of Yoruba culture. Ifa survived its significant early migration from Egypt and flourished in its new home in Western Africa in spite of this, or perhaps because of it. Ifa's ability to remain intact in these early times foreshadowed its success during the even more turbulent migration across the Atlantic Ocean to Cuba, which was to come during the Atlantic Slave Trade. Ifa's longevity is a unique aspect of Yoruban culture that affirms its ability to remain intact even after being relocated to a different culture. Some scholars like the author George Brandon, believe this is because Ifa, as well as other early African religions "permeate[d] the society as a whole rather than existing within it as a separate and isolable institution[s]."¹⁶ Ifa, before it migrated to Ile-Ife, developed gradually over a long period of time in Egypt. The tenets of the religion were added individually as they were needed by the people and were based upon practical necessities. Rather than many ideas being imposed at once by a religious leader, Ifa was created over time by its community of followers. The ideas were transmitted orally to each new generation and were strengthened by the families that made them into tradition. Ifa, before it migrated, was more than a religion; it was so connected to aspects of life that it, in essence, was the life of the Yoruba people. By the time great shifts were eminent, such as the migration to Western Africa and the African diaspora, Ifa was the basis of the entire culture so it could be manipulated to fit its new surroundings while still retaining its core.¹⁷

¹⁵ Karade 2

¹⁶ Brandon 11

¹⁷ Ibid 18

Examples of Ifa's permanence are still present in the way some describe Cuban religion. The form Ifa took when its people were moved to Cuba is generally called Santería because of its syncretism with Catholicism, but some insist that what they practice is called Ifa or Yoruba. This is not completely accurate because Ifa has gone through so many pressures and changes that it is unlikely that these believers are following the exact African form. However, to these adherents, their religion is so in touch with its native African roots that to call it anything other than Ifa would be offensive. These adherents believe that Ifa has not only survived two migrations intact, but 500 years in a changing Cuba as well.

While Ifa is a complicated religion, its essence can be summarized with one dualist theme. The Ifa believe that every human has both an earthly consciousness called *ori* and a heavenly consciousness called *iponri*. By nature, these two forms of consciousness are far from each other and difficult to reconcile. The goal of an adherent of Ifa is to enrich his or her *ori* until it meets the status of *iponri*. When the *ori* is elevated, the *ori* and *iponri* merge to become one essence. Ifa priest Baba Ifa Karade calls this unification a "state of divine oneness."¹⁸ Moreover, Ifa adherents assert that "divine oneness" is the natural state of all beings and that life is a struggle for humans to "return to their divine nature."¹⁹ Everything that an Ifa adherent does is aimed at elevating the earthly consciousness in order to achieve this exalted state. This theme and many other tenets of Ifa are known through Ifa's prophet, Orunmila. Orunmila, other minor prophets, and ancestral spirits called *egun* all formed Ifa's religious beliefs.²⁰ While these traditions were oral for many years, they were eventually written down.

¹⁸ Karade 10

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid 7

However, as in all oral traditions, discrepancies occur and this perhaps accounts for the many differences in sources available on Ifa today.

Another important tenet of Ifa is the existence of ashe. To Ifa people, ashe is the essence of God, whose proper name is Oludumare.²¹ Just as some speak of the “spirit of God” in a Christian context, ashe exists in all things and all beings. It is also often referred to as a type of energy or life force. Because ashe is seen as being an important part of nature, it is understood by Ifa people that the entire earth has the essence of Oludumare and should be treated as a holy site.²² Therefore, any place on earth is fit for an Ifa temple in which to worship and connect with the divine. In addition to Oludumare, Ifa has a pantheon of deities, called orishas, who play a large role in Ifa worship. The essence of the orishas can be understood from Karade’s description of the etymology:

Orisha as a term, is actually the combination of two Yoruba words. *Ori* which is the reflective spark of human consciousness embedded in human essence, and *sha* which is the ultimate potentiality of that consciousness to enter into or assimilate itself into the divine consciousness.²³

So an orisha is the product of a human achieving the divine unity of the two parts of him or herself. It is the goal of Ifa. Because the orishas represent the goal of Ifa, they are honored and revered. The regard for orishas was so great, that the pantheon of orishas is one of the aspects of Ifa that remained most intact during the Atlantic Slave Trade and exposure to Catholicism. Though there are many orishas, there are seven main deities in Ifa (Obatala, Elegba, Ogun, Yemoja, Oshun, Shango, and Oya) and they are still the most common orishas in Cuba. Though each orisha has a distinct human-like personality, Ifa

²¹ Ibid 21

²² Ibid 60

²³ Ibid 23

adherents honor the orishas, not by mimicking their behaviors, but by making sacrifices through ritual, prayer, and dance.

Like many African religions, Ifa is very ritualistic. According to Karade, “order is of the utmost significance” to Yorubans.²⁴ Ifa ceremonies, such as those used to initiate new priests into the religion or to communicate with the divine, have specific ascribed rules that must be followed before and after the ritual. These rules are important because it is only when the ritual is done correctly that the adherent will receive the full benefits of the ritual and be spiritually uplifted.²⁵

Prayer is used to honor both the orishas and the ancestors, called egun, who are often revered as much as the orishas. Prayer is used to ask the orisha to help hone the Ori, or earthly consciousness, in order to attain a heavenly state. Many Ifa people consider asking for worldly gains such as riches and employment to be the opposite of sincere prayer. While Ifa adherents communicate with orishas, the subject is honoring the orisha rather than asking the deities for gains in the physical world.²⁶ The sincere prayer of Ifa would be that which helped the adherent find ashe within him or herself in order to come closer to divine oneness.

Another vehicle Ifa adherents use for prayer is dance. As in many African traditions, dance is a crucial part of storytelling and communication for Ifa. Ifa dance and music are particularly expressive ways of praying to the orishas and are immensely complex. Each orisha has a series of movements attributed to him or her that an adherent must learn and perfect to use dance as a prayer. Dancing also offers the opportunity for spiritual possession of an adherent; an orisha may choose to “mount” the adherent and

²⁴ Ibid 107

²⁵ Ibid 108

²⁶ Ibid 47

perform his or her dances through the adherent as a way to allow him or her to accept the orisha's ashe. During the Atlantic Slave Trade, these specific dances survived and were used within slave communities once they arrived in Cuba.

Syncretism

Though Santería is not the same religion as Ifa, the Ifa roots are so apparent in Santería that, in many ways, to understand one is to understand both. Knowledge of Ifa is also important in the study of Santería because it points to elements of Ifa that survived under the domineering Spanish presence of the slave masters. The changes and additions to Ifa that form Santería are vestiges of early Spanish control, but they are also indicators of which aspects of Ifa were strongest in the Cuban slave communities.

