

# Every thing has its thing

*In the words of the greatest of the great: testimony  
from a “Palero” called Emilio O’Farril*

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When I met him in mid 1991, his celebrity status extended across Cuba, and many included him in the list of the legendary Babalawos<sup>1</sup> from Guanabacoa. But Emilio O’Farril was not a Babalawo, nor could he be one. He was basically a Palero<sup>2</sup>, and he had the greatest of ranks in this religion, which is that of Tata Deabola. Additionally, in the Yoruba or Lucumi faiths, which he also practiced, he was son of the Orisha, Oggun<sup>3</sup>, and as such, he was forbidden to acquire the hierarchy of Babalawo for reasons that concern the principles of this religion. So he was a Santero.

Tata Emilio was born in 1904, in Sierra Morena, a town close to Sagua la Grande, province of Villaclara. He was the grandson of people from the Congo brought to Cuba as slaves. He spent his adolescence in Jovellanos, Matanzas, and established himself in the Havana area of Guanabacoa since he was very young, where he formed a family.

During almost half a century, he worked as a cargo handler in the Havana port. His contribution to the awareness of Cuban folklore is of immeasurable value, since he was one of the chief collaborators for Fernando Ortiz and Argeliers León<sup>4</sup> in matters of song and dance in the branch of conga or Bantu, which

is known in Cuba as “Palo Monte.” He had a decisive participation in the founding of the National Folkloric Ensemble as a choreographer, dancer and drummer due to his exceptional abilities in those areas.

His family lived in an old mansion in the center of Guanabacoa, but he remained in his little deteriorating wooden house that would become drenched in water whenever it rained. There, he preserved all of the foundations of the cult that his ancestors had passed down to him. In addition, he maintained alive the humility that he professed and that formed part of his ethics and his philosophy on life. That’s the reason why he used it to provide consultations to his godchildren and in it he equally received the actor Harry Belafonte as he did the Yoruba king.

He had assumed his mission as if it were a priesthood and he would not charge a specified amount for his consultations, but what each person could leave according to their economic possibilities. He even assumed the cost of those who did not have the necessary funds to complete the tasks that their saints and their departed ones recommended.

When I met him, even though he was 87 years old, he conserved a surprising vivacity. He attended any religious activity that his godchildren invited him to attend regardless



*Palo Monte (Nganga) magico-religious vessel*

of how far the location was (sometimes he would ask me to accompany him). He also danced in the rituals with juvenile release and agility. He still had an excellent memory, which appeared to be refreshed in the freshness of the mountain and in the extract of sticks and herbs. His words were perceived to be deep and wise, and even though his conversation was fluid, his knowledge indicated to him in every moment, what to say and what to keep silent, particularly in political issues<sup>5</sup>.

After this testimony was published we established more than a friendly relationship, we established a family-like relationship; to the point where he would visit me when I would not go to see him, and sometimes he would remain at my home for several days. He came in those overflowing buses which circulated in Havana at the beginning of the 90's, and he would get down panting, but without anger or annoyance, before the curious looks of the neighbors who knew whom he was. He never arrived with empty hands; he would bring something for me to cook. More times than not, he brought meat that at the time was impossible to find in the Havana markets, even though it had not stopped being consumed in the depth of the marginal world in which his godchildren moved about.

There, in that house where he had once been happy, Tata and I shared our mutual loneliness. I suffered from unending insomnia, but he slept for long hours, as if he felt the fatigue of life. But he had a troubling sleep, because most of the time, he spoke out loud with his departed ones.

He knew that I would be leaving Cuba soon, and he gave the best of his thought and soul for them to free me from that prison to which I had been confined. He also knew that I would never return once they allowed me to leave. I don't remember precisely the last time we saw each other. I also think that there was no farewell. I preserve his memory with true devotion because, with very few words or without any at all, he taught me some lessons that have been very useful in my life. I carry his picture with me so that I don't forget who I am or where I come from in the exile that signifies a sense of eradication and disorientation.

