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## Santería in a Globalized World: A Study in Afro-Cuban Folkloric Music

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Nathan Montgomery

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# SANTERÍA IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD: A STUDY OF AFRO-CUBAN FOLKLORIC MUSIC

## ABSTRACT

The Yoruban people of modern-day Nigeria worship many deities called *orichas* by means of singing, drumming, and dancing. Their aurally preserved artistic traditions are intrinsically connected to both religious ceremony and everyday life. These forms of worship traveled to the Americas during the colonial era through the brutal transatlantic slave trade and continued to evolve beneath racist societal hierarchies implemented by western European nations. Despite severe oppression, Yoruban slaves in Cuba were able to disguise *orichas* behind Catholic saints so that they could still actively worship in public. This initial guise led to a synthesis of religious practice, language, and artistry that is known today as Santería.

Though continually repressed by multiple regimes, increased accessibility of information, ease of travel, and an explosion of tourism have catapulted Santería into the global religious conversation. With practitioners around the world, Santería has become an international religion that deserves to be studied and respected. With it comes a rich artistic tradition that both preserves the history of an oppressed people and their indigenous ties to West Africa, and uses a unique

combination of influences to embody a living communal tradition that is powerful enough to summon the divine.

I used my Senior Experience Grant to conduct a 30-day research trip to Cuba in July 2017. I will be speaking about the history of Santería as a world religion in Harper Hall on May 13<sup>th</sup> at 11am, sharing insights gleaned from my experience in Cuba and presenting a selection of music that I learned from primary sources.

## INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2013, I was persuaded to join *Tambo Toké*, Lawrence University's Afro-Cuban ensemble, led by Lawrence alumnus Eli Edelman. In March of 2014, I performed as the lead vocalist (known as the *akpwon*) in his senior recital, which featured a thirty-minute arrangement of what I was told was "Afro-Cuban folkloric music." I had no previous experience with any Afro-Cuban tradition, but I decided to take a chance and learn what I could. The recording we produced won a Downbeat Award for best undergraduate Latin Group and jumpstarted another year-and-a-half of intense performance in a tradition that I still barely knew anything about. Over time, my continued involvement with the ensemble fostered the beginnings of the fascination and love I now have for the diversity and depth of Afro-Cuban traditions and opened my eyes to the musical and historical importance of studying the spread of West African ritual throughout the Americas.

In 2017 I was awarded a Senior Experience Grant from Lawrence University to execute a 30-day research trip to Cuba during the month of July. I immersed myself in the musical and religious communities in Havana and Matanzas. While I learned about traditions such as *Ijesa*, *Arara*, *Abakwa*, *rumba*, and *son*, my focus became Santería, the most prevalent religion of African origin that exists in Cuba. Specifically, my focus sharpened upon the musical practices of the religion, which consist of call-and-response songs sung over specific rhythms that are used to evoke and pay tribute to deities called *orichas*. In addition to multiple percussion lessons and religious fieldwork, I recorded, transcribed, and memorized over 150 *cantos* (songs) for 20 different deities while studying with a

kind and talented *babalawo* (a priest in the Santería religion) named Gilberto Morales in Matanzas, Cuba.

With the material I obtained over the summer, I have now become a co-director of *Tambo Toké*. I have been putting forth my best effort to share the small amount of knowledge that I have with my peers in an attempt to give voice to the culture and share the excitement I feel about the music.

As an aspiring Twenty-First Century musician and musicologist, I strive to be transparent throughout this ongoing project. This is my experience with a culture that is not my own. I am attempting to be as accurate as possible, acknowledging my own biases and the existence of conflicting information. That being said, I am also allowing my own personal experiences with Santería traditions to inform my analysis. The purpose of my essay and presentation is to consolidate my current knowledge of the history, religious context, and contemporary portrayal of Santería and its artistic rituals, and to present two primary observations.

First, despite an obscured history due to the oppressive institution of slavery, displaced West African peoples of Yoruban origin shared cultural values and artistic traditions that both reflected a need to contextualize their existence through ancestral lineage and emphasized the importance of creating physical community in their immediate space. The inherent qualities of their decentralized belief systems encouraged these displaced communities to actively connect and homogenize, preserving ancestral ties while simultaneously adapting and reacting to new environments on local levels. Hiding their traditions and adapting their language when they needed to in order to satisfy their oppressive overlords, a communal resilience allowed these Yorubans to create their own history to a certain extent, resulting in a new syncretic tradition called Santería, a religion whose values, while uniquely Afro-Cuban, have now spread across the globe. Second, because sacred rituals have been obscured and appropriated to a certain degree by secular folkloric performance, it is important to be informed about its religious context to better understand and connect with the musical tradition. When executed appropriately, the presentation of the artistic

practices of Santería in the context of secular folklore can be respectful and informative, giving authentic exposure to the cultural history and contemporary religious practice that it ultimately represents.

## THE AURAL TRADITION OF SANTERÍA AND THE STUDY OF AFRO-CUBAN CULTURE

“Before the 15th Century, much of the information on African culture had been orally documented by African elders, encoded in their dance and music activities or forged on paraphernalia. Exact documented information had also been difficult to locate due to their migratory lifestyle, [decentralized religious practices,] and the sharing nature of the people” (Badu 2002: 39). The first individuals who attempted to document West African and Afro-Latin history formally, in writing, included early European explorers, Christian missionaries, and ambassadors of Islam, all of who came from codified and centralized religions with written traditions. The sources they produced are unreliable, and often misleading, due to the biases implicit in their sense of religious or ethnic nationalism, regarding West African culture as the exotic-yet-inferior. For this reason, it is better to rely on the West African aural tradition for authentic information: a practice founded by songs, rhythms, and movements that embody a living history, tell stories of a people and their values, and, if intended, have the power to summon the divine and communicate with the dead (Badu 2002: 60, Erel 2017, Morales 2017, Orale 2017). It is important to remember that the diverse cultures and religions represented by these musical traditions exist both historically and contemporarily and have never been static (Apter 2013: 365-368).

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF CUBAN SLAVERY AND COLONIAL RULE

Before colonial powers had made claim to the Americas, the island of Cuba, like the surrounding islands of Hispaniola and San Salvador, was populated by a variety of indigenous communities led by their own set of nobles (Las Casas 1552: 43-47). After his first landing on San Salvador, Christopher Columbus made his second landing in Cuba on October 28, 1492. In 1511, after the island’s initial “discovery,” Diego Velázquez landed on the east side of the island at Baracoa and founded the first Spanish settlements in Cuba. He soon conquered the island, and by 1515 there were

no fewer than seven Spanish towns, including Havana, founded in 1514, and Santiago, founded in 1515 (Chapman 1927: 25). Because of its location in the Caribbean, Cuba was seen a strategic position in reference to Spain's mainland colonies and in the matter of navigating international relationships with other colonizers from competing nations. The Spanish government knew that maintaining control of the island was imperative to the success of their empire (Chapman 1927: 25-26).

The Spaniards enslaved the local populations and also exposed them to new pathogens. Together, the brutality of slavery and high death rates due to illness quickly decimated the indigenous population of Cuba. While both the forces of enslavement and disease wreaked havoc on indigenous peoples, it's hard to say which had the more deleterious effect. Burkholder and Johnson argue, however, that slavery was the primary source of the decline of native Cuban populations (Burkholder and Johnson 2004: 37). In response to this decline of the labor force, the Spaniards began importing African slaves to replace indigenous workers in the mines and fields as early as 1523 (Chapman 1927: 25). West African slaves were a constant resource for the Spanish empire, at first forced to extract metals and other natural resources from the island before being consumed by the sugar industry boom.