Syncretism is “an amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions or schools of thought” which produces a unique product.²⁷ It is often discussed in reference to Santería because of the elements from both the Ifa tradition and the Catholic tradition that exist within it. However, when any two cultures interact with each other, some kind of syncretism (linguistic, economic, etc.) is bound to occur. The yoga phenomenon in America is an apt example: when yoga, a spiritual Indian discipline, was adopted by American culture, it was adapted to reflect American priorities, and thus often centers around physical fitness rather than its original spiritual emphasis. Syncretism is even seen on a smaller scale in Western Africa. Before the slave trade, there were many distinct African languages but, because different language groups interacted through commerce, unique languages with elements of two or more, called linguafrancas, developed and were frequently used. Though a linguafranca was not one’s native language, people from different language groups could generally use them to communicate because they resembled both languages.²⁸

²⁷ Keir, dictionary

²⁸ Thorton 186, 191

The interaction between Spanish slave masters and African slaves in Cuba formed the perfect environment for syncretism to occur between Catholicism and Ifa to form Santería. Syncretism, as it pertains to Santería, is a complicated issue. There are elements of both Catholicism and Ifa within Santería but whether it should be practically identified as a syncretized religion is controversial. In order to understand why, it is necessary to understand what aspects of the religion have been syncretized. Perhaps, the most cited example of this is the syncretism of the orishas and saints.

Orisha Syncretism

In Catholicism, saints, who could be martyrs, holy people, or even miracle performers, are very important.²⁹ Over 10,000 saints have been declared over the course of Catholicism's history and each is connected to an aspect of life.³⁰ For example, St. Francis of Assisi is the saint of the ecology and St. Francis de Salle is the patron saint of writing and they watch over people associated with these subjects.³¹ Through prayer, Catholics ask saints for assistance because they are seen as "special protectors or guardians over [specific] areas of life."³² Many Catholics feel personal connections to certain saints and have images or shrines dedicated to them in their homes. Some aspects of the Catholic pantheon, such as connection through prayer and personal connection to the saints are reminiscent of the role that orishas play in the life of an Ifa adherent.

At least in theory, the pantheon of saints is not unlike the pantheon of orishas. They are both a canon of beings, understood to once have been humans, who were

²⁹ Catholic Online

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

elevated to a heavenly status. However, the ways in which the orishas and saints are represented are very different. Reverent awareness of the saints is taught by the Catholic church and its leaders. Information about the orishas, on the other hand, comes mainly from the patakí (or patakín), a collection of myths about the origins and exploits of the orishas.³³ The patakín tell the stories of the orishas in a form similar to the tales of the Greek gods and goddesses. They describe how the orishas love, trick, and help each other and they present the orishas with human desires and actions. In this way, they differ greatly from the idealistic representation of Catholic saints.

Even beyond the difference in representation, it would still be completely untrue to say that saints and orishas are the same beings presented in different contexts. Such assumptions fade when the complexity of each pantheon is learned and their differences become apparent. Regardless, enough similarities were present that when circumstances made adopting elements of Catholicism beneficial, the similarities eased the transition for Ifa adherents. The multitude of saints made it simple for Ifa adherents to find a one that seemed similar enough to an orisha and state that the two were one and the same. This made it possible for Ifa adherents to claim that they were worshiping saints when they were actually worshiping orishas. This is the point at which the name Santería, which means “the way of the saints” came into being.³⁴

Orisha syncretism is logical at times, but can also appear random. Describing specific orishas and their saint syncretisms illustrates syncretism’s arbitrariness and

³³ Mason 133

³⁴ De la Torre xi

clarifies the orisha's role in Santería. The following orishas were some of the most frequently celebrated in Ifá and are now considered the main orishas in Santería.³⁵

The Orishas

Elegguá

It is appropriate to begin by describing Elegguá because he is the orisha that Santeros always begin with in worship. As the keeper of the gates between the physical and spiritual world, "he is in charge of the entrance and exit of the paths of life" which the orishas use to join Santeros in the physical world for worship.³⁶ In order to open these gates, Elegguá carries a garabato, an object used to cut bushes aside to clear a path for the other orishas. Because Elegguá decides whether or not to open the gates for the other orishas, he is coaxed and placated through sacrifices, songs, and dance. Represented by the colors red and black, he is known for being a mischievous trickster with the "body of a child and the face of an old man."³⁷ Because of this dichotomy, he can be either helpful and carefree or serious and dangerous, even causing physical accidents to those with whom he is upset.³⁸ As they say, "he'll save you or kill you," which is why he is treated with respect and always appeased first.³⁹ Elegguá is syncretized with both the Santo Niño de [Holy Child of] Atocha, a representation of a young Jesus, and San Roque [St. Roch].⁴⁰ As St. Roch was a French orphan who contracted the plague and is invoked for protection from disease, there is little connection

³⁵ Karade 5

³⁶ Frutos 35 (my translation)

³⁷ Ibid (my translation)

³⁸ De la Torre 52

³⁹ Frutos 35 (my translation)

⁴⁰ Ibid

between the him and Elegguá. There is a more substantial connection between Elegguá and the Holy Child of Atocha because Elegguá often takes the form of a child. However, the comparison is simply based upon that physical characteristic and not on any of Elegguá's or the Holy Child's important deeds or attributes.⁴¹

Shangó

Shangó (also spelled Changó) is the king of music and drums and is often represented in performances showcasing orisha dancing. He is associated with the colors red and white and carries a double-edged ax made of wood. Shangó is noted for being a strong man with virility which is reflected in his forceful dancing and composure. Shangó is the owner of fire and thunderbolts and uses them to cause death on earth when he is angry.⁴² He also uses the energy of the thunderbolts to give his dancing power and command. Shangó is said to be syncretized with saints including St. Barbara, St. Mark, and St. Jerome among others.⁴³ Perhaps the clearest connection is between Shangó and St. Barbara. St. Barbara is often associated with lightning because it killed her father after she was tortured by him upon her conversion to Catholicism.⁴⁴ As a saint of war, she is often associated with weapons and is often depicted holding a sword. This image is reminiscent of Shangó holding his ax, perhaps causing people to believe that they were the same being.

⁴¹ De la Torre 62

⁴² De la Torre 52

⁴³ De la Torre 54

⁴⁴ De la Torre 66

Ochún

Ochún is the female orisha associated with sexuality and seduction. As Cuba's patron saint and mother, Ochún is celebrated as a coquette, and her flirtatious nature is replicated in her dancing and mannerisms.⁴⁵ According to legend, Ochún used to have black skin, but it was changed to a caramel color.⁴⁶ This identity with lighter skin color is associated with the creole people of racially mixed ancestry and is how she gained such an honored role in Cuba. She owns the sweet waters, or rivers, and is represented by the color yellow for its youthful energy. She is syncretized with Our Lady of Charity, a representation of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus who is honored specifically as the patron saint of Cuba in the Catholic church.⁴⁷

Babalú-Ayé

Babalú-Ayé, the orisha of disease and sickness, is invoked to cure Santeros of their ills. As a representation of sickness, he is said to be constantly infected with leprosy, syphilis, gangrene, and other diseases.⁴⁸ According to a patakí, Babalú-Ayé was traveling from town to town looking for charity but as soon as he entered a village, cowbells were rung to warn others of the arrival of a contagious person. Babalú-Ayé traveled all over, but whenever the cowbells sounded, all the people hid inside and refused to help. Finally, Babalú-Ayé went to a village inhabited by the sick, homeless, and people of ill repute. Here, Babalú-Ayé was well received and was given what few gifts and help the people could muster. Because of this kindness, Babalú-Ayé is said to

⁴⁵ Spiro, interview

⁴⁶ Frutos 75

⁴⁷ Catholic Online

⁴⁸ Frutos 95

be more sympathetic to the poor than the rich.⁴⁹ Fittingly, he is associated with the Catholic St. Lazarus, who was charged with protecting lepers.