I never knew anything else about Emilio O'Farril until two years after I left. Somebody informed me from Cuba that he had returned to what had been my home, and not to see me, but to lay in the same bed where he spoke to his departed ones, to close his eyes and concentrate (like when he invoked Zarabanda<sup>6</sup>) and to pass the slight frontier that separated him from eternity on the back of his invisible horse.

Fifteen years later<sup>7</sup>, I reproduce what I consider to be everlasting from that testimony, in honor of one of the most generous men that I have met in my life.—It is a sign of respect toward the humility sustained by the authentic followers of the African influenced Cuban religions. Some day when Cuba no longer needs heroes or martyrs, but moral and spiritual pillars to redo their cultural memory, the importance of men like Emilio O'Farril will be seen in all of its dimension:

*"I am, by Palo denomination, Tata Deabola, which means the greatest of the great. I know the Abakua<sup>8</sup> denomination, but my main ones are Palo and Yoruba. Palo is part of the Bantu, and Yoruba is Lucumi<sup>9</sup>. On the Yoruba side, Oggun is my saint that in the order ends up being Saint John of God, the one whom baptized Christ. If you notice, Saint John is greater than Christ because he came first. I am a Christian and I am baptized.*

*"Oggun is warrior saint of the Yesa land. He's represented by iron and as a result, his characteristic is to be a blacksmith. He has an anvil where he fabricates all of the weapons and tools. The most important one is the knife because it was the first one he made. He dresses in reddish brown, and there is a part that he wears in black. His true representation is an iron chain, from which fourteen or twenty one weapons and tools hang.*

*"I acquired my knowledge from my grandfathers, since I was a child, listening and seeing how things were done. My son Rodolfo, who works with me, with the years, can become Tata Deabola. He has potential, but still needs more work.*

*"Many people know me, but, to say the truth, in this order of things, one thinks about it and friends are few because everyone creates his own world. A very close person is Mister Mundo Fong, who is about eighty years old and comes from that reunion that we had in Sierra Morena. But it is no longer as it used to be when the 'cabildos'<sup>10</sup> existed. We were all united, and the one who knew the most was the one who directed.*

*"I believe that we should be more united, and we should start by home, by family. Forming a family is not, as many believe, having a house with a wife and children, and every once in a while buying the kids a pair of shoes. No, it's not like that. It's to take that united family*

*down a good path, teaching it how it should live with morality and principle. To accomplish that, one must be a good father, good husband, good worker; that the children see a path to follow in their father.*

*"That is, according to my thoughts, the way of maintaining the country united. The country is the greatest thing, and to help it, one must have conditions, principles and morals. How? By being worthy, decent and struggling men. One must teach those who don't know; give them principles about what liberty is.*

*"People from all places come here, without problems. They come from Pinar del Rio, Matanzas, Sancti Spiritus, Camaguey, and Santiago de Cuba. I even have godchildren in Guantanamo. There are days that I begin to receive people in the morning and I have not ended yet at ten o'clock at night, because they come from another region of the country.*

*"I have so many godchildren that I don't remember how many there are. Some keep track, but I don't, because I've had them since I was twenty some years old. I don't even remember who some of them are. Many are already old and others have died."*

## *The Congos*

*"I am Congo Musundi. I am separate. Congo is part of Bantu, but there are different types of Congo. There is mixture of intulti, quinfuiti, suaba, fundongo, carabali, bubota. There are also the gangá and the mandinga or moro, whom are the dark blacks but with nose, hair, and other white features. The real Congo was the one who knew how to read and write, and that's why he was the chief of the tribe.*

*"All of these are Bantu lands, and they are called Unayanda, which is the territory where one is born. Africa is Cunayanda. Yoruba is Africa's biggest land. They dominated all of the others. That's why Yoruba and Congo are relat-*

ed, because Yoruba was something like the capital. Everything took off from there.

"The Congos in Cuba expanded more from Matanzas to here. In this area there were some like the Quinfuiti in Quiebracha. But here, in Havana, the strongest was the Lucumi, and some Arara meetings.