Under Spanish rule, Cuba and its sugar trade were tightly controlled and trade took place primarily in a bilateral fashion between the colony and the Iberian Peninsula. During the period from 1523 to the middle of the Eighteenth Century, the number of slaves in Cuba was approximately 39,000 at any given time, a modest number in comparison to what was to come (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

In 1762, the British seized control of Cuba, and opened the port of Havana to the global economy. Free trade revealed to the world the wealth of resources of Cuba (Chapman 1927: 29). In addition, the English flooded the island with African slaves to develop that economic potential. While the British held the capital city of Cuba for a little less than a year, they imported approximately 10,000 slaves in that short period, mostly to work on sugar plantations as the global demand for

sugar soared (Guerra y Sanchez 1964: 45). When the port of Havana was returned to the Spanish in 1763, the nature of conducting business had changed. The population, too, had changed dramatically. After 1770, Cuba absorbed more than half of the slaves entering Spanish America after 1770, and in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the small island had a population of 96,440 whites, 31,847 free colored, and 44,333 slaves. By 1840, the enslaved West African population had grown exponentially to about 400,000 individuals (Burkholder and Johnson 2004: 134, Guerra y Sanchez 1964: 45, *Encyclopedia Britannica*). During the three-and-a-half centuries that slavery was legal in Cuba, it is estimated that over one million West Africans were brought to Cuba, and over sixty-five percent of contemporary Cuban citizens have West African heritage (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

The independence of the American colonies in 1776 birthed another active threat to Spain's power in the region. Because of its proximity to the island and a prevalent manifest destiny mentality, members of the U.S. government had many conflicting opinions on Cuba during the latter part of the Eighteenth Century and throughout the Nineteenth Century, but the general consensus was that the U.S. should have as much control over Cuba's political economy as possible. Many Americans moved to Cuba and made a lot of money in the sugar industry (Chapman 1927: 65-69). Slaves continued to be shipped to both countries, with Cuba importing over 600,000 West Africans in the nineteenth century alone (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

After a century of one-dimensional economic exploitation and the insistence of colonial absolutism from a declining empire, paired with a growing abolitionist movement and a frustrating economic crisis in 1857, Cuba began to pull away from Spain (Chapman 1927: 29). Wealthy Cuban-born landowners, angry at Spain that they had no political representation, began to call for Cuban independence in 1868. With the slavery question in the U.S. settled by the end of its Civil War, both the U.S. and England helped to foment the independence movement, as well as supporting the abolition of slavery in favor of adopting newer technologies and hiring migrant workers (Chapman 1927: 61). Because of these momentous pressures, Spain agreed to emancipate Cuban slaves in 1869, and allow for more representative government, acknowledging the independence of the Cuban

people without relinquishing the colony. A law in 1870 provided for a gradual emancipation, but was not adhered to due to the distraction of the Ten Years War, which ended in 1878 with Spain managing to retain control of the island. In an effort to satisfy Cuba's aggravated citizens, Spain passed a law in 1881 to allow for gradual emancipation and by 1886, slavery in Cuba finally ended (Chapman 1927: 69). Despite a change in the law, nothing could undo the mass displacement and brutal exploitation of the black West African communities in Cuba, who all the while had strived to preserve, adapt, and ultimately, advance, their cultural, artistic, and religious practices.

## CULTURAL HISTORY OF DISPLACED WEST AFRICANS

The majority of West Africans brought to Cuba came from the same linguistic origin, though they represented three different ethnicities: the Lucumí, of Yoruba origin, the Carabalí from Calabar, the Ewe, from the Dahomey Kingdom. While these three groups were culturally distinct, they all spoke a similar language and shared an original history. A fourth important population of enslaved persons in Cuba were the Bantu people, who came from the Congo (Castellanos 2005: xiii). Out of these four ethnic groups, it was the Lucumí who eventually came to represent the dominant Afro-Cuban culture.

“The Yoruba make up one of the oldest identifiable ethnic groups in Africa, and Yoruba speaking people of West Africa have cultural roots dating back at least two thousand years (Olopun and Rey 2008: 4). The Yoruba historically originate from the kingdom of Oyo, which was located in modern-day Nigeria. Its sacred capital, the city of Ifé, referred to as *Ilé-Ifé* (*ilé* meaning home in Yoruban), was founded in the Fifteenth Century by a large community of Yoruban people who traveled west after the fall of the Sudanese *Songhai* Empire. Citizens of the kingdom adhered to a religion known as “The Rule of *Ifá*.” While the modern Yoruban people have cultivated, and are today still actively encouraging, a transnational Yoruban ethnic identity, this was not always the case. As the old kingdom of Oyo grew in size, sub-groups of Yoruban speakers left the region to form their own neighboring kingdoms, cities, and villages (Falola and Childs 2004: 5-12).



Yoruban religion is practiced at a communal level in the physical space that its believers occupy. While each subgroup of Yoruban community shares a common origin with every other (the Rule of *Ifá*), the traditions of each subgroup are completely decentralized and in no way subject to any pressures of a higher religious canon beyond each local community. Yoruban mythology, which “originates from the Rule of *Ifá*,” is host to over 600 deities called *orichas*, and, for the most part, each Yoruban community or kingdom in West Africa chose a specific *oricha* within the greater divine community to worship as a protector of their people (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 2). When the Lucumí (one of three main subgroups of Yoruban people that were brought to Cuba) were at their cultural height, they represented over twenty different West-African communities, each one worshipping a separate deity with specific songs, rhythms and movements that were aurally transmitted from generation to generation (Falola and Childs 2004: 5-12). In the colonial era, these groups formed their own communities that centered around houses called *cabildos de nación* “religious sodalities that doubled as social clubs and mutual aid societies.” Inspired by their previous regionalism, each *cabildo* acted as a small, neo-African kingdom, usually representing a specific *oricha*, equipped with its own flag and set of localized traditions (Apter 2013: 369).

The Ewe people were originally Yorubans who left the city of Ifé and founded the kingdom of Dahomey (located in between present-day Benin and Togo). They were later expelled from their kingdom by an attack by the Fon people, another Yoruban subgroup that previously coexisted peacefully with the Ewe. A large group of displaced Ewe traveled to the coast, some traveling south and some west. Because of their large numbers and newfound vulnerability, many were taken prisoner and sold into slavery by European slave traders. The Ewe that escaped ended up settling in Togo and present day Ghana. Though these communities’ traditions were soon affected by the presence of Dutch colonial power, the Ewe people still are a prevalent population in Ghana and maintain their religious practices (Badu 2002: 60-70).

The Ewe that were shipped to Cuba landed at a port in the province of Matanzas. Their traditions were well represented in colonial-era *cabildos* and have been maintained to a certain extent, but the Ewe soon felt the influence of other ethnic traditions, in particular Lucumí. The Ewe

tradition still survives today, albeit quietly, as the music and religious practice of *Arara*. While still representing its Ewe origins, *Arara* now falls under a larger Lucumí influence, with its practitioners usually involved in both traditions, rather than just solely *Arara*. Only two *cabildos* still practice *Arara* and the contemporary music and spiritual collective *Afrocuba de Matanzas* is one of the few groups that still performs public demonstrations of *Arara's* artistic practices. Today one cannot find any accurate representation of *Arara* outside of the province of Matanzas (Orale, 2017).

The Carabalí secret society of *Abakwá* originated from the kingdom of Calabar, another community of Yoruban origin that settled just east of the Niger River (Falola and Childs 2004: 20). Their traditions, while originally completely separate from Lucumí, were also eventually absorbed into what became a secret society within a much larger group of Lucumí practitioners. Africans were also brought from many other kingdoms that had originated from Old Oyo, including the Kingdom of Ijesa, whose traditions were also completely absorbed by Lucumí but whose rhythms and songs are still performed in certain contexts (Falola and Childs 2004: 5-12).