Orúnla

Orúnla is the orisha who presides over divination and specifically protects the babalawos, or elders of Santería. The following patakí, documented by De la Torre, describes how Orúnla received his powers of divination and responsibility to the babalawos. In previous patakís, it is told that Yemayá and her son, Oggún had a sexual relationship. They were discovered when Elegguá, Yemayá's other son, discovered them and told Yemayá's husband, Obatalá. In his fury, Obatalá promised to bury Yemayá's next son alive as punishment. Then,

Yemmú (Yemayá) gave birth to Orúnla. Obatalá, true to his word, ordered Elegguá to bury his brother alive. Elegguá, the trickster, found a gigantic ceiba tree and buried his brother up to the neck in the tree's dark shadow. As time went on, Orúnla learned the secrets of divination from the ceiba tree. His fame as a diviner spread, and people came from miles around to have their fortunes told. In exchange, they fed and cared for the buried Orúnla. With time, thinking his son was dead, Obatalá repented for having his son buried and regretted his harsh judgment. When Elegguá heard this, he took his father to see Orúnla, very much alive though buried up to the neck. With reunion all was forgiven, and Orúnla was released from his grave. But he did not wish to leave the tree that had served as his mother. In compliance with Orúnla's wishes, Obatalá turned the tree into a

⁴⁹ Ibid (story translation and summary by Reed)

round wooden tray, which Orúnla has used ever since in determining futures.⁵⁰ Because of this story, Orúnla is frequently invoked by babalawos who use Orúnla's techniques learned from the ceiba tree for divination. He is syncretized with St. Francis of Assisi, likely because of St. Francis' association with nature and earth. However, St. Francis is not associated with divination so the syncretism is rather shallow.

The supposed syncretism between orishas and saints are largely coincidental and rarely parallel. Occasionally, they line up well, such as the connections between Shangó and St. Barbara or Babalú-Ayé and St. Lazarus. More frequently, though, the connections are vague, such as those between Elegguá and the image of the child Jesus which only share the commonality of age, though only Elegguá's only body is in child form. Still other supposed syncretisms, like those between Ochún and Our Lady of Charity, seem to have no parallels whatsoever. It is clear that the supposed syncretism between orishas and saints are not completely founded and rarely depict actual similarities.

Regardless, these connections, or lack thereof, highlight cultural similarities. War and disease are both part both Catholic and Ifa history and, therefore, it is logical that those common threads were easily found with Shangó and Babalú-Ayé. A deity who opens the gates so that the other deities can visit the physical world is a concept that is present in Ifa but not Catholicism, so it is logical that the syncretism between Elegguá and child Jesus relies on physical attributes of the deities rather than their purposes or main themes. Furthermore, Ochún, the orisha representing sexual love, seems very out of place in the context of the chaste Catholic doctrine and, not surprisingly, was not

⁵⁰ De la Torre 41

syncretized with an existing Catholic saint. Despite their coincidental correlations, an understanding of the orisha-saint dynamic is not an accurate representation their actual relatedness; rather, the syncretism is somewhat arbitrary. Still, this dynamic is demonstrative of the cultures' historical contexts. While the claim of syncretism is not fully substantiated, there were important reasons that the claims occurred, which can be described by the way the claims originated.

How the Orishas Were Syncretized

The connection between saints and orishas proved useful in many different situations, which is why the connection has remained so permanent to some. It was useful in creating a new tradition, but it was also necessary for the basic survival of the Ifa religion at the beginning of the slave trade. There are many different theories about the ways in which Ifa and Catholicism interacted to create the supposed syncretism in Santería.

One theory has to do with the reality of life as a slave master in Cuba. Plantations were large isolated plots of land and keeping a large plantation running required considerable effort. Thus, a small family of wealthy Spanish slave masters could live on a plot of land with a disproportionate number of slaves. This arrangement, while profitable for the slave masters, was also problematic. The Spanish were greatly outnumbered by their captives and, wisely, feared mutiny, particularly after the violent 1792 revolt led by ex-slaves in Haiti, which led to deaths and fear for slave owners.⁵¹ In fact, slave revolts were not uncommon; “in Matanzas province alone 399 acts of

⁵¹ Reinhardt 246

violence, including attempted revolts, were reported from 1825 to 1850.”⁵² This fear was escalated by what the Spanish saw, through a Catholic lens, as a barbaric and strange pagan religion that involved spiritual possession and crazed dancing. Some slave masters responded by forcing their slaves to practice Catholicism. While there were certainly some genuine converts, many African slaves voluntarily syncretized portions of their native religion in order to make their masters think they were practicing Catholicism when they actually practiced Ifa. In this way, the ability to syncretize the orishas and saints, even if the syncretism was inaccurate, worked to the slaves’ advantage.

A related version of this theory is that Catholic priests in Cuba were the ones to cause the syncretism of orishas and saints. In some areas of Cuba, the effort to Catholicize African slaves was so strong that Catholic priests were recruited to form and enforce Catholic slave communities called *cabildos* or *cofradías*. However, the priests in charge of these communities were not always as strict as intended and, therefore, African slaves had enough freedom to add some of their own concepts and rituals to their “Catholic” practice.⁵³ These actions also likely led to the syncretism of orishas and saints, but in this theory, the priests, not African slaves, produced the syncretism.

Others argue that syncretism between Catholicism and Ifa was less intentional and much more gradual. How likely Ifa and Catholicism were to mix in various parts of Cuba was dependent upon “class, rural versus urban residence, and the availability of [Catholic] churches and clergymen.”⁵⁴ Though Catholicism was and is known for its centralized power which dictates its doctrine, there were fewer implementers of this doctrine in less populous Cuban cities where there were no churches. The religious

⁵² Singleton 108

⁵³ Brandon 70

⁵⁴ Brandon 46

structure that resulted made worship a family-centered activity and led the way for folk interpretations of Catholicism.⁵⁵ Religious education taught by the family as opposed to organized worship was a central theme in Ifa and other African religions since their beginnings.⁵⁶ Thus, in rural communities, Catholic slave masters already had a inclination towards the Ifa way of worship. This less doctrinal view of Catholicism allowed Spaniards to interpret their own views more freely. For some, this meant seeing parallels between the orishas and the saints and interpreting it to mean that they were one and the same. Once Ifa was viewed more like an extension of Catholicism, though the assumption was off base, it was more acceptable for a slave to practice it, especially if elements of Catholicism were included in worship.

A similar theory involves family-centered religion, but is applied in the years after 1790. The 1790's brought an economic boom for the land plantations, especially coffee, when fearful slave owners in Haiti took their slaves to Cuba to avoid danger from the Haitian revolt. The new population of slave owners and Haitian slaves caused an increase in land usage and number of plantations.⁵⁷ This drastic increase in production potential led to an increase in demand for slave labor. A plantation master could only use land to its full potential if the labor was available. However, only so many African slaves could be imported at a time and slaves frequently died while adjusting to the intense work conditions, which decreased slave owners' profits. Some slave owners remedied this by shifting the gender demographic of their slave populations. In earlier years of Cuban slavery, only strong young men were brought to Cuba to maximize labor potential. Later, when deaths resulted in demand for more slave labor, female slaves began to be imported

⁵⁵ Brandon 48

⁵⁶ Brandon 60

⁵⁷ Singleton 99

with the goal of creating self sustaining slave populations. Thus, female slaves began to be valued and imported much more frequently.⁵⁸ The slave masters, by way of encouraging women to reproduce, unintentionally encouraged families to form, creating a better sense of community among slaves on plantations.⁵⁹ Religion was better cultivated and taught to future generations in these communities, allowing it to grow and become more established in its new Cuban environment. Because the family structure was imposed within Cuban slave communities, religion again became a central part of life and the aforementioned syncretisms were able to occur.