"There are still some Congo grandchildren in the Matanzas zone because the Congos created families. But with time, those knowledgeable in the religion end up dying. And the elders have not taken the time to teach their descendents. As a result, authenticity tends to disappear."

### *Fernando Ortiz's and Argeliers León's Collaborator*

"Fernando Ortiz and Argeliers León knew a lot about this. Fernando was, in terms of science and theory, the one who knew the most. Jesus Perez, one of the greatest drummers that Cuba has fathered, Raul Perez and Trinidad Torregosa, who were his consultants, brought him here to me. Fernando would sit at a desk that still exists. He would pull out a notebook he brought; I would start to teach him lessons, and he would start to write. We would do that for hours.

"One spoke to Fernando with a lot of ease, because he knew that some things could be published and that others could not. There was something very good about him: he never really asked any direct questions. The first day he came, he said: 'Emilio, I don't want you to talk to me about how you run things or for you to put a pot for me like this or like that. I want song and dance.' And that is how we did it.

"One of the last times he came by, he told me that his wife was sick, and asked me. So I told him: 'Look, Fernando, nothing can be done, she has something bad.' She died a few days later.

"At the beginning, when I began to collaborate with Fernando and Argeliers, I got into a lot of trouble with my people. Havana and Cuba were fully agitated, to see what I was going to do. They would say to me: 'How can you take this to the theatre?' But nothing happened, because I would only take that which I could: music, song and dance.

It was because of Argeliers that I entered the Folkloric organization, here in Guanabacoa. Argeliers was the one with the idea and the greatest leader of the foundation. He was going to be director, but around that time they sent him to the Science institute<sup>11</sup>, and then came the other people.

"Oreol Bustamante, who already passed away, and I were there from the beginning. We started here, in Alfa and Omega. That is where the first meetings took place. In 1964, when the National Folklore came about, Oreol and I took care of the Conga part. At that time, new things were always being developed because those of us who were fierce were there. Sometimes we did international tours. I even went to Paris. That was impressive.

"But it just so happened that we were carrying some fabrics in the Amadeo Roldán theatre one day. Somebody called me, and when I turned around, I fell with two rolls on top of me. I didn't fracture any bone, but I said: 'I will leave the Folklore' and there, around '66 or '67, I retired. Before, in Varadero, I had had a little problem, and I had to slap somebody. I got pissed off and I left.

"Sometimes they have called me: 'Let's make a picture, let's make a group.' But I have taken myself away from it all. I'm here with my godchildren. They tell me that I am one of the oldest teachers in this. It's not that I am older; it's that they did not allow all these Conga lands to develop. And I don't like middle grounds, if we are going to do something, we do it as it should be done, if not, we don't do it at all, and

that's the end of it. As a result of fully teaching all of those first art instructors how things were truly done, they were taught how to do things theoretically and practically. Today they are teachers and they teach other people.

"Anybody can grab a book and read it. But then you ask them to put to practice what they read, and that person doesn't know how to do so. The right thing would be that when it is said that the Musundi Congo is developed in such a planet, in such a way, that it can be seen that it is that way.

"When one is going to teach, one must teach correctly, in order for that disciple, tomorrow or the day after, to get the same result whenever he stands up and says: 'So and So taught me,' everybody should respond with: 'That is true, because So and So is knowledgeable.'"

## *The practice*

"In our religion, "rayarse en palo" is to be initiated. In that moment, the individual is discarded of "enguello"<sup>12</sup>. With time, sometimes, when the initiated already has the knowledge, he is made "padre prenda"<sup>13</sup>, which is the four wind bright star or the "prenda" companion. But one must have a lot of knowledge for that.

"One must know a lot about the sticks and herbs. It's knowledge that comes from the ancestors. A Palero cannot be blind in front of the mountain; he must know all the herbs and sticks, and know for what each one of them is useful. So that when, herbs and sticks are spoken about, you know what they are: yaya, jocuma, ceiba, San Ramón, tengue, cabo de hacha, espuela de caballero, guayacán, salvia, maravilla, guanina, anamú, sasafrás, quimbancha, vence batalla, vencedores. . .

