

Cuban religions of African origin: **Santería**

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The importance of religions that originated in Africa and their establishment within the Cuban population is constantly growing. These belief systems broke social and racial barriers to become religions of national character a very long time ago. Over the last decades, we have witnessed an expansion of these religions, without precedence, and an increase in the number of followers of such religions. Additionally, the influence of these religions is perceived in the most diverse expressions of every day life.

The place that these religions occupy has been recognized by dignitaries in the Cuban Catholic Church, who generally oppose any of these religious practices. In reference to the general religious panorama and, in particular, the waves of atheism and anti-religion that came about in Cuba after 1959, Monsignor Carlos Manuel de Cespedes, General Vicar of the Havana Archdioceses, pointed out that:

“In the condition of my country during the 60’s, 70’s and even in the 80’s, converting to Santeria or to another syncretic religion was a path, consciously or not, to implement religious sentiments or a certain openness to Transcendence or, at least, a superhuman reality... Little by little, during thirty years, the syncretic religious forms turned into the religion of a wide

spectrum of Cuban society... the syncretism has been, paradoxically, one of the most effective popular paths to save some of the important components of the catholic faith, of the Christian values and of the effective adhesion to the Catholic Church in all of the layers of the Cuban population”.¹

The strength with which believers of African-based religions constantly conserve and renew their faith also explains the expansion of such religions to other areas of the Caribbean, Latin America and United States. This is particularly true in areas that were receptive of Cuban migration in the second half of the 20th century. Cities, in the United States, like New York, Chicago and Miami see this growth as more and more people join these religious groups. These religions have constituted a force of great social influence in today’s Cuba.

Currently, several religious systems of African origin exist in Cuba. These systems exist in correspondence with the heterogeneity of the ethnic components derived from the slave trade and as a result of the multiple, diverse and constant cultural interactions of a long process of transculturation. Santeria or Rule of Ocha, Palo Monte or Conga Rule, and the Secret Abakua Associations stand out amongst the religious systems; however, this essay is specifically dedicated to Santeria.



Batá Drums.

The other African originated religions will be discussed in future issues of *Islas*.

Santería or Rule of Ocha

This system originated with the religious beliefs and rituals associated with Orichas, or deities, from the Yoruba mausoleum who, with the historical saints of the Roman Catholic Church, were made syncretic. This system, in which every Oricha saint was made equivalent to a Catholic saint, based on the similarities of their characteristics and attributes, was what originated the Santería denomination, which is the term most frequently used by the believer and non-believer populations. Santería, or Rule of Ocha, is also known as the Rule of Ocha-Ifá, due to the great significance of the practices related to the Ifá oracle, carried out by the babalawos (Priests of Ifá, the god of prophecy).

Orichas

Followers of Santería believe in a Supreme Being called Olofin. They do not directly worship him beyond making him the object of invocations during ceremonial practices. Further, Orichas are considered mediators between Olofin and man and are authorized to protect or punish depending on the circumstances.

Orichas are deities that make deals with certain forces of nature that also comprehend the worship of deified ancestors. They are attributed with both divine and human qualities. Their ability to feel and act like humans is presented through fables and legends. Therefore, nobody should be surprised when they are described as having the most diverse manifestations of mortals' virtues and vices. They are not infallible to human weaknesses; they are not dogmatic². There are no known limitations to the Orichas' beneficial actions toward mankind.

Another characteristic of the Oricha is their state of being a “father” or “mother” to human beings. According to popular belief, Orichas are always willing to provide protection and help to their children here on earth in the presence of any life conflict. However, this attitude can change quick and unexpectedly. This mostly happens when the Oricha’s demands are not satisfied, his predictions are not paid attention to, or when the favorable practices and offerings he is owed are not carried out. A believer must pay attention to the advice that emerges from the prophetic practices. The transgression of the norms and taboos established during the initiation process into the religion are very risky. On that occasion, it’s common to establish prohibitions, taboos, norms and patterns of conduct that the person being initiated should follow rigorously during their entire life.