The likely answer is that all of these theories together contributed to the syncretism of orishas and saints. It is tempting to see the power of the Spanish that forced the African people into slavery and imagine the same thing happening with its religion. While it is true that Catholicism had power over Ifa due to the power dispersal of people who practiced each religion, it was more than the interactions of Ifa and Catholicism that caused the pressure which produced Santería. It was a slow process of evolution, of the two peoples and their religions exchanging information, then adapting. It is unrealistic to think that any one of these elements was enough to single-handedly create Santería.

This uncovers another problem with the concept of syncretism, particularly in present day Cuba. It is undeniable that Catholicism had a large effect upon the religion practiced by the first African slaves who were brought to Cuba. Vestiges of these influences can still be found today in Santería ceremonies and even the way Cuban

⁵⁸ Brandon 54

⁵⁹ Brandon 53

people talk about Santería and Ifa. For example, one of my interviewees, Osmel López Bonne, identified as a Santero but also said that he occasionally attends church.⁶⁰ Regardless, speaking about Santería as a syncretized religion is missing the point. Santería is a religion that very closely represents the way the first African slaves practiced Ifa while they still lived in their native land. Some elements have been adapted because of Catholicism's presence, but its foundation is still wholly African. Focusing on the Catholic additions is an anthropological study of the interaction between two cultures rather than an exercise in understanding Santería. In many ways, it was mere coincidence that the orishas coincided with Catholic saints well enough for them to be syncretized, but, in truth, a Santero does not worship Catholic saints. He or she worships the orisha and even when the image of a saint is present, the saint is merely a symbol of the orisha which it represents. Syncretism often conjures the image of two ideas contributing half of themselves to form a new idea which equally represents both. In Santería, though, the vast majority of influence comes from Ifa. Therefore, using the term "syncretized" as a fundamental part of explaining Santería is inaccurate and misleading.

The Cuban perspective on syncretism is, predictably, varied. To some Santeros, the Catholic presence is more pronounced and they participate in Catholic services as well as Santerian practices. For others, the Catholic influence is not acknowledged at all and the connection to Ifa is paramount. Some recognize Santería as a syncretized religion, others do not. One opinion is that when one is deeply involved in Santería, the Catholic presence atrophies because its irrelevance is realized. The following quote from De la Torre summarizes this viewpoint well: "for the neophyte beginning their spiritual

⁶⁰ López Bonne, Interview

journey, the orishas are seen through the lens of Catholicism. But as they move toward the final ordination... [they] discard the Catholic saint masks and focus primarily on the orishas.”⁶¹ In this viewpoint, the connection with Catholicism is used to give a broader and more graspable definition of the orishas. However, once the adherent is immersed in Santería, the extra context is not needed and the orishas prove to be most important while the saints’ role diminishes. The reason that so many people discuss the Catholic presence in Santería, according to De la Torre, is that willingness to discuss Santería openly more often comes from “those who are beginning their spiritual journey and therefore rely more on the Catholic symbols.”⁶² More invested adherents are more private and defensive of the religion’s secrets and do not readily provide their orisha-centered viewpoints.⁶³

These variations of opinion do nothing to create a concrete concept of Santería’s nature. However, the variation in itself informs Santería’s identity. Santería—more so than other religions— is not quantifiable. Any statement about its concepts is not absolute and is certainly not adequately described when cultural biases are involved in its perception, as was the case for both my primary research in Cuban interviews and the majority of the sources I have used. This proves problematic for academic writing and, since it cannot realistically be rectified, must be kept in mind throughout its study.

⁶¹ De la Torre 107

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Ibid

Rituals and Practices

While pinpointing any one element of Santería such as orishas, dancing, drums, or music does not accurately summarize the religion, the most descriptive element would be its rituals. In Santería, there is no central doctrine which demands that rituals be performed in a certain way and the knowledge of how to perform these rituals is generally held only by the highest and most respected elders of Santería, the babalawos. A babalawo is a devoted male Santero who has experienced Santería's most profound rituals.⁶⁴ The process to become a babalawo is long, involved, and costly, giving babalawos an important role in Santería. Because babalawos have exclusive knowledge, many rituals are secret and cannot be performed without the help of a babalawo. Rituals are also sought after and expensive because of their secrecy and the many items that are needed for their execution.⁶⁵ This secrecy causes the more involved rituals to be retained with surprising uniformity because so few babalawos perform them. Because of the difficulty and seriousness of performing rituals, worship usually takes the form of simple prayer and communication with the orishas. This type of worship is much more ubiquitous and well documented.

Reflecting Santería's long past of being kept secret from slave masters, there are not specific physical centers of worship for Santeros—unlike churches in Catholicism—so a large amount of worship takes place in the home of adherents or anywhere an altar can be built. In this way, Santería is very portable; when a Santero wants to observe, they only need a few easily found items to practice Santería. Perhaps this is because of the nature of Santería's beginnings. In slave communities where non-Christian religions had

⁶⁴ De la Torre 106

⁶⁵ Mason 60

to be practiced in secret to avoid punishment from the slave masters, Santería flourished because it could be practiced anywhere and with anything. This adaptability originated in Santería's African roots; in Ifa, any place imaginable could be a altar because Oludumare's godly presence is everywhere.⁶⁶

Altars are important because they can be used in group worship, but they also help the Santero foster a personal connection with his or her orisha. The altar is a tangible connection between the two and is, therefore, taken care of and tended to frequently.⁶⁷ Santería altars are built in many different ways. They can be housed in homes, places of work, or even outdoors in locations that represent the orisha, such as near a train tracks for Oggún, the orisha of metals.⁶⁸ Objects that correspond to a particular orisha, such as an iruke⁶⁹ for Oyá or a garabato for Elegguá, may be placed on the altar to praise that orisha. Apart from the specific attributes of the orishas, many everyday objects have religious connections the deities and are used on altars when available. "Geographical features, herbs, weather patterns, colors, animals, and actions," as well as foods, music, dance steps, objects, and abstract themes are all connected with the orishas.⁷⁰

Though there are many ways for a Santero to create a altar, the intention of the altar is what gives it its meaning. If a Santero wishes to worship, all he or she must do is "invoke the orisha and offer a sacrifice of some kind to 'feed' it."⁷¹ This action in itself

⁶⁶ Karade 60

⁶⁷ Mason 58

⁶⁸ Duncan

⁶⁹ An iruke is an object made of a horse's tail and is unique to Oyá. It is used to represent the wind and gather dead spirits to be buried in the cemetery.

⁷⁰ Mason 57

⁷¹ Brandon, 75

creates a place for the Santero to worship, which is referred to as a igbodu.⁷² When the intention of praising the orisha is present, the Santero only needs to do something to get the orisha's attention, no matter how small the action may be.