"I know of herbs for everything. There is a radical remedy for stomach ulcers. I even cured myself with it. Some years ago I had an ulcer that would not let me live, and I was getting

treated by a doctor who charged me twenty five pesos for each consultation. He told me to take this and that, but I would not get cured. Then I went to see my master. A saint comes and says: 'You have this and this boy, but you're afraid of getting an operation.' I say: 'Yes.' He says: 'I'm going to solve the problem for you.' And he gave me the recipe. Two months later I went to the doctor again. He took an x-ray, and when he looked at it, he told me: 'You don't have anything.' He takes another, looks at it, and tells me: 'Do you eat everything?' I say: 'Yes, I eat.' He says: 'And how were you cured?' I say: 'With the medicine you gave me.' He says: 'No way, you're embarrassed to tell me, but there is something else going on here.' And I say: 'Well, how do you know that it wasn't with the medicine you gave me?' And he says: 'Because one must prescribe something, what they say works, and one orders it.' Then I explained to him how I had been cured. He says: 'Don't you think that this can suit everybody else the same?' I say: 'I think so.' He says: 'Listen, why don't you become one of those that give people herbs as cures?' And I say: 'Let it go, Doctor.'"

## *The knowledge of the Palero*

"The Palero has to know a lot of things about life, be experienced, to be able to give advice. There are people, and I have met them, that develop themselves to the highest levels, and they end up having a palace, but they fail. Why? Look: I have a box of matches that is old, but working. There are those who, when they have the palace, say: 'Damn, this shitty box of matches!' They throw it away and buy a match factory. And there is the mistake. In any moment, somebody will come and tell them: 'The palace is done and over with, you are no longer somebody.' Then they run to look for their box of matches, but when they get there it's not there anymore, because another one came

and picked it up. And they're left without the match factory and without the matchbox.

*"They are spoiled people, and they have to fail. I, just in case, listen to everybody. Sometimes a five or six year old child comes around and says to me: 'Emilio, don't leave the house today.' If it were another person, he would say: 'Why does this little brat have to speak to me?' But I start to think of who may have sent him, a saint, a spirit, who knows, and I stay sitting by the door all day. Another individual would say: 'I have to go because I can...' And that is precisely where the phenomenon is, the devil is right there.*

*"What can one take out of all of this: something very important: every thing has its thing. Everything in the world has its thing. It's the prerogative of those who do not know it or don't want to know it."*

Testimony of E. O'farril

## NOTES

1. Superior hierarchical category in Santería or rule of Ocha-Ifá. (Editor's Note)
2. It refers to Palo Monte, a Cuban religion of African origin. (Editor's Note)
3. In Palo Monte, Oggún is Zarabanda.
4. Considered the principal musicologists of the Cuban ethnicity.
5. In this version, I have opted to eliminate the favorable opinions that I shed about the Castro government in the original, because they were dictated by the fear, his as much as mine, that his testimony would be censured. In private, Emilio later expressed to me the most pungent criticisms of the reigning regime in Cuba. I remember that, on one occasion, when there were great celebrations for another anniversary of the assault on the Moncada quarter, he made a careless comment to me: "I don't know why they celebrate, because this day should be of mourning. They took those boys to get killed with no sense."
6. Palo Monte deity. (Editor's Note)
7. This testimony was originally published in the Bohemia magazine, at the end of 1991.
8. It refers to the secret masculine associations of African origin, known as Abakuá. (Editor's Note)
9. Ethnic denomination assigned to several African ethnic groups, particularly the Yoruba, introduced during the period of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. (Editor's Note)
10. Religious-mutualism associations which grouped Africans and their descendents of the same ethnic group. (Editor's Note)
11. It refers to the Institute of Ethnicity and Folklore of the Academy of Science in Cuba.
12. A person who has not been initiated in the religion and, therefore, has no knowledge of its secrets and ritual practices. (Editor's Note)
13. Hierarchical category in Palo Monte. It has its own initiation ceremonies and specific functions within the cult. (Editor's Note)