Orichas are considered owners of nature’s elements, such as the sea, fresh waters, hills, lightning, stars, metals, etc. There are also Orichas believed to be owners of the illnesses, wars, agriculture and other events related to human life. Each one of them has his own colors and materials that identify him. Even though they sometimes acquire humanlike representations, it is common for them to be materially represented in recipients that contain their respective elements of nature and that become the deity itself, after carrying out the ceremonial practices established by tradition. The materials which these Oricha containers or receptacles are made of have varied with time. Currently, they are made of wood, clay, metal or porcelain.

The culture of wooden statues that is characteristic of the African towns was not



Changó

developed in Cuba. However, wooden humanlike figures that represent some of the Orichas can be found in some homes.

As an example, let us look at how all of the above is manifested in the characterization of the Orichas, Changó and Ochún.

Changó is the god of virility, fire, lightning, thunder, war, and drums. He is the patron of warriors and storms. His dances are warlike and erotic. His color is red. His receptacle is a deep tray or wooden basin with a lid painted in red and white colors. The axe and sword are some of his characteristic attributes. His collars are made of red and white beads. He is compared to Santa Barbara.

Ochún is the goddess of fresh waters, flirtation, love and maternity. She is presented as a mulatto woman of great beauty. Her dances represent feminine sensuality. She owns the yellow metals and her color is bronze. Her receptacle is a bowl where the color yellow predominates. Some of her characteristic attributes are jewelry, peacock

feathers, conchs, fans, and handkerchiefs. Her collars have yellow beads. The sunflower is found within her favorite flowers. She is compared to Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, Patroness of Cuba.

The different ways in which Orichas present themselves and act can be explained through the concept of “paths.” These “paths” are described in their rich mythology through fables and legends of great poetic beauty. They have been passed down from generation to generation through oral traditions. They are enriched or transformed with time by virtue of changes and additions made by the initiated storyteller, who embellishes what he/she received from the “elders”, that is, those who preceded him/her in the initiation. The different versions that can be heard about an Oricha’s stories and behavior are very interesting; as they have been influenced by the experiences of the believers.

The syncretism

Along with other circumstances, the constant interaction with the dominant culture and the official catholic religion, but particularly with the popular Catholicism that reached Africans in the middle of a long process of transculturation, lead to a syncretism in the field of religion, especially as it related to Catholicism. One of the expressions of such syncretism is the relationship established between the Orichas and the Catholic saints.

As Isaac Barreal pointed out, “in the process of catechism and in the exercise of the posterior slight religious practice, the black man slowly got to know the Catholic saints”³, and began to find similarities between them and the Orichas, for which they took into consideration certain elements

such as color and attributes, or historical passages and legends associated with them.

This identification was also a way to cover and safeguard the African deities in the middle of a slavish regime that rejected and even repressed their beliefs. The Catholic images constituted a cover behind which the Orichas were hidden. They were definitely the ones worshiped and venerated. For those living in slavery, religion was an element of agglutination for the slaves and it was a form of resistance to the conditions that slaves were continuously exposed to.

Corresponding catholic images can be found by Oricha representations in trays and porcelain bowls in the homes of religious believers. These images coexist in a narrow transposition where analogies and differences that irrefutably express the intricate processes of transculturation are manifested. This refers to the transculturation processes that gave birth to the Cuban people and culture.

This intimate and harmonious coexistence and the way in which the believers take it on, is explained by one of the Santeras cited by Lydia Cabrera⁴ in her classic book, *El Monte*: “Saints are the same here and in Africa. The same, with different names. The only difference is that ours eat a lot and must dance, and yours are content with incense and oil, and they don’t dance.”