While the reality is that Santería can be practiced anywhere, it is often practiced in spots where people can congregate. Before the abolition of Cuban slavery in 1886, cabildos, or "fraternal orders"⁷³ following ethnic lines, provided this gathering place.⁷⁴ Men in cabildos were loosely guided by Catholic priests and encouraged to practice Catholicism, though they were often left to their own devices and practiced their old African faiths.⁷⁵ When slavery was abolished, this location shifted to homes where permanent altars were set up. Even larger religious events often take place in the homes of devout Santeros. A home that has space dedicated to Santería, such as a permanent altar, is known as an ilé and becomes a place where troubled people go to seek guidance from notably devout Santeros.⁷⁶ The rituals that occur in ilés are numerous and varied.

The rituals of Santería can tell us a lot about the religion, however, it is difficult to find accurate information on all of them. Because of the secrecy and unique knowledge necessary for many practices, there are many rituals which Santeros may not discuss. During an interview with a close Cuban friend named Aliochi, I was told that there were secrets of Santería that he could not tell me even though he wanted me to learn as much about Santería as possible.⁷⁷ The secrecy of many Santerian rituals adds to the mystery and misguided superstition surrounding Santería. While some aspects of the rituals may

⁷² De la Torre 102

⁷³ Delgado

⁷⁴ Brandon 75

⁷⁵ Brandon 70

⁷⁶ De la Torre 102, 104

⁷⁷ Melian Gil, interview

seem barbaric to outsiders, the meaning behind them shows that they are very purposeful. Before describing the rituals themselves, there are some themes in almost every ritual which must be understood.

Aspects of Rituals

Animal Sacrifice

Animal sacrifice is a practice that has long been taboo. Though many religious traditions have included animal sacrifice, some European cultures began to associate animal sacrifice with paganism and saw it as a mark of a lesser, primitive, and bloodthirsty civilization. However, the sacrifice of animals and other objects in Santería, called *ebbó*, is done both purposefully and with many parameters guiding the process.⁷⁸ When an animal is slaughtered as a sacrifice to an orisha, Santeros believe that the life force of the animal is received by the orisha who then gives vitality and favor to the sacrificer.⁷⁹ This is why animal sacrifices are often done at the beginning of rituals; the sacrifice appeases the orisha before more is asked of the deity. Sacrifice is also believed to be a way for Santeros to spend personal time with the orishas. When a sacrifice is eaten, the Santero is sharing a meal with the orisha to whom it was sacrificed and strengthens the relationship.⁸⁰

There are specific regulations regarding animal sacrifice. Most Santeros are allowed to sacrifice small birds, but only *babalawos* who have gone through a special ritual are allowed to sacrifice larger animals. Thus, animal sacrifices do not happen often and they are always purposeful and pragmatic. In fact, there are kinds of *ebbó* that are

⁷⁸ De la Torre 121

⁷⁹ Mason 74

⁸⁰ De la Torre 126

done more frequently than animal sacrifice, such as sacrificing food, herbs, and objects like burning candles.⁸¹ It is also important to note that these sacrifices are not done alone; they are done as a part of a larger ritual and, therefore, the sacrifice itself is not the focus of the ritual.

Divination

Divination is another fundamental aspect of Santería rituals, though it is rarely a ritual in itself. It is, in essence, a way for Santeros to communicate directly with the orishas.⁸² This communication is necessary for many reasons. A Santero may use divination to ask an orisha if an offering is acceptable, to know what things he or she must do to lead a better life, to decide if objects contain an orisha presence,⁸³ or to discern whether one is fulfilling his or her destiny.⁸⁴ Divination is most commonly done using cocos, or coconut meat. In this divination practice, the elder Santero will ask a question and cast four pieces of coconut meat onto the ground. The orisha's answers are decided based upon the patterns that the cocos make.⁸⁵ This practice goes back to the Ifa tradition in which kola nuts and shells were cast and the patterns and shells' orientation dictated the answer of the orisha.⁸⁶ Cowrie shells are still used in Santería divination as well.⁸⁷ Like sacrifice, most Santeros are able to perform some basic divination, but expert diviners, called *italeros*, are often consulted to ensure an accurate reading.⁸⁸ When a complex reading is needed, Santeros sometimes consult *babalawos* who have a higher

⁸¹ De la Torre 121

⁸² Mason 53

⁸³ Mason 70

⁸⁴ De la Torre 139

⁸⁵ Mason 125

⁸⁶ Karade 82

⁸⁷ De la Torre 142

⁸⁸ De la Torre 143

system of divination named Ifa after its roots in the African religion.⁸⁹ Though this divination system is kept secret, it is known to be very effective and, according to my interviewee, Aliochi, “babalawos see everything.”⁹⁰ Regardless of what means a Santero uses to divine, divination provides a direct communication with the deities that is an important part of many Santería rituals.

Spiritual Possession

Lastly, spiritual possession, though not a ritual in itself, is central to many rituals, particularly those involving dance. Spiritual possession in Santería is viewed very differently than in American cultures. “Mainstream American culture tends to think of possession in terms of Hollywood films like *The Exorcist* and *The Believers*—in other words, with negative, if not downright demonic, connotations.”⁹¹ However, Santería possession is not a frightening occurrence where the person is possessed against his or her will. In fact, it is considered an honor to be possessed, or mounted, by an orisha. In my fieldwork, I witnessed a possession; as it became apparent that the young man few feet away from me was mounted by Yemayá, the woman standing next to him said “how beautiful that someone finally let her in.” To a Santero, being mounted is a time when “the human and the spirit are united briefly in the same body,” a chance to simulate the unification of the ori and iponri from the Ifa belief system.⁹² Therefore, it is a desirable experience and one that is often intentionally sought. When a Santero is mounted, he or she dances the steps of the possessing orisha. People nearby will hand the person objects

⁸⁹ De la Torre 149

⁹⁰ Melian Gil, interview

⁹¹ De la Torre 114

⁹² Mason 53

belonging to the mounting orisha, such as the iruke for Oyá and the garabato for Elegguá. The mounted is then treated like the actual orisha, praised, and cared for. Depending upon the rowdiness of the ritual, the mounted may need to be taken outside for fresh air and rest until the orisha has left his or her body. Because it is such an honor, spirit possession happens regularly at religious events and is not considered out of the ordinary. It is an important aspect of many Santería rituals.

The Practices

Bajar a Orúnla

One of the most fundamental rituals for a Santero is the practice of receiving a personal orisha. The importance of the orishas to Santeros is clear. Santeros look to the orishas to guide their beliefs, actions, and to improve their lives. While all orishas are important to Santeros, each Santero has an orisha who personally watches over the adherent, an orisha that has chosen the Santero.⁹³ These personal orishas are often referred to as “guardian angels” and are reminiscent of the way Catholic saints watch over specific people or groups.⁹⁴ A Santero receives his or her personal orisha through a ceremony called bajar a Orúnla (translated as “to bring Orúnla [guide of the babalawos] down,”); this ceremony is led by multiple skilled divining babalawos.⁹⁵ By casting cowrie shells, babalawos are able to see which orisha is the guardian of the Santero and, when this is pronounced, the Santero is said to be the hijo or hija (son or daughter) of that orisha.⁹⁶ Then, the Santero will honor the connection to his or her orisha publicly. For

⁹³ De la Torre 115

⁹⁴ De la Torre 107

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ Ibid

example, an hija of Yemayá may wear blue frequently or make frequent offerings of ferns and water-loving plants to honor her.⁹⁷ One public way a Santero can honor his or her orisha is by wearing elekes, special beaded necklaces, that bear the colors of the Santero's orisha and are said to offer protection.⁹⁸ Elekes are popular and may be purchased by anyone in Cuba, even if he or she has not undergone the ceremony. However, when a Santero has officially received his or her orisha, the elekes are blessed and sometimes made by the Santero's *madrina*, or spiritual godmother.⁹⁹ Receiving an orisha is a source of pride and guides a Santero's actions. For example, a Santero will learn the dances of his or her orisha well because orishas are more likely to mount those with whom they have a deep connection. The fundamental ritual to receive an orisha is an important event in the life of a Santero and paves the way for many other rituals.