The Bantu slaves from the Congo had their own unique sets of traditions called *Palo Monte* that were, and essentially still are, completely separate from the Yoruban tradition. Bantu religion and artistic practices are equally deep as those of the Yoruba and were some of the most prevalent among colonial Afro-Cuban communities, at one point representing a majority of *cabildos*. In this essay, my focus is the development of Santería, which arose from the Yoruban—and primarily Lucumí—ethnic, linguistic, and religious tradition. While Bantu populations still exist in Cuba and practice their culture today, it was the Lucumí that were able to adapt in the most extreme ways, absorbing virtually all of the other displaced Oyo-originating West African communities under their umbrella, while naturally allowing for the same kinds of regional variation that had existed in the Old World (Apter 2013: 369)

By its very nature, Yoruban cultural tradition—and religion—is syncretic. It freely borrows and adapts and evolves in new circumstances, migrating to different regions with its practitioners. Unlike Christianity—or Judaism or Islam—there is no assumption of doctrinal purity. The

decentralized quality of Yoruban culture allows local communities to evolve and express themselves under new circumstances without being subject to an overarching regulator (e.g., the Christian Bible). These inherent cultural qualities encouraged the Lucumí and their fellow West African communities to seek out like groups and redefine their social identity on the basis of commonalities of language and religious practice in response to the social trauma of forced migration (Falola and Childs 2004: 17-18).

## THE EVOLUTION (DEVELOPMENT) OF SANTERÍA

The word *Lucumí* is representative of a unique Afro-Cuban ethnic nation that evolved as a conglomerate of the multitude of diverse traditions that forcibly displaced West Africans (known as the African Diaspora) brought to Cuba. *Lucumí* is also the word that is used to represent both the religion and the language of these people. The origin of the word is usually said to come from a Yoruban greeting meaning “my friend,” though some researchers believe that this term is derived from *akumi*, which means, “I am Aku.” Because the Yoruba people of Sierra Leone are known as the Aku, González-Wippler hypothesizes that this linguistic connection may indicate that many of the Yoruba who were brought to Cuba originated in Sierra Leone (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 3).

*Lucumí* as a religious practice is synonymous with *Santería*, *Regla de Ocha*, *Regla de Ifá*, and *Regla de Osha-Ifá*. These various names refer to the same thing: the “Rule of *Ifá*” practiced in the old Oyo Kingdom. *Santería* is a Spanish translation and is now the most commonly used title for the religion, literally meaning “the worship of saints” (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 1-7). “Saints,” of course, were an acceptable concept under the rubric of Catholicism, while the worship of a “god” other than the Christian God would have been unacceptable to the Spanish colonials. Equating *orichas* to saints was an adaptation necessary to *Lucumí*’s survival under colonial rule.

Like all religions originating from Old Oyo, *Santería* is an animist faith, an “earth religion [with] a magico-religious system that has its roots in nature and natural forces.” Each of the hundreds of *orichas* (saints) is identified with a natural force, which is viewed as a direct manifestation of god himself (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 3, 6). “Because the physical elements of

existence reflect spiritual principles, believers are assured that they do not exist in a universe that lacks reason or direction” (La Torre 2004: 6). The connection between God and mankind—through nature as expressed through the *orichas*—is enforced through *ebbó* (sacrifice), for the purpose of receiving *aché*, (power) (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 6).

Just like old Oyo, Santería is not a polytheistic faith. The *orichas* are expressions of a “personal supreme creator God—omnipotent and omnipresent if also distant and in retirement.” This supreme God—referred to as *Oloddumare* or *Olorun*—has always existed (Castellanos 2005 xvi). This omnipotent entity is who is believed to have created all of the *orichas* and given them their *achés* one by one. Still strongly connected to its Yoruban origins, Santería shares the common Yoruban creation story about the city of *Ilé-Ife*, where it is believed that creation began” (La Torre 2004: 158). The Cuban Lucumí share the same concept of the creator *Oloddumare/Olorun*, but refer to him as *Olofi*, the three titles representing different aspects of the same supreme being. *Oloddumare* is “a transcendent being who is the essence of all there is and more,” *Olorun* refers to the act of creation, while *Olofi* is the creation itself, rather than the creator. The best way to define the concept of this supreme God in Santería, is as man’s personal God, a manifested force that is in charge of creation. It was after creation that *Oloddumare* gave powers (*aché*) to the *orichas* so they could control and affect different aspects of the world’s natural forces and connect with humanity. With *Oloddumare* now retired, “all that is, whether it be seen or unseen, exists as a part of a system in which [*Oloddumare*’s] valiant *orichas* protect all of creation” so that humans may continue to exist and develop (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 24-26, Morales 2017).

While Santería’s foundational tenants center on communal practices that celebrate familial connections and ancestral lineage, “Santería’s main purpose is to assist the individual, regardless of their religious background or affiliation.” Santería’s most basic belief is that destiny begins in heaven (*Ilé-Olofi*) prior to birth. The goal of practitioners is to live in harmony with their assigned destiny, which they prepare themselves for by ensuring they possess the necessary rituals to navigate life’s difficulties and by consulting with *babalawos* (high priests), who communicate with the *oricha* named *Orunmila* in an effort to advise each person on how to best follow their destiny and avoid

misfortune. Santería begins with an individual's problems, initiating them into a community that encourages them to find context and success (La Torre 2004: 4).

As in the many disparate Yoruba traditions in Africa (which all reflect "old Oyo"), Santería is highly decentralized. No central institutional structure provides consistency within Santería. Worship takes place in the homes of individuals and within communal "house-temples." Each house-temple is an entity unto itself, with little or no connection or responsibility to other house-temples. This decentralization is so extreme that even neighboring *casas de santo* (house-temples) can have different interpretations of tradition and divergent practices (La Torre 2004: 4). This radical decentralization allowed Santería to continue to absorb diverse traditions while still permitting variation on a local level. The house-temples that exist today descend from the original colonial-era *cabildos* that continue to represent West African diversity and regionalism (Apter 2013: 369).

As more displaced Yoruban traditions began to be absorbed by Lucumí practices, enslaved populations were forced to become creative in order to continue to comfortably practice their religion, which—Catholic clerics being categorically intolerant of divergence and variety within their faith—was actively discouraged. The Lucumí solution was to disguise the *orichas* they worshiped with Catholic saints. One example is that *Olofi* was syncretized as Jesus Christ. Other *orichas* are now represented by religious figures such as Saint Anthony (*Elegguá*), Saint Lazarus (*Babalú-Ayé*), and Saint Norbert (*Ochosi*). Because of these adjustments, the Lucumí were able to claim that they were practicing Catholicism in their own way for a short period of time. However, the colonial government and Catholic clergy soon caught on to this obfuscation and began to persecute the Lucumí for not embracing the doctrinal purity of Catholicism. This forced the Lucumí religious community underground, with practitioners often swearing to secrecy to protect themselves and their communities. As years passed, boundaries between the now underground Lucumí cult and the public practice of Catholicism began to blur, resulting in the fusion of the two sacred systems. Because of this phenomenon, contemporary "Santería is a typical case of syncretism, the spontaneous, popular combination or reconciliation of different religious beliefs" (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 3-6, 24-75).

Once the religion was more established and its communities were not being so actively persecuted, Santería was able to migrate from Cuba to other countries in Latin America, including the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, and elsewhere. One analyst estimates that there are now more than a hundred million practitioners of [Santería] in Latin America and the United States (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 6).

## THE LUCUMÍ LANGUAGE AND ITS ROLE IN RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

While the religion of *Lucumí* has many names, the language of *Lucumí* is referred to only as *Lucumí*. This is most likely because it is a unique mix of non-standardized Yoruban dialects and colonial Spanish. There are certainly very clear similarities between modern Yoruban and *Lucumí*, but *Lucumí* itself has never been codified and varies from region to region, *casa* to *casa*, and even between individuals.