Of course, expressions of syncretism go beyond such identifications. They are also manifested in the requirement that to be initiated in these cults, it’s necessary for the person to be baptized by a Catholic priest first and to have offered a mass to those who are dead (egguns), including those related by blood and rite. One can add to this that the deities of African origin are rendered homage during the development of the Catholic almanac festivities. This is not only done in

the homes of believers, but also in the Catholic churches, under the critical but tolerant observation of Catholic priests.

Everything discussed earlier, which is the result of historical and socio-cultural processes that occurred on this side of the Atlantic has placed a distinctive American mark (or Cuban in this case) on the beliefs of African origin. However, it must be noted that in spite of the expressions of syncretism, African features are still the ones that set Santeria apart. The identification between Orichas and Catholic saints often tends to wear a formal character that does not interfere with the ritual practices.

The initiation

Santeria has a series of initiation ceremonies that are carried out within highly complicated and secret rituals. They include a great variety of symbolic acts that establish hierarchies and functions within the cult. Thus, the people who are anointed with their “father” or “mother” Oricha, become Babalochas (male Santeria priests) and Iyalochas (female Santeria priests). These are the most extended categories in the whole country. From that moment on, the head Oricha or saint goes on to live in the home, and no important life decision is made without first consulting the Oricha through the divination systems.

There is a special place assigned to ceremonies for the consecration of Babalawos, which are Ifá priests that possess the greatest hierarchical position in this religious system. Initiation processes are also used to consecrate people who play specific roles in the cult, such as Olú batá, who are drummers that specialize in executing the ritual music directed to the Orichas, played with the three sacred drums called batá⁵.

The divination systems

The divination systems occupy an important place in the Cuban religions of African origin. Several means are employed with this purpose in Santeria. These means include four pieces of coconut (obbi); sixteen cauri shells (diloggun), the Ifá chain (Opkuele) and Ifá's board. The last two are used exclusively by the Babalawos⁶.

Divinations play an important role in the lives of believers, especially in the lives of the initiated. Divinations not only allow them to know the past and present, but also what can happen in the future. Through divination, an individual can know the changes that life will bring and the way to act during the course of events. It is a source of protection and personal reaffirmation. “Fear ceases for the believer if he or she obtains what he waited for. If his or her fear is foretold, the fear also ceases because it is replaced by the exercises that will lead to compensation and resignation.”⁷

The results of divination must be fulfilled and can require the achievement of ritualistic cleanings (ebbó), offerings or other sacred-magic practices. All of this leads to obtaining the favor of the Orichas in the resolution of everyday problems or to distance that which bothers and obstructs a believer's progress.

The conception of the world of believers, their philosophy, and the way in which they interpret and resolve the phenomena of life and death is manifested in the stories, myths and legends associated with the different signs and “letters”. These are obtained through foresight and through the verbal legacy of African origin, conserved and recreated on this side of the Atlantic.

Orichas and nature's elements, particularly plants and animals, are associated with



Santería

each of the signs or “letters” that are obtained through divination. The powers attributed to the different vegetable species were thoroughly described by Lidya Cabrera⁸: “Trees and plants play an all too important role in religion and the mystical life of black Cubans...Due to their healing abilities, due to the magical power attributed to them...the black person cannot do without using them almost on a daily basis and to invoke the protection of spirits or forces that fix on them.” As it has been pointed out, these religious practices actually bring Cubans of all racial groups together.

Not only do active believers of this religion submit themselves to these divination inquiries, but also people who occasionally try to solve their problems or reinforce the fulfillment of some of their goals in life.

The Temple House

Santería does not have a local or national organization nor does it have a hierarchy that acts as leader of the religious practice in the country. This state of affairs, which presented itself from the beginning of its formation in the colonial period, led each house to function with a high degree of independence. The cult to the Orichas acquires a somewhat individual character in which the

personal will of the Santero, who generally does not feel obliged to fulfill norms established in other houses, has great clout. Thus, the Santero’s house becomes a true temple where the Oricha goes to live. That Oricha rules the Santero’s destiny and, to a certain extent, becomes his owner. It is there that believers, deities and protective spirits coexist in the greatest harmony.