Bembes

A *bembe*, while it is considered a ritual, often looks like a party to outsiders. *Bembes* are done to "honor, thank, supplicate, or repay an orisha" or to celebrate a certain event, such as the anniversary of a Santero's *bajar a Orúnla*.¹⁰⁰ *Bembes* are joyful celebrations usually accompanied with food, alcohol, music, and lots of dancing. During a *bembe*, which is often hosted in a *babalawo's* home, an altar with gifts (such as rum, food, deserts, candles, colored fabric, and items of sentimental value) is the focal point of the room. Musicians and participants in the *bembe* gather around this altar, standing packed together to accommodate many people in a small space. As alcohol is passed

⁹⁷ Mason 73

⁹⁸ De la Torre 109

⁹⁹ De la Torre 108

¹⁰⁰ De la Torre 119

around, the musicians and singers first play the music of Elegguá to open the gates for the orisha or orishas who are to be honored at the bembé. The drums play a central role in the bembé, as the correct rhythms give musicians the power to communicate with the orishas and to call them to join the bembé by mounting an adherent. Though the focus is on the orisha, bembés are a source of great enjoyment to Santeros; they are a way to celebrate and play with the orishas.

Occasionally, bembés are turned into a spectacle and performed in public for tourists.¹⁰¹ These bembés can be ostentatious and contain a suspicious number spiritual possessions to impress the tourists. Visitors who build a relationship with Santeros, however, may be invited to bembés that are done in a home and are generally sincere. During my fieldwork, I was able to take advantage of some close connections I made in Cuba and attend a bembé. While my acquaintances taught me a lot there, they understandably shared virtually nothing about Santería's other highly secretive rituals. While these secret rituals were well protected, it is not frowned upon to invite non-Santeros to casual rituals like bembés. Because Santeros do not wish to proselytize (that is the job of the orishas), many of them enjoy sharing acceptable parts of Santería with others. This was true even in Ifa before it moved to the New World; proselytism was not practiced or even necessary because of how holistically assimilated it was into African life.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ De la Torre 119

¹⁰² Mbiti 12

Asientos

Asientos are supposed to be secret rituals, though some authors have published partial accounts of these lengthy, elaborate ceremonies.¹⁰³ According to De la Torre, an asiento translates to “ascending the throne” and has the goal of purifying the Santero through spiritual rebirth and solidifying the connection between the Santero and his or her parent orisha and ancestors.¹⁰⁴ This ritual is the final act to become completely initiated in the religion and, when completed, gives the Santero the title “priest” or “priestess.”¹⁰⁵ An asiento can take years of preparation for the week long ritual and is very expensive because of the necessary animals for sacrifice, herbs, feast food, and ingredients for special mixtures.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, with asientos being secret rituals, few high priests of Santería are knowledgeable enough to perform it and may charge a high price to execute it.¹⁰⁷ An asiento is comprised of several smaller rituals which are completed to accomplish everything from spiritually cleansing the initiate, being crowned with the ashe of the orishas, and being given spiritual knowledge.¹⁰⁸ Predictably, Santeros who have undergone an asiento are highly regarded in Cuba’s religious community. Their priesthoods are symbols of the dedication and time put into preparing for the ceremony. Those who have undergone asientos are the teachers of the next generation of Santeros and will lead religious ceremonies in the future.

¹⁰³ De la Torre 112

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ De la Torre 116

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Mason 60

¹⁰⁸ Mason 67

Drums and Songs

In almost all rituals, drumming with a special drum, the batá, plays a central role. Musically, the two-sided batá drums can contribute the bass line as well as the melody and harmony of the songs. Spiritually, they represent the presence of the orishas, the secrets of Santería, and a spirit called Aña which lives inside the drums.¹⁰⁹ Their presence is respected by all and according to De la Torre, as a sign of respect, dancers never face away from the drums.¹¹⁰ In my fieldwork, I observed dancers facing into a circle away from the drums, but respect of the batás was certainly apparent in other ways. Regardless, it is clear that batá drums are given a high status. In fact, once batás have been used in a Santería ceremony, they are considered sacred or consecrated and possess the secrets of the orishas. When batás achieve this sacred status, they may not be played by non-initiates of Santería or women, a tradition of patriarchy passed down from Catholicism. Consecrated drums earn the name fundamento and are used with great care.¹¹¹

There are three different batá drums, each with a different pitch. The iyá is the largest batá which plays the lowest pitch and represents the orisha of war and thunder, Shangó. The itotele is the middle size batá and represents Oyá, the orisha of the cemeteries and wind. The ocóncolo is the smallest of the three and represents the trickster orisha, Eleggúa. The different pitches of the batás allow complete melodically complex songs to be played with just the three drums.

The three batás and occasionally bells and other available percussion instruments are used to create melodies that are unique to each orisha. These songs are sung

¹⁰⁹ De la Torre 118

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ Duncan

frequently within Santería families and, therefore, children are brought up learning them and the stories they tell. By the time children are old enough to participate in rituals, they have likely been exposed to the songs and can identify the rhythm, orisha, and any relevant movements.

The songs played in Santería rituals have lyrics from a variety of languages. They are most frequently in Spanish, Yoruba, or a hybrid of the two, but there are also songs whose lyrics have creole influence or inflection. The songs tell the patakís of the orishas, discuss the attributes of the orishas, and praise them. Songs have the power to sweeten the hearts of the orishas and are used to coax them to the ceremony. Songs can also be used to invoke the orisha's power. For example, Santeros may sing to Babalú-Ayé for their ills to be cured. Along with the batás, these songs are used to communicate with the orishas and are very important to a Santero.

Orisha songs, like many songs with African roots, are call and response. The lead singer is called the *composé* and leads the singers and dancers. In order to indicate what words are to be sung, the *composé* first sings the phrase to be repeated by all (A) and then an improvised phrase (B). The group, who will likely have some familiarity with the song, then repeats the first phrase (A) and the *composé* adds another improvised phrase (C). The pattern continues (A B A C A D A E...) until the *composé* changes the repeated phrase, thus starting a new pattern of A B A C A D... In any song, the *composé* has many phrases to choose from and may use any number of them throughout the course of the song. Additionally, the repeated phrase can be as short as one word so it requires great concentration to recognize the quick change to a new phrase.

The *composé's* improvised words after the initial line is sung are praise for the orisha. Often, this can be as simple as adding vocal improvisation or rearranging the words of the initial line. For example, in a verse about Oyá, the repeated words are “war’y war’y akuko” and the *composé's* improvised response may be “akuko war’y war’y.” Other times, however, the *composé* may add elaborate praise to the orisha in Yoruban, detailing accounts of the orisha’s splendor. This type of singing paired with the *batá* drums is an integral part of worship in *Santería*.

Dances of the Orishas

Accompanying the orisha songs are, of course, the orisha dances. The collection of movements associated with each orisha is so vast that it takes a lifetime to master them. *Santeros* who wish to learn orisha movements start at a young age and are often part of a family that already is known for dancing. For example, according to a dancer at Ballet Folklórico Cutumba de Santiago, an eastern Cuban dance company that preserves the orisha dances, Shangó has over 100 unique movements. The footwork for these movements is of varying difficulty. Some movements are as simple as stepping in place, but others involve difficult turns and rhythms that match the *batás* in subtle ways. However, even for the movements that involve basic steps, the arm gestures, body posture, distribution of weight, undulation of the back, and even facial expressions make even the most seemingly basic movement extremely complicated. While the same footwork is used in multiple movements for multiple orishas, all of these extra aspects make each movement unique. For example, the footwork may be the same for a movement of Shangó and a movement of Oyá, but because Shangó holds an ax and Oyá

holds two irukes, the movements and qualities appear completely different. Similarly, the same footwork would look different if it were performed by Oshún because her constant flirtatious smile gives the movement a light feeling and she may add turns to simulate swirling river waters. The specificity of orisha movements is so subtle that it is often completely lost on observers. Even to a trained mover, the differences may be too minute to notice. However, to a Santero well versed in the dances, these subtleties are of the utmost importance. While taking a class on the movements of Oyá with Ballet Folklórico Cutumba de Santiago, I was told that I was performing her foot and armwork correctly, but because I did not have my eyes opened as wide as possible, with a look of total rage, I was not telling the story of Oyá drinking a magic soup that made thunder roar in her stomach and explode through her mouth. That small detail meant that I was not truly dancing Oyá.

The movements represent the essence of the orishas. Every subtle part of each movement clearly points to an aspect of that deity. While literal gestures are sometimes used to tell stories while dancing, such as Oyá standing between Oggún and Shangó to stop their fighting,¹¹² most patakís are reenacted using the aplomb of the orisha's movements to tell the majority of the story. Such is the case with Oyá and Shangó, who have very specific images to convey.

Oyá, the orisha of the cemeteries, also conveys very specific images with her dance steps. In the majority of her movements, regardless of the footwork, Oyá keeps the irukes in her hands constantly circling. This movement, which involves active rotation and use of the back, shoulders, arms, and wrists, is done to collect all of the lost spirits in the skies. Then, in a plunging motion towards the earth, Oyá brings both hands and

¹¹² Valero, film

irukes downward, symbolically burying the dead spirits in the ground. In addition to the body movements, Oyá has a specific facial expression that completes her image. Oyá's face is in a silent scream, eyes wide in anger. Her fierceness is conveyed well by her movements, but even by looking at just her facial expression, one would understand the essence of Oyá.

Shangó represents thunder and music, but more generally, he represents machismo and virility. Though this includes many complex features, including physical strength, confidence, and the respect of the orishas, one interesting this emerges in his movements is their reference to sexual love.¹¹³ Shangó was known, in his human life, as a womanizer who could have his way with any woman and thus, when he became an orisha, he was associated with sexual love and fertility.¹¹⁴ Shangó uses his other representations to the service of his machismo in his dancing. For example, in one Shangó's movements, the dancer reaches his or her¹¹⁵ hand to the sky, gathering the energy of the thunderbolts and then, with a swift movement, brings his or her hand in a throwing motion towards his or her pelvis. For this reason, this movement must be executed with power and strength in the arm in order to transfer the power of the thunder into the genitals to prepare for ejaculation. Shangó and his movements represent an acknowledged part of life, sexual love, which must be honored by Santeros.

There is a general distinction that must be made about orisha dancing. The orishas and the dances they perform represent aspects of life; sexual love (Shangó), motherhood (Yemayá) flirtation (Oshun), youth and old age (Elegguá), death (Oyá), war

¹¹³ De la Torre 120

¹¹⁴ De la Torre 64

¹¹⁵ All of Shangó's movements represent masculinity, but they are certainly not limited to being danced exclusively by men. In fact, both men and women danced Shangó in my classes and, as gender does not enter into spiritual possession, all Santeros have an obligation to learn his steps.

and conflict (Oggún), and sickness (Babalú-Ayé). When devout Santeros dance the orisha movements, they truly take on the orisha's personality to praise the deity. However, this does not mean that followers of any orisha emulate their behaviors as a rule. Reading about orishas or watching elaborate tourist spectacles can create a skewed perspective of orishas and Santeros. For the sake of entertainment, orishas' characteristics are sometimes exaggerated and the dancers adopt this false representation as hypersexual or violent beings. This image has, in some sources, become related with all Santeros rather than the individual orishas. Shangó does represent sexual love, but this is celebrated as an undeniable part of life, not used as an excuse to be overtly sexual. The same is true of Oyá's rage, Oggún's hostility, Elegguá's malice, and all other orisha traits. This type of sensationalized imitation of the orishas is superficial and not an accurate representation of either the orishas or Santeros who praise them.

Orishas in Social Dancing Today

Though in some ways, Catholicism and Santería are linked, Santería separates itself from Catholicism in the way it seeps into Cuban social dancing. Traditionally, dancing has not been a central part of Catholic worship, particularly in the orthodox circles. As evidenced by the previous section, it is apparent that the opposite is true in Santería. Moreover, the sacred dances of Santería are not limited to worship services. Because so many people associate (even broadly) with the orishas, aspects of the sacred dances are brought into Cuban culture trends such as salsa dance.

Salsa dancing is one of the most popular dance forms that originated in Cuba.¹¹⁶ It is different from ballroom salsa because it is more grounded and uses exaggerated hip movements. It is a male-led partner social dance; both dancers execute a basic step and the woman is led into various movements by the male's arm movements. The dancers are in an embrace as they dance, but they also execute solo styling when they separate. During this time, the dancers execute movements that showcase their talents. In traditional Cuban salsa, this could be hip movements for the woman and fast footwork for the male. However, dancers occasionally use this time to perform orisha movements. The timing of many orisha steps corresponds to salsa timing; like salsa, orisha dances involves many short, repeatable steps. The dancers may face each other and execute the basic step of Elegguá, crossing their legs back and forth and doing a clearing the path for the other orishas with their hands. The gathering and thrusting downward of Oyá is also a popular movement to use in salsa dance.

The incorporation of Santería is also seen in pop music. Some artists, such as the Cuban group Síntesis, create fusion music that mixes popular orisha songs with jazz rhythms, synthesizers, and electric guitars.¹¹⁷ Being used to hearing the orisha songs played with traditional batás, I was surprised to hear these fusions in Cuban clubs. However, before long, I realized that orisha fusion had become a part of pop culture and was not unusual for Cuban dancers.

Adding orisha movement into salsa and orisha lyrics into popular music may seem like it is trivializing Santería. Mixing secular and sacred forms often brings about this reaction. However, for Santeros, this union is quite logical and purposeful. Santería

¹¹⁶ López Bonne, interview

¹¹⁷ AfroCubaWeb

does not confine its practice. Whether it is practiced in an ilé or outdoors, with a babalawo or family, Santería is just as valid as long as the intent to practice is present. Santería's music and dance are not confined either. Mixing the secular with the sacred is not sacrilege for a Santero. It is a subconscious choice to incorporate faith into an enjoyable activity. The frequency with which Santería is referenced in popular culture speaks to the extent to which it is present in all aspects of Cuban life.

Conclusion

What began as an extremely broad research topic went through many changes as I learned more about Santería. Eventually, it became a relatively narrow topic: the role that orisha dancing plays in Santería. However, even this topic was too extensive because of the large amount of crucial contextual information. Being an eager researcher, new to the topic of Santería, I was not aware I would be forced to modify my focus to include Santería's long history. As this thesis took shape, the focus was not orisha dancing as I had originally intended, but through the realization that I had to address all parts of Santería, some general themes emerged.

Syncretism

Using syncretism to understand Santería is misleading. When I first began research, I thought that Catholic saints and influence played an equal role in Santería as its African roots. This belief is common among researchers. Though I am not Catholic, living in a predominantly Christian culture made it easier for me to grasp Santería when it was explained in a Christian context. This reaffirms De la Torre's argument that those just being introduced to Santería rely on the Catholic aspects and that, as one learns more, he or she realizes that Catholicism is not central.¹¹⁸ Though I have only just begun my research on Santería, I can already see that Catholicism is not as fundamental to Santería as I thought it would be. To a committed Santero, the Catholic influence exists merely in the word "Santería" (from the word "saint") rather than in his or her beliefs.

¹¹⁸ De la Torre 107

Adaptability

I was shocked upon learning how close Santería remained to its Ifa roots. The Ifa religion and its adherents were put through a terrible and tumultuous ordeal, being kidnapped and taken to a new land for physical labor in awful conditions with the constant threat of death. Ifa remained intact despite this environment and active efforts by the slave masters to quash it. It seems that this is because Ifa was so ubiquitous in the lives of its practitioners. Ifa is not a religion that is only practiced during prayer or in a specific place. The Ifa practice exists in every day actions like bathing and dancing. To live is to practice Ifa. While slave masters could prevent their slaves from holding rituals, they could not remove the Ifa roots from everyday life. This ability made it possible for Ifa to adapt to its new, cruel surroundings. Now, hundreds of years later, Santería is still adaptable because Ifa was adaptable when it first came to Cuba.

Santería Today

My fieldwork in Santiago, Cuba taught me many things, but the recurrent lesson was that Santería is still adapting and changing to fit its environment. In Santiago, I saw many instances of Santería being engrained into Cuban culture; orishas were shown on TV, outdoor markets sold elekes and religious items, sacred music was to be heard in dance clubs as well as religious events. It seems that the constant connection to everyday life is extremely pronounced in Santería. I believe that this is tied Santería's ability to adapt and exist in all parts of life.

Next Steps

This thesis provides only an overview of Santería and its African roots. However, even this broad study has uncovered a whole new realm of inquiry; with this newfound appreciation of the complexity of Santería, I feel I can better grasp its myriad concepts and the value of examining each tiny detail. The intricacy of this topic has caused me to alter my entire way of thinking and value the importance of every experience in the effort to study a new culture. I intend to continue my research on Santería and Cuban culture to understand it as best as possible and continue immersing myself in this different world.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Butler University and its invested professors who made this thesis possible. Thank you to Mariangela Maguire for the opportunity to participate in the 2012 Butler Summer Institute where I learned invaluable lessons from other researchers. Thank you to James Lepore and George Mason University for two incredibly unique research experiences in Eastern Cuba and to Butler University's Campbell Fund committee for funding my second trip. Thank you to my interviewees from Luna Negra Dance Theater and Santiago, Cuba; without them I would know almost nothing. I am very grateful for the advice of Amy Elson, Paul Valliere, and my advisor, Cynthia Pratt, which kept my research and thinking on the right path.

Glossary

ashe- a complex theme from the religion, Ifa that may be used to reference the presence of God, a spiritual energy, or a life force

babalawo- a Santero who has dedicated his life to Santería and has exclusive knowledge of various Santería rituals, sometimes called a high priest of Santería

batá- a sacred two-headed drum that is often used in the playing of religious music

garabato- a sickle shaped object used by Eleggúa to clear the path to the physical world for the orishas.

Ifa- an ancient African religion practiced by the Yoruba people

ilé- a home that is consistently used by Santeros for religious practice

iponri- in Ifa, the heavenly consciousness present in each human being

iruke- an object used by Oyá that gathers dead spirits to be buried in the cemetery

Oludumare- God in the religion, Ifa

ori- in Ifa, the earthly consciousness present in each human being

orishas- anthropomorphic deities in Ifa and Santería

patakí- a collection of myths about the origins and exploits of the orishas

syncretism- a fusion of concepts from multiple cultural traditions

Yoruba- a cultural group in Western Africa, many of whom were eventually captured and sold into slavery in Cuba

Bibliography

- Almarales Corona, Belgis. "Religión Y Baile En Cuba." Personal interview. 17 Jan. 2013.
- Brandon, George. *Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. Print.
- "Central Intelligence Agency." *CIA*. N.p., 5 Feb. 2013. Web. 02 Mar. 2013.
- Delgado, Elio. "Cuba's African Cabildos." *Havana Times*. N.p., 15 Jan. 2011. Web. 22 Feb. 2013.
- Duncan, Cynthia. "About Santería." *AboutSanteria.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Feb. 2013.
- Frutos, Argelio. *Panteón Yoruba: Conversación Con Un Santero*. Holguín, Cuba: Ediciones Holguín, 1992. Print.
- "How Does the Church Choose Saints," "Patron Saints." *Catholic Online*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.catholic.org/>>.
- Karade, Baba Ifa. *The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts*. York Beach, Me.: S. Weiser, 1994. Print.
- Keir, Glynnis. "Oxford Dictionaries Online." *Oxford Dictionaries Online*. Oxford University Press, n.d. Web. 01 Mar. 2013.
- López Bonne, Osmel. "Religión Y Baile En Cuba." Personal interview. 18 Jan. 2013.
- Mason, Michael Atwood. *Living Santería: Rituals and Experiences in an Afro-Cuban Religion*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2002. Print.
- Mbiti, John S. *Introduction to African Religion*. Oxford [England: Heinemann Educational, 1975. Print.
- McGuire, Susan. "Latin Dances, African Roots." Butler University, Indianapolis, IN. Sept-Dec. 2011. Lecture.
- Melian Gil, Aliochi. "Religión Y Baile En Cuba." Personal interview. 18 Jan. 2013.
- Reinhardt, Thomas. "200 Years of Forgetting: Hushing up the Haitian Revolution." *Journal of Black Studies* 35.4 (2005): 246-61. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40027220>>.
- Sánchez Brady, Yoelbis. "Religión Y Baile En Cuba." Personal interview. 18 Jan. 2013.
- Singleton, Theresa A. "Slavery and Spatial Dialectics on Cuban Coffee Plantations." Thesis. N.d. *Slavery and Spatial Dialectics on Cuban Coffee Plantations*. Web.
- "Sintesis." *AfroCubaWeb*. N.p., n.d. Web. 2 Mar. 2013.
- Spiro, Michael. "Religion and Dance in Cuba." Personal interview. 12 Jul. 2012.
- Thornton, John. *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World: 1400-1800*. Cambridge [u.a.: Cambridge Univ., 2007. Print.
- Valero, Antonio. *Rumba En La Habana Con Yoruba Andabo*. Miami, FL: Pimienta Records, 2005. DVD.