This can present interesting problems when defining or interpreting the “language” of the *orichas*. If *Lucumí* is infinitely variable, how do the gods speak in a way that is both immutable and divine, but can also be easily understood by those who may speak wildly different versions of that language? Practitioners of Santería think of the *orichas* as speaking an “ideal” or divine version of *Lucumí*. At the same time, the *santeros* also recognize that this “pure” form of *Lucumí* has been lost over time and space. Anthropologist Kristina Wirtz (2007) puts it this way:

*“When the orichas speak during spirit possession, they incorporate markers of both Lucumí and heavily exaggerated bozal Spanish...Lucumí, thus, evokes a poignant combination of the presumably timeless divine plane and the bitter history of the ancestors who brought Yoruba traditions to Cuba...In part because the oricha embody ideal fluency in Lucumí, santeros regard Lucumí as perfectly intelligible to anyone with sufficient knowledge. At the same time, they recognize that their own linguistic knowledge is imperfect because much has been lost through the generations” (Wirtz 2007: 111-112)*

My teacher, a *babalawo* named Gilberto Morales, certainly recognized that his knowledge of the *Lucumí* language was imperfect. Many of the translations he gave me were vague and he admitted to not being able to translate many Spanish words into *Lucumí*. When I mentioned that a friend and mentor from Havana (acclaimed *rumbero* Pedrito “El Bumbo”) had offered to let me borrow his Yoruban dictionary as a resource, Gilberto just laughed and claimed that none of the words found in a

standardized *Yoruban* dictionary would correspond to the Lucumí vocabulary. He emphasized the complexity of Lucumí's origins and gave me examples of how the lyrics for *cantos* have evolved and vary by region.

One such example is a song for *Ochún*, the *oricha* of wealth and beauty. Gilberto told me that the majority of people know a song that goes:

*Chi chi olongo, chi chi olongo,*

*Tani mowaye, olongo ea,*

*Chi chi olongo.*

Gilberto argues that these words do not make sense. "*Chi Chi*" is a simple nickname and "*Olongo*" refers to basket that is carried over the shoulder. He told me that the true lyrics are:

*Obá iki olo owo, obá iki olo owo,*

*Tani mowaye, olo owo ea,*

*Obá iki olo owo.*

This version makes much more sense because *obá* translates to "king", *olo* translates to "owner of," and *owo* translates to "money." *Ochún* is the queen/owner of money (Gilberto says he has never heard of a Lucumí word for queen), so the context of the previously obscured *canto* becomes logical (Morales 2017).

Lucumí is an aurally transmitted divine language that has morphed over time. Direct translations of *cantos* are hard to come by and often impossible to obtain. Most religious practitioners and scholars are satisfied with being able to identify certain vocabulary within Lucumí *cantos* and *rezos* (prayers). Some *santeros* have even argued that it is inappropriate to directly translate Lucumí because of its divine properties. That being said, many *santeros* consider it their duty to obtain the most authentic versions of Lucumí *cantos* as possible, some attempting to adhere to a form of Lucumí that adheres as closely as it can to the original Yoruban roots of the language, while others are more accepting of Lucumí's living properties and constant evolution (Wirtz 2007: 108).

All the materials that I was able to obtain from my Cuban teachers and every academic source I consulted contained different spellings, and sometimes varying translations, for Lucumí vocabulary. For purposes of continuity, I have chosen the spellings that I think are most accurate and kept them consistent throughout the paper. I have also included a list of some translations of important Lucumí terminology for reference. While it is very much an incomplete and imperfect list that I created using a variety of sources, it should still prove useful (sources include Morales 2017, Erel 2017, Martínez 2018, González-Wippler 2016 [1989], Hagedorn 2001, and Lachatañeré 2005 [1938]: 145-153).

## MELODY, MOVEMENT, AND RHYTHM

*Orichas* are evoked by their worshipping communities by means of specific praise songs (*cantos*), drum rhythms, and physical gestures. Sacred ritual is dictated musically, a common trait in West-African polytheistic traditions (Hagedorn 2001: 75-76). The *cantos* are called by a lead singer, a talented orator known as the *akpwon*. The choir (*coro*) then replies to each call with the same melody or a related response. The *akpwon* leads the ensemble, determining how many times to repeat each *canto* and when to move on to the next *canto*. The drummers and dancers react to these songs, knowing what to do during each transition. The songs are meant to praise, tease, and tempt the *orichas* into entering one's place of worship, so that the deities can communicate with, and sometimes spiritually possess, their human children (Morales 2017).

The *orichas* are called during a *tambór*, also known as a *toque de santo*. *Toques* are specifically religious, often lasting for three to four hours and usually presented in house-temples. As the populations from different *cabildos* began to mix, those of Lucumí origin began to combine the worship of their community's specialized *oricha* with those of other specialized *orichas* from other Lucumí communities. Soon, all the *orichas* were prayed to during a single event in a specific order. The order varies from *casa* to *casa*, but a full set of songs for all twenty-one *orichas* is called an *oro cantado*. Sometimes before the *oro cantado*, the drummers will play an *oro seco*, a set of rhythms, played without songs, for each deity in the same specific order (Morales 2017).



In addition to enticing the *oricha*, *cantos* can also tell stories, or *patakís*, that tell the history and mythology of the *orichas*. Like other aspects of Yoruban culture, its mythology is complex, varying from region to region. Often myths contradict one another because they stories originated from geographically separate communities. These *patakís* are “not interpreted literally [because] their purpose is to provide guidance and practical help for believers in the here and now” (La Torre 2004: 31).

“Although *sheckere*, *agogos*, and even *conga* drums may be used in other Santería ceremonies, the three double-headed *batá* drums are the most effective instruments for evoking the *orichas* during a *toque*” (Hagedorn 2001: 75). The *batá* drums used to call the *orichas* must be blessed during a special ceremony in order for them to be able to summon divine power. In addition, each drummer must go through a special hand-washing ceremony before they are allowed to touch the sacred *batá* (Hagedorn 2001: 75-76).

“*Toques de Santo* can be interpreted as a distillation of more than a century of diverse, divine performative intent.” The traditions still continue to evolve, but the overall meaning has stayed the same (Hagedorn 2001: 75). Singing *cantos* is like speaking, or like having a conversation and preaching a sermon at the same time. Each oration must be compelling enough to physically bring an *oricha* to earth so that they may communicate with their human children (El Bumbo 2017).

When observing both *toques* and folkloric presentations in Cuba, I saw that each *oricha* is physically represented by a dancer, dressed in the costume and colors that correspond to the deity they embody in that moment. During religious ceremonies, it is the human body that connects the physical world to the divine. If successfully summoned, *orichas* will possess or “mount” their children, leaving them possessed, seizing, or in a trance-like state (El Bumbo 2017).

“It is through the words, the rhythms and the movements of these sacred songs that the *orichas* were able to travel from Africa to Cuba,” allowing displaced communities to assert their religion in the new physical spaces that they occupied. Similarities in artistic practices are what united diverse Yoruban *cabildos* in their worship, offering a larger sense of community (Concha-

Holmes 2013: 490-491). These traditions of song, rhythm, and dance are what continue to be the most compelling ambassadors for Santería across the globe.

## ENTERING THE FAITH

I know from personal experience that approaching a deeply complex faith with such a nuanced history can be intimidating, especially as an outsider. When first arriving in Cuba I was unsure of how my interest in these practices would come across to the practitioners themselves. I was, and continue to be, pleasantly surprised with the amount of support I have received from the Santería community to continue with my studies, hone my musical practices, and even become involved in the religion.

I learned that while rooted in Africa, “Santería is not limited to those of African descent. Anyone and everyone is welcome to honor and worship the *orichas* because the natural forces they represent are present everywhere in the world...one becomes a devotee not according to ethnicity or race, nor because of a profession of faith, but rather because of an action taken during a ritual” (La Torre 2004: 4). Even non-religious persons like myself are welcome to participate in secular presentations of the music and share the intense communal energy of an artistic tradition founded ritual practice. Once I had learned a full *Oro Cantado* from my lessons with Gilberto Morales, many religious practitioners were surprised by my amount of knowledge and interest, asking me why I had learned so much and not yet become a practitioner myself. I told them truthfully that I loved the tradition but wanted to take my time and become more informed before getting more personally involved with religious ritual. Despite this mentality and my initial goal to study and observe Santería tradition as an outsider, I became more personally involved than I originally intended, partially because of the amount of encouragement I received to participate.

During my last week in Havana I met a man named Erel at a park (*El Parque Trillo*) near where I was staying. While I correctly suspected that he had approached me because he had no money for dinner, he was incredibly friendly, respectful, and easy to talk to. We ended up having a long conversation about my project, and I sang him some of the songs from the *Oro Cantado* that I

learned in Matanzas. He was impressed, lowering his voice to tell me that he was a Santería practitioner and could show me aspects of the religion that most tourists never see. As we became more comfortable with each other, he admitted that he was spiritually communicating with his ancestors and that they were telling him that I deserved to be involved and learn more. We ended up spending many days together. During that time, Erel brought me to his *casa de santo* and introduced me to his religious community of *santeros*, specifically his *Padrino* (the *santero* who had initiated Erel into the faith). Just like Erel, they were impressed by my knowledge of their traditions and encouraged me to become more involved. With the help and blessing of his community, Erel and I performed numerous low-level rituals to better connect me with my ancestors, asking them for support in my personal journey.

“There are several roles available in Santería. Each offers a different level of protection, power, and knowledge to the devotee. As the believer progresses through the different levels of the faith, they move from a religious expression which relies mostly on the Catholic influences of the religion toward greater reliance on its African elements” (La Torre 2004: 106). Each step is characterized by a specific series of rituals. “Practitioners are initiated into embodied knowledge systems and gain the abilities to use music and movement to communicate across physical and spiritual borders, as well as enact social and political change across ethnic, religious, and national boundaries” (Concha-Holmes 2013: 491).

After a series of initial rituals (the majority of which I was never personally involved in), initiates have the opportunity to *hacer santo* (to make saint). *Santeros* are also referred to as *omorichas*, or “children of *orichas*.” Each *santero* is given an *oricha* to serve as their adopted parent. Once the musicians establish a connection between heaven and Earth during a *toque*, *santeros* and *santeras* are responsible for directing the ceremony and passing on the benefits of this divine intervention to their *ahijados* (godchildren) (Hagedorn 2001: 82).

Beyond *santero*, the next step is becoming a *babalawo* (like my teacher Gilberto), a high priest consecrated to the rule of *Ifá*. In addition to added ceremonial responsibilities, *babalawos* help

people by summoning the deity *Orunmila*. Also known as *Orula*, *Orunmila* is said to live between heaven and Earth and has the power of divination. *Babalawos* consult him to harness that divine power, helping individuals choose the right path to effectively adhere to their predetermined destiny (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 33-36, 94-98).

While becoming a *santero* is a goal of many Santería practitioners, it is clear that anyone can become involved to any degree if they are interested and able to find a religious community to support them. This trait of acceptance, despite such a violent history with western European culture, is a key reason why Santería is shared with and practiced by communities all over the world. I am grateful to my Cuban friends and mentors for being so kind, encouraging, and generous with their time.

## THE CONCEPT OF *EGUN* AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ANCESTRAL CONNECTION

As I learned from Erel, an essential tradition in Santería and all other Yoruban-based cultures is the worship of one's ancestors, known as the *egun*. Before presenting to the *orichas*, it is paramount to pay tribute to one's lineage first, appeasing the *egun* and bringing them into the room to ask for health and strength. Once connected, the worshipper then asks permission of the *egun* to use their ancient knowledge of tradition that has been passed down since the beginnings of *Ifá* (Erel 2017). According to this tradition, "death does not separate a person from their community; rather, the dead remain tied to and part of the faith community of which they were a part in life" (La Torre 2004: 21). The *egun* continue to help and protect their loved ones and have the ability to bring harm to their enemies. In Santería, it is considered perfectly natural that the dead can interact with the living. According to La Torre, these interactions are perceived as a natural aspect of existence "in which the physical and spiritual converge and intermingle to the benefit of both realms"

Like all *orichas*, *egun* have their own songs and rhythms to summon them before each ritual. I would like to examine, and later demonstrate live, one *canto* in particular that I learned from Erel:

*Aumbá wá orí,  
Aumbá wá orí,  
Awa osún, awa omá,  
Lerí omá, leyawo,  
Ará Orún kawé.*

This roughly translates to:

*We have our heads  
We have our heads,  
We have Osún (an oricha who represents one's personal guardian angel), we have our children,  
To our children we will pass the secret,  
People in heaven join us.*

As the *akpwon* calls this particular song, he or she will often change the words of the last verse, substituting the words *ará orún* in order to include other groups of ancestors. While first asking the people in the kingdom of heaven to join the practitioners in the physical world, the *akpwon* will ask the *bogbo egun* (all our ancestors), the *iyá egun* (the ancestors of our mothers), the *babá egun* (ancestors of our fathers) the *mokékeré egun* (ancestors who died as children), and the *egun ilé* (the ancestors of the particular *ocha* house-temple where the ritual is being performed (Erel 2017)).

This song for the *egun* embodies two key elements of Santería practice: First, it acknowledges the role of individual consciousness, highlighting that cultural history and context is principally conceived of and preserved in people's minds. Even though West African religious traditions were not physically recorded, communal practices continued to survive within the bodies and brains of individuals. Second, it communicates the importance of learning cultural practices from the older generations and passing them on to younger generations through rituals of physical and artistic practices. This is perhaps the most fundamental cultural value practiced by the Lucumí, ensuring their continued survival and communal development despite a history of severe oppression.

## WHO ARE THE *ORICHAS*?

The number of *orichas* that exist in Afro-Latin American traditions fluctuates between twenty and twenty-five (González-Wippler 2). During my time in Cuba, I came across 21 *orichas* that represent the Lucumí tradition, though it is very possible that there are a few lesser deities that I have not heard or read about yet. Both the Lucumí and the greater Yoruban community categorize *orichas* as being either “white” and “cool,” with life-giving powers (i.e. *Obatalá*), or “dark” and “hot,” symbolizing strength, virility, and more chaotic emotions (i.e. *Elegguá*). All of the *orichas* have specific natural powers (*aché*) that were given to them by God/*Oloddumare*. (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 24-28)

For the purpose of this project, I will examine and demonstrate *cantos* and *batá* rhythms for three of the most essential *orichas*: *Elegguá*, *Obatalá*, and *Yemayá*.

## ELEGGUÁ

*Elegguá* is the *oricha* of the crossroads, a strong warrior with a mischievous streak who holds the power to control change and destiny (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 4). Considered the youngest and cleverest of the *orichas*, *Elegguá* is the divine enforcer and the most powerful of the warrior gods. He is considered the second most powerful *oricha*. His name in Yoruba means “messenger of the gods,” and he uses mice as his agents to help guard the paths of divine and human communication. He is also the divine trickster who enjoys putting both gods and humans in compromising positions. Despite his tricks, *Elegguá* is known to always act rationally (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 31).

In addition to carrying messages between human beings and the other *orichas*, *Elegguá* also reports human actions to *Oloddumare* (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 28). *Elegguá* has been syncretized with several Catholic saints, including Saint Anthony of Padua, the Holy Infant of Prague, Saint Martin of Porres, and Saint Benito. He is represented by the colors red and black as well as by numbers that are multiples of three (twenty-one in particular). He is also valued for his ability to guard homes against dangers. Some *santeros* keep *Elegguá*'s image in their courtyards in a small

house especially for him, but most keep him inside the house near the front door, so that he can keep away evil (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 29-30).

Following the rituals for the *egun*, *Elegguá* is the first *oricha* to be addressed at each *toque de santo* so that he may enter the room and physically open the line of communication between the worshipers and the other *orichas*. The dancer who represents *Elegguá* will approach members of the crowd, physically connecting with people hand-to-hand and forehead-to-forehead before finishing the dance. For the remainder of the ritual, the *Elegguá* dancer leads the other *oricha* dancers on and off stage, physically embodying *Elegguá's* role.

The first song that I learned from Gilberto Morales is a common song to initiate an *Oro* for *Elegguá* and is the second song that I will demonstrate during my presentation:

*Mojuba o, Mojuba oricha*

*Aché, mojuba oricha*

*Mojuba* translates to a salutation or prayer, while *aché* represents the spiritual power wielded by the *orichas*. This is a clear declaration of respect for *Elegguá* and his power.

Another common song for *Elegguá* is *ago ilé ago*. *Ago* is a phrase that asks for permission for entry (e.g., a knock at the door). *Ilé*, as mentioned earlier, refers to the concept of a physical home. In this song, the *akpwon* is asking for permission to enter into communication with the divine world, inviting *Elegguá*, and all other *orichas*, into their *ilé* (Morales 2017).

## OBATALÁ

Obatalá is father of the world, though he/she appears in both masculine and feminine forms. Obatalá is the physical creator of mankind and is also the symbol of peace and purity. Obatalá is represented by the color white, is said to live on top of a mountain, and represents the highest level of existence (La Torre 2004: 58). He/she protects the minds of all individuals (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 38).

According to Yoruban mythology, *Obatalá* was the first *oricha* created by the supreme god, *Olofi/Oloddumare*. He/she is the most powerful *oricha*, is the father/mother of many of the *orichas*, and is considered to be the father of humanity. Interestingly, the tradition is that *Obatalá* is the creator and owner of all human heads, and is thus in charge of human thoughts and dreams. When someone is troubled or confused, *Obatalá* provides serenity, and when someone is going through difficult times, he/she can bring clarity (La Torre 2004: 57-58).

The santeros often say that all of *Obatalá's* attributes emanate from a combination of the *oricha's* male and female aspects, but that it is important to remember that *Obatalá* is one entity. "He is the owner of the world, *cabeza grande*, the first *oricha*, and for that reason, his tureen or *sopera* is placed above those of all the *orichas* in the *canastillero* or cabinet where they are kept...*Obatalá's* sacred numbers are eight, sixteen, and twenty-four [and their] feast is celebrated on September 24, the day of Our Lady of Mercy in the Catholic Church" (González-Wippler 2016 [1989]: 38).

The second time I met with Erel's *padrino* was so that he could read my energy and help me connect with my ancestors. After invoking the *egun* of my deceased grandmother, I was told a variety of things about my energy and life trajectory. I was advised that I needed to participate in a ceremony to *lavar la cabeza* (wash my head) so I could receive *Obatalá* as my guardian angel, to watch over me and protect my head. This purification ceremony involved prostrating myself to multiple *orichas*, burning candles and offering food to appease *Obatalá*, and placing chopped fresh fruit on my head and limbs. After some investigation I found out that early initiates to the faith always receive *Obatalá* as a guardian angel to watch over them until they receive their principal *oricha*. I still wear the blessed white beaded necklace, bracelet, and anklet I received during the ceremony when I can, especially on days that I need extra mental support.

I have unfortunately been unable to find accurate translation for the *cantos* for *Obatalá* that I will be demonstrating. Gilberto told me that the *cantos* for *Obatalá* are some of the most lyrical. While the *akpwon* is allowed to improvise variations of their calls for other *orichas*, to embellish *Obatalá cantos* is generally considered unnecessary because of the importance of their specific melodies.



## YEMAYÁ

*Yemayá* is the goddess of the ocean and the mother of all that exists. “If *Obatalá* symbolizes the seed of life, then *Yemayá* germinates that seed. She is the mother of the world, mother of humanity, and mother of several of the *orichas*.” Interestingly, practitioners of Santería associate life with water: just as our scientific understanding of the origin of life on Earth began in the water, *Yemayá*—the origin of life—possesses the properties of water (La Torre 2004: 72). Her name is derived from the Yoruba title *Yeyeomo eja*, which means “the mother whose children are the fish” (González-Wippler 1989: 57). As a maternal symbol, *Yemayá* is also the goddess of fertility, receiving fertility rites from women who are hoping to conceive.

In Catholicism, *Yemayá* is also known as Our Lady of Regla (*La Virgen de Regla*), a version of the Madonna and protector of sailors and patron saint of the Bay of La Havana in Cuba. In the middle of the seventeenth century this image of the black Madonna was brought from Spain. Followers of Santería soon began to use the black Madonna as the “mask” for their *oricha* *Yemayá*, because of both skin color and her association with the sea (La Torre 2004: 73-74). *Yemayá* is the only *oricha*/saint in Santería that is depicted as a black African. “Her greatest gifts to humanity are the *di-logun*, the seashells which are used by the *orichas* to communicate with their children” (La Torre 2004: 72).

I managed to partially translate the second to last song of the set of *cantos* that I will present for *Yemayá*:

*Yemayá olo odo, awalodo lo mio*

*Yemayá olo odo, awalodo lo mio*

*Olo*, translates to “owner of” and *odo* means “river,” so we can be sure that this *canto* is praising *Yemayá* as “the owner of the river.” *Mio* should be possessive, most likely meaning “my,” but I have not been able find the translation for *awalodo*, though I believe latter half of the word is still referring to a river (*odo*).

During my last week in Cuba, I rode the ferry across the bay that separates Havana with the suburb of Regla on a number of occasions, a town originally formed by emancipated slaves where

Erel lived with his mother. In the middle of each crossing, Erel would cross himself (a Catholic tradition) with a coin and then toss it in the river as a gift for *Yemayá*. He encouraged me to do the same. After my head-washing ceremony for *Obatalá*, we gathered the remainder of the chopped fruit that had been placed on my head and left it on the stairs of a Catholic Church. We then went to pay tribute to Yemayá, arriving at the water's edge next to the popular *malecón* in Havana. We lit a candle and "washed" ourselves with flowers and the remaining fruit that remained intact (this consisted of a circular "scrubbing" motion from head toe) before throwing the offerings into the ocean.

### SACRED VS. SECULAR: THE PROBLEMS OF FOLKLORIC PRESENTATION

At least from the end of the Nineteenth Century, most people (including academics) have dismissed Santería and other Afro-Latin religious traditions. They erroneously categorize it in one of two ways: First, they have interpreted it as a static and declining tradition. Most non-practitioners who have been exposed to Santería's artistic traditions have not appreciated Santería as a living, breathing form of contemporary religious expression. Rather, they have seen it as a bit of folkloric tradition that modern Cubans keep alive as a fun and lively art form used purely for entertainment. The characterization and demonstration of Santería music as folkloric entertainment has allowed it to be "objectified and reconstructed without consideration for [its] contemporary religious context" in many instances (Hagedorn 2001: 4). Second, many analysts have wrongly associated it solely with the Afro-Cuban experience: that it is something that is associated only with the history of slaves brought to Cuba, and is therefore a dying bit of folkloric tradition that is being lost as Cuba modernizes. My experience in Cuba—along with my research into the faith—has convinced me that Santería is not only an active religion that lives and breathes, but is also a faith that operates on a global scale, flexible enough to allow for localized variation and evolution, and welcoming to people who are neither black nor Cuban.

During the early years of the Cuban Republic at the turn of the Twentieth Century, Havana-born scholar Fernando Ortiz became the first academic to write about Afro-Cuban religious traditions. His first works *Los Negros Brujos* ("The Black Witches," published in 1901) and *Los Negros*

*Esclavos* (“The Black Slaves,” published in 1916), were highly exoticized accounts of what I have just explained to be deeply complex religious traditions with a rich history, equating these practices to witchcraft and exotic folklore of a “simple” or unsophisticated “primitive” people (Castellanos 2005 [1938]: 153, and Erel 2017).

While his writings seemed to ignore the role of Afro-Cuban artistic practices as a legitimate form of religious expression and were plainly racist, Ortíz was the first to organize public staging of *batá* drumming in 1936 and 1937, giving Santería a new public platform. This was the beginning of the *Conjunto Folklórico*, a group that eventually became the first state-sponsored artistic collective to demonstrate Afro-Cuban artistic, and originally religious, practices within a highly secular “folkloric” context (Hagedorn 2001: 5).