The most common relationships of religious character are those established between the Santero and his “godfather” or “godmother”, who is the person that initiated him in the religion and conforms the religious genealogies or “branches” in the cult⁹. These “godfathers” or “godmothers of sainthood” sometimes gather a great number of followers and contribute to the close relationship between their “godchildren” and their “elder” Santeros. All of this functions as an important basis for the conservation of traditional knowledge transmitted in oral or written form and often enriched by the successive generations.

Nevertheless, during the development of some significant events such as initiation, it is common for Santeros and Babalawos not necessarily from the same genealogy or branch in the cult to gather. Aside from carrying out several functions during the initiation process, they can be witness to the appropriate process of the ceremonies.

The temple house conserves the receptacles that contain the Oricha foundations that a person has fixed on his or her head – his or her Oricha “father” or “mother” – and of all of those that he or she receives throughout the path of life as symbol of protection and strength of his or her religious powers. Many of them are placed in cupboards known as “canastilleros” (or basket holders)¹⁰. For this purpose, and depending on the economic conditions of the Santero, spe-



The Oricha Warriors: Elegguá, Oggún y Ochosi

cific areas of the house are designated especially for the cult.

Behind the main door of the temple house, it is common to place different objects to protect against bad influences or harm that may come from outside. These objects may include ribbons made of fabric in different colors, flags, pieces of sticks or branches, etc. The Oricha warriors, Elegguá, Oggún and Ochosi, are also placed by the door. They act as guardians of the household and its inhabitants. A spiritual dome dedicated to the spirits that protect the house is also common.

All of the religious practices are carried out at the temple house. It is the stage for parties in honor of the Orichas and parties destined to celebrate events, such as the “saint birthday” or “of the ritualistic birth.”

In this context, the transmission of knowledge, prayers and other formulas necessary for establishing a relationship with the Orichas has been mainly accomplished through oral legacy, without discarding the importance the “saint notebooks” have been acquiring over time, zealously kept and conserved by the Santeros, particularly by the older ones, whom are the ones that have accumulated the most knowledge.

The Necklaces

Santería also possesses a wide variety of accessories that, with deities, play an important role in the cult. This is the case of the necklaces. As Martínez Furé, has pointed out, “For the believers the necklace ceases from being a simple object of adornment to become something more; the strengths of the Orichas are found in the strung beads according to a strict order. The person who uses them will be protected against any accident, illness, bad influences and other adversities. In addition, the necklaces are alive; they are entities within the cult”¹¹.

They acquire their strength and power through specific ritualistic ceremonies and processes of purification. If a necklace breaks, it is a warning that something bad is going to happen and the person must submit themselves to an “investigation” through the divination systems. In addition, there is a set of norms required to be fulfilled for those who use the necklaces.

The color, number and order of the beads depend on the Oricha that it represents. Additionally, there are variations for each one of the Oricha’s paths, which explains their great diversity. This is the reason why it is almost impossible to determine the exact number of necklaces. One must take into account the fact that some Orichas have up to twenty “paths.” The simple necklaces of a single loop are worn around the neck as a means of constant protection, but they’re sometimes carried in the pockets or conserved in bowls or other receptacles where the Orichas reside.

Clustered necklaces also exist. They are very beautiful and complex in their confection; other kinds of work are reserved for them in the cult as well. The necklaces are only used by the Iyawó (initiated) dur-



Iyawó

ing their presentation at the drum. They are then placed in the receptacles where the powers of the Orichas reside. The bracelets or iddé that are used around the hand have similar functions.

Some general characteristics

In contrast to the other universal religions, a non-exclusive quality stands out within the general characteristics of the Cuban religions of African origin. It is not odd to find people and families who profess Palo Monte as well as Santería and, even on occasion, their main male priests are members of the Abakuá Secret Society. Spiritualist practices are often added to the religions in addition to the Afro-Catholic syncretism. Ostensible loans, exchanges of ideas and procedures that denote important forms of religious syncretism are produced in some of these cases. As Joel James has pointed out, these magi-religious systems are highly flexible, creative and adaptable. In

these days, these religions are not found in their pure form or isolated in themselves.

In reality, these religious complexes of African origin possess common differentiating elements in the ritual liturgy and other elements associated with the cult, depending on its different ethnic backgrounds. Common elements are observed in part due to similarities in the development of the different African theogonies (the origin and descent of the gods) and their forms transculturated in Cuba.

These popular religious forms, in which the subject has a lifelong attachment to his faith, have many expressions that go beyond the ceremonial and esoteric realm. The presence of believers and the initiated is increasingly made more noticeable in public places. The use of necklaces and bracelets (iddé) as safeguard or protective elements can be observed in the most diverse places. What could have been hidden in other times is presented with pride today and there are quite a few who see this as a social distinction. It can

also be said of the Iyawo (people recently initiated into Santería), with their flashy white suits as exponents of the process of purification to which they have been subjected in the city and town streets.

Independent of what has been pointed out, the care and even the lack of trust to transmit and make known the secrets and knowledge received from the “elders” and accumulated in the daily practice, continues to be one of the characteristics of these religious systems. Born in the middle of the damaging and fatiguing life of the slave barracks, rings of fugitive slaves, communities, and the main homes where the slaves executed domestic labor, these religious systems have been passed down to our days with a renovating force that constantly makes them earn new followers. The level of flexibility of their codes of ethics and their emphasis on the solution to the earthly problems has led them to nourish themselves with the most diverse social and racial strata of the Cuban society.

Nevertheless, it's difficult to calculate the number of believers in these religions. There are no statistics to provide this data. Besides, one must take into account the existence of people who practice the religions occasionally and those who attend the religious ceremonies or divination investigations inconsistently. What actually seems possible to confirm is that the number of followers appears to progressively increase and that they constitute an indisputable social force in today's Cuba.

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2.- See Menéndez, L. (1995). *¿Un cake para Obatalá?*, Revista *Temas*, no. 4, Ministerio de Cultura, La Habana. p. 46

3.- Barreal, I. (1966). *Tendencias sincréticas de los cultos populares en Cuba*. *Etnología y Folklore*, no. 1, Academia de Ciencias de Cuba, La Habana. p. 20.

4.- Cabrera, L. (1989). *El Monte*, Editorial Letras Cubanas, La Habana. p. 29

5.- “Bi-membrane-phonoc” drums. The patches possess different diameters, with which six different tones are obtained. The instrument is carried around the neck or it's placed between the legs of those who play it. Each patch is struck with one hand. There are three batá and they're called, from bigger to smaller, Iyá, Itótele y Okónbolo.

6.- The coconut (Obbi) and the shells (Diloggún) are divination instruments used by Santeros. Their reading is made according to the way in which they fall. The Ifá Chain (Opkuele) and the Ifá Board, are instruments only used by the babalawos, through which Orula, the Oricha of divination expresses himself.

7.- James, J. (1989). *Sobre muertos y dioses*. Ediciones Caserón, Santiago de Cuba.

8.- Cabrera, L. (1989). *El Monte*, Editorial Letras Cubanas, La Habana. pp. 24-25.

9.- See López Valdés, R (1985). *Componentes africanos en el etnos cubano*, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, La Habana.

10.- Cupboard with several shelves, with or without doors, in which the receptacles with specific attributes are placed, and in which the Oricha is placed. The oricha located on each shelf is easily distinguished by its colors and other elements that belong to it.

11.- Martínez Furé, R. (1961). *Los Collares*. *Actas del Folklore*, año 1, no. 3, Centro de Estudios del Folklore, Teatro Nacional de Cuba, La Habana. p. 23.