

Afro-Cuban Religion: Did it leave Cuba?

Rodolfo R. Bofill Phinney
Journalist
Cuban. Resident of the United States

“**D**amn! The black cock has beaten the white rooster. Aché Elegguá!” declared Roberto Boulet’s ancient and steady voice on the night of November 4th, when news of Barack Obama’s electoral victory was announced.

Getting comfortable in front of his TV, to hear the United States’ first black president’s speech, he was once again perplexed: “There is some kind of Cuban rhythm in this,” he said with devotion. Obama’s family was dressed in red and black, colors identified with Elegguá, the holy *orisha* messenger of all the Afro-Cuban deities: holding the key to destiny, he is the Santo Niño de Atocha of a syncretized version of Catholicism. The designer, Narciso Rodríguez, who is at the top of his game in the U.S.A., is actually the child of Cubans. He must know about colors, saints, and hidden invocations. This knowledge is in one’s blood.

“How many ceremonies, incantations and animal sacrifices must there have been over there, in Kenya, in an attempt to bring about the triumph of this black cock,” the old Cuban priest asks himself, thinking about the president elect’s African background.

In their 2008 Letter of the Year, thou-

sands of Santería and Regla de Ocha priests gathered in Havana predicted, amidst rites, chants and offerings, that the next U.S. president would be young and inexperienced. It came in the form of a simple and seductive metaphor: “The cock will beat the rooster.”

Each term and phrase of the Cuban babalawos’ Letter of the Year conceals numerous intentions, resulting from the deities’ hidden manipulations. Always mindful of reality, but also of their touch of grace, the earthly representatives of the divining *orisha* Orula, whose syncretized Catholic identity is San Francisco de Asis, also warned of their predictions concerning the economic crisis and the challenge of facing unprecedented natural disasters.

The global economy came to the brink of collapse and three devastating hurricanes battered Cuba in fewer than three months, all causing a level of destruction whose consequences have yet to be fully known or understood.

In his personal home-temple in Hyattsville (Maryland), where the Cuban priest studies and interprets his island brothers’ two letters, Boulet awaits these predictions every year. This is a labor of love he enjoys like a fine wine. These are parallel predictions that the Organizing

Commission of the Letter of the Year and the Yoruba Cultural Association (this second one more in line with the Cuban government) have been generating for quite a few years now. Both organizations bring together thousands of babalawos who observe coincidences, chance and destiny's magical plans, playing with the horizon as if decorating a theater.

"Orula has left Cuba," Boulet interjects with insolent assuredness. He lives and breathes a religion that explains life to him and knows the Bedouin proverb "To travel is victory." He personally interprets the true and lucid reality of the practitioners and followers of this religion who today live all around the world. Our Caribbean island is no longer an exclusive nation-temple where one seeks divine guidance, makes pacts and offerings, and performs ceremonies that awaken excitement and joy in *orishas* who are both capricious and grateful.

That is the contagious power of Santería. This religion, which is full of hope, whose roots are in an island that is waiting, showcases freedom; its followers, as well as spirits or supernatural beings, find themselves in a strange time of globalization, growing migration, and the collapse of ideologies.

Cuban Kenia Perdomo plays with the supernatural, but illegally and quite far from her homeland. She was initiated into the Santería priesthood at age 16, and her guardian angel is the *orisha* warrior Changó. Her Maryland home-temple looks like any other domicile, but within its walls live beings from both this and the other side of the world.

An examination of one of her ceremonial rooms reveals Lydia Cabrera's *El Monte*, the most important book there is on Afro-Cuban religions, and Natalia Bolívar's

Los orishas en Cuba—besides Yemayá, Ochún, Obbatalá and other deities. These are *de rigueur* reference books for understanding the primitive clarity of magic.

Every religion attempts to seem more authentic than the others, but religiosity is also a market. With no other light to guide her than that in her own human mind, Perdomo, like any tried and true minister of the faith, distances herself and laments the suspicious and guilty ceremonies that erode Santería's credibility.

We must all face today's difficult times, and luck comes in many ways. That is a reality that Armando Sosa, who eight years ago became a babalawo in Cuba and practices his profession in Argentina, too, lives every day.

In the United States, the Cuban babalawo must awaken early to *mayugbar* [greet and praise] his deities; he solemnly looks inside a closet where he has constructed his altar, the center of his Afro-Cuban magic. He has to go out to the "country" today, to leave his offering. Snow is no obstacle to liturgy.

Sosa tries to understand the universe with a fortunate and wise deliberateness inherited from his African ancestors. Mysteriously, he insinuates as much in his choice of metaphors. His magical gaze comes from an ancient divining system that the *orisha* Orula controls. It is employed by Ifa's priests for observing beforehand something that is about to happen or has happened. "Orula does not make mistakes, ma'am!" he unintentionally but haughtily tells a Virginia neighbor who is seeking supernatural and spiritual answers about her troubled and delayed immigration status. She accepts more with hope than faith what Ifá says.

Today, Sosa needs to find a particular

botánica shop in Washington, D.C. (there are more than 30 in this region), to get sacred Orula palms, a very Cuban plant that Orula marked for prosperity. He also needs *embeleso* [*plumbago capensis*], but it is hard to find this herb, even in Cuba. A friend who brought some from Havana, did so thanks to a long-time veteran of the practice, Bernardo the Herb Man, who told him that the only place one can find any is at the garden surrounding the José Martí mausoleum. So he asked the Apostle, himself, for permission, and took the necessary amount for this project.

He also needs Eko palm oil, to clean Ochosi, the long-sighted, keen eared and nimble warrior. He is the *orisha* who presided over the 2007 Letter of the Year, which predicted a funerary moment, which was soon followed by the death of Cuba's first lady, the wife of Cuba's current president, Raúl Castro. All this happened while