After Ortiz’s initial work, Cuban born scientist and writer Rómulo Lachatañeré began doing his own ethnological research into Afro-Cuban music and religious practice. Lachatañeré established “the methodological and semantic routes to be followed by subsequent Cuban ethnology” in his work *The Religious System of the Lucumís and Other African influence in Cuba* (published in 1946). In his writing he referenced Fernando Ortiz’s groundbreaking work, declaring himself a disciple, but still pointing out his mentor’s mistakes and limitations. He critiqued Ortiz’s study of Afro-Cuban religion and art forms as merely a study of the “black underworld” that was brought to Cuba by “primitive peoples” as a result of the transatlantic slave trade (Castellanos 2005: xi).

To his credit, Ortíz published Lachatañeré’s critique in the pages of the academic journal he edited called *Estudios Afrocubanos*. As a result of this seemingly unlikely collaboration, Lachatañeré’s anthropological approach was adopted by Ortíz, enabling “the rapid advance of Afro-Cuban societies at a crucial point in [their] development” and inspiring other anthropologists and ethnomusicologists (i.e. Lydia Cabrera, Katherine Hagedorn) to continue to investigate both the history and contemporary existence of diverse Afro-Latin traditions in more comprehensive and respectful ways. (Castellanos 2005: xi). The ethnographer Jorge Castellanos writes about the difficulties that

Lachatañeré and his contemporaries faced in their effort to obtain accurate information about Afro-Cuban culture:

*It was necessary to penetrate the secrecy in which black believers cloaked their beliefs and their cults, fearful—with good reason—of attracting all manner of disdain, desecration and persecution. To the arrogance of the dominant culture was added the understandable inferiority complex of the subjugated culture. Exorcising those demons was not a simple matter (Castellanos 2005 viii).*

While all of my religious Cuban friends and mentors were very open and encouraging, I could tell that they weren't sharing all of the secrets of their faith, or at least were just giving me information little by little. This makes sense because Santería is a practice that one enters gradually through a series of rituals, each revealing new information about the religion's "secrets." This is a trajectory that all practitioners, including Cubans of West African origin, must follow. If anything, practitioners of Santería have found their religious beliefs to have become more acceptable in the public eye, allowing them to be more comfortable practicing their religion openly and more empowered to share aspects of their traditions with foreign individuals and communities.

Despite its newfound openness and global presence, the nuanced and historical imbalance of power between ethnic groups continues to create problematic situations in the context of secular presentations of Santería, raising questions about how to give these traditions their own voice in the most respectful manner possible. The best methods to avoid mischaracterization of the tradition are education and conversation.

## SACRED VS. SECULAR: THE TOURIST BOOM

When the Castro regime came to power, it adopted an official policy of "scientific atheism," which drew upon Marx as well as the models of Castro's Soviet benefactors. As a result, the Castro regime persecuted practitioners of Santería and other African-based religions. However, soon after, the Castro government began to selectively support some of Cuba's African-based religious traditions, "legalizing certain practitioners and mainstreaming these religions and their adherents to the tourist trade" in an effort to make money. In so doing, the government projected a white-washed image of a diverse and evolved "Cuban" heritage onto the island's developing post-revolutionary

identity. The first artistic collective to be state-sponsored was a continuation of Fernando Ortíz's original folkloric project, with the state officially establishing the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba* in 1962 (Hagedorn 2004: 7, 19).

In her book *Divine Utterances*, Katherine Hagedorn interviews Alberto Villareal, a percussionist and *santero* who was one of the *Conjunto's* original members. In this interview, Villareal explains that while the form of the *Conjunto's* performances was secular, most of the members of the ensemble were deeply religious and committed to the Santería tradition:

*The Conjunto was formed by religious people, who were the ones who made religion into art by their strength, their abilities, their instruments, their clothing...the Conjunto was born of that which is religious, it was born of the religion. We [the drummers] were capable of bringing religion to art" (Hagedorn 2001: 86).*

As further evidence of the continued "masking" of the religious traditions—this time from the Castro regime rather than the Spanish colonists or Catholic priests—Villareal explains that in these secular presentations, sacred drums are never used, which according to Santería practitioners means that the music performed in these secular contexts would not conjure sacred power (Hagedorn 2001: 99).

Key differences of secular performance and sacred practices include the performative intent of the participants as well as the nature of their performance practice. While folkloric demonstrations are orchestrated as typical music rehearsals where musicians are free to rehearse different sections of an arrangement to perfect a specific arrangement that has been previously agreed upon, religious rituals are rehearsed through repetitions of function. In the religious practice of Santería there is never a moment where the intent of the music and movement is anything besides an attempt to access divine power (Hagedorn 2001: 12).

Lines between sacred and secular performances began to blur because many Afro-Cuban ritual musicians were also involved in folkloric performances. In fact, as stated by Alberto Villareal, if it wasn't for the religious practitioners, who all of a sudden had become responsible for accurately representing their traditions to an audience of outsiders, the folkloric ensembles would not have had an opportunity to exist. Because of the crossover of musicians and a relatively accurate portrayal of

Santería and other sacred Afro-Cuban traditions, “the task of differentiating between religious and folkloric intent [in performance] is constant” for the artists involved (Hagedorn 2001: 85). Folkloric presentations have sometimes inadvertently put musicians or religious audience members into divine trances because of the religious background of many of the performers, as well as the musical commonalities that secular presentations share with religious ritual (Hagedorn 2001: 112-116). In her continued interactions with Alberto Villareal, Hagedorn concludes that Villareal walks the line between an active *santero* and “a preserver of his religious tradition,” even though he claims that his work and his religion are totally separate” (Hagedorn 2001: 98). In this case, one role consists of fostering continued religious practices within his community, whereas the other role is one of a cultural ambassador who introduces foreigners to Lucumí in an effort to educate communities outside of his own. This dual sense of purpose seems to mirror the role that my teacher Gilberto Morales plays as a both a *babalawo* and a secular musician.

Despite the success and growing popularity of these state-sponsored Afro-Cuban folkloric groups, most manifestations of religiosity were still seen as counter-revolutionary by the Castro regime. Practitioners of Santería were still discriminated against, not being allowed to join the Communist Party and sometimes denied professional training, education, and housing (Marouan 57).

During my own time in Cuba, Gilberto Morales told me that he and his family practiced Santería in secret during the Castro regime, despite being able to openly play religious music in a folkloric context. Gilberto’s view is that it was not until 1998, after the arrival of the Pope John Paul II in Cuba, that the Castro regime began to relax policies enforcing secularism, allowing him and others to more freely and openly practice his religion (Morales 2017). His perception must have coincided with drastic changes in the Cuban economic mentality that developed after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. Soviet support for the Cuban economy vanished, and neither the struggling sugar industry, nor the revival of the cigar market could balance Cuba’s massive trade deficit. With its beaches, tropical climate, and easily exoticized history, opening the country to tourism seemed to be the only answer (Hagedorn 2004: 7).

The tourist trade has provided some economic opportunities for Cuban people, bringing global influence and an increase in foreign investment. However, it was easy even for me to perceive during my short time in Cuba that the Castro government prioritizes tourists' well-being over that of Cuban citizens. The two types of currency are the first signs of disparity, with the Cuban peso equating to only one twenty-fourth of the tourist dollar (CUC). While in Matanzas, I heard many stories about local grocery stores running out of many types of food on a relatively regular basis because the government chose to prioritize maintaining an abundant food supply for tourists on the beaches of neighboring Varadero.

Tourists coming to Cuba have also become increasingly excited about all forms of Afro-Cuban music, including folkloric presentations of Santería practices. The Castro government's plan to commodify religious tradition has succeeded and led to forms of what is now called *Santurismo*. This form of fetishized tourism has created a market for foreigners to pay a greatly inflated price to take part in rituals and initiations of religions that still face discrimination and erasure. This has promoted "the rise of new religious voices that [have challenged] the commercialization of the religion" (Marouan 58). Hagedorn writes that one could easily argue that the folkloricization of Afro-Cuban religious traditions is inherently problematic, describing a "historicized process in which an inward-directed, noncommodified religious tradition becomes outward-directed, commodified, staged, and secularized" for public consumption (Hagedorn 2004: 9).

Despite feeling wary of folkloric presentation, Hagedorn compliments Alberto Villareal's ability to program secular presentations while respecting religious practices: "In the same way that [Villareal] guards the authenticity of the folkloric renditions of his religion, he also guards the secrets, so that the partial version he gives is absolutely authentic, compromising neither the integrity of the folkloric performance, nor the sanctity of its religious antecedent" (Katherine Hagedorn 2001: 98-99). To me, this an important observation that recognizes that when given the autonomy, Santería communities have the potential to accurately represent themselves in ways that bring exposure to their cultural practices while still preserving sacred ritual. Again I see similarities between Villareal and my teacher Gilberto Morales.

During my time in Cuba I went to secular folkloric presentations that were performed by a combination of religious and non-religious musicians attended by a mixed audience of religious and non-religious persons. These performances walked the line between secular and sacred because, while not performed for a specific religious purpose, religious performers and attendees were still paying tribute to the *orichas* in their own way. Despite not actually summoning the deities, the music and rhythms were clearly enough to stimulate people's faith and build community. Hagedorn writes an interesting passage about the role that people's physical bodies play in the space between sacred and secular performance:

*The sphere of sacred intent is most often constructed by resurrecting the memory of the sacred in both folkloric and religious performance. And in both types of performance, the memory of the sacred is translated through the body. The body is where "sacred" and "secular" meet, where the boundaries are blurred, and it is this liminal space that is both powerful and disruptive because it calls into question the performative categories implied by the terms 'sacred' and 'secular' and forces the participants to renegotiate their respective "rules of engagement" (Hagedorn 2001: 77).*

Because the music played during religious *toques* is used to summon *orichas* so that they may physically possess their human children, it is actually the individual practitioners themselves who have the power to allow the music of Santería to affect them in spiritual ways. Even folkloric performances using secular *batá* drums have caused religious listeners to have seizures or fall into trances due to divine intervention (Hagedorn 2001: 75-88). The space between sacred and secular performance is navigated by the performative intent of the participants.

Navigating this performative intent has always been an important aspect of performing with Lawrence University's *Tambo Toké*, an ensemble that I am fortunate enough to co-direct. As religious outsiders, our goal is to learn and present Afro-Cuban music, including that of Santería, as authentically as possible with an intent to educate members of the ensemble and our audiences about these nuanced musical practices and the deep history of communal ritual that they represent. As the lead caller (*akpwon*) of the group, I am constantly orating in Lucumí, frequently wondering whether it is my place to do so. The overwhelming encouragement I have received from Cuban Santería practitioners has inspired me to educate myself further, not only because I love the music,



but also because I feel a responsibility to accurately portray the emotional depth, historical complexity, and living faith that the music represents.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite the egregious disadvantages of a racialized globalized capitalist system still dictated by historically colonial powers, the important advantage of the development of secular folkloric practice has been the increased exposure of important Afro-Latin traditions. While racist undertones and lack of education allow the music to be easily commodified, exoticized, and appropriated by foreigners, many musicians, dancers, and religious practitioners argue that any exposure can be good exposure and encourage conversation and education (Bumbo 2017, Morales 2017, Martínez 2018, Hagedorn 2001: 101).

During a *Tambo Toké* masterclass with accomplished musician and Cuban-born *santero* Pedrito Martínez in April of 2018, Martínez emphasized that secular performances of Afro-Cuban traditions should be accessible to anyone. He kept repeating that the type of informed and educational performance that we strive for is “good for the culture.” He related to us that it was the *cantos* and *batá* rhythms that first attracted him to Lucumí, encouraging him to not only learn the music, but educate himself about the religious rituals and cultural history as well (Martínez 2018). I believe that it is this pure curiosity that can be inspired by both sacred and secular formats of Santería, the latter being much more easily accessible for members of the global community and therefore holding a vast amount of educational potential to introduce previously uninformed populations to not only a wealth of overlooked artistic practices, but also to an ancient, yet inherently fluid, religious practice that continues to survive, thrive, and adapt.

One key reason Santería has been able to withstand abrupt change and constant external pressure is because of its internal emphasis on paying homage to ancestral lineage (respecting the *egun*) and the important practice of actively building new community through aural ritual. I believe that it is this value specifically that encouraged displaced West Africans with an obscured sense of

heritage to evolve from within and claim spaces of the stolen island as their own, building a sense of community and history from the remains of what was taken away from them.

Santería is able to authentically represent a version of the rule of *Ifá*, allowing its practitioners to take part in a developing transnational Yoruban identity and connect to their original West-African history, as well as simultaneously being able to progress forward with living tradition and adapt religious practices on local levels. Complimenting sacred ritual is the folkloric presentation of an adjacent secular musical “genre” that, when executed correctly, has the potential to educate audiences and bring important exposure to Santería, its music, and the greater West African Diaspora.

Just like the religion itself, my relationship to Santería and its artistic practices will continue to evolve. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to learn what I can about this important tradition and am humbled to play a small role in exposing its music to new communities.

## LUCUMÍ TRANSLATIONS

*Aché*: Positive Spiritual Power

*Alagba/Alagbalagba*: Respected

*Agó*: A phrase that asks for permission (Knock-Knock)

*Agoya*: Enter

*Aiku*: Long life

*Ajuba*: We Salute you

*Akpwon*: Lead singer/caller when singing *cantos*

*Ala*: Dream

*Aña*: *Oricha* of the drum

*Awo*: Secret

*Babá*: Father

*Babalawo*: Priest of *Orula*, A practitioner of the *Regla de Ifá*

*Babaloricha/Babalocha*: A *Santero* who has initiated others into the a faith

*Iyaloricha/Iyalocha*: A *Santero* who has initiated others into the a faith

*Bogbo/Gbogbo*: All

*Di-logun*: Mollusk shells used for divination by *babalochas* and *iyalochas*

*Ebbó*: Sacrifice

*Egun*: One's ancestors

*Ekuele*: Diving chain

*Elegguá*: *Oricha* who oversees the communication levels between the human realm and the divine

*Eleri/Eri/Ori*: Head

*Foribale (Moforibale)*: Salute by prostrating (act of greeting/respecting the *orichas*)

*Güemilere*: *Tambor/Toque de Santo* (Ritual celebration of invoking the *oricha*)

*Igboro*: *Oricha* Priest

*Ikú/Icú*: Death

*Ilé*: Home

*Ina*: Fire

*Iré*: Blessings, Good fortune (in the form of energy)

*Iroko*: *La ceiba* – A sacred tree

*Iyá*: Mother

*Iyawó*: Wife

*Mi*: My

*Mo*: I

*Mojuba*: Salute/Salutation/Homage/Prayer

*Mokékeré*: Babies/Children

*Obá*: King

*Obiní*: Woman

*Oguede*: Plantain

*Oke*: Mountain

*Okuní*: Man

*Olo*: Owner, one who has...

*Olofi/Oloddumare*: Omnipotent and Omnipresent God that bestowed *aché* to all existing *orichas*

*Omá*: Children

*Omí*: Water

*Omordé*: Woman “in the specific sense of the word” (Castellanos 2005 [1938]: 151)

*Oricha*: An animistic deity of Yoruban origin with some amount of control over the natural world

*Orún*: Heaven, or Sun

*Orunmila*: *Oricha* who lives between heaven and Earth, consulted by *babalawos* because of his powers of divination

*Owo/Olowo/Oguo*: Money

*Patakí*: stories that depict diverse mythology of Lucumí *orichas*

*Wa*: Come

*Yemayá*: *Oricha* of fertility, Queen of water, mother of all life

*Yeye*: Mama/informal name for mother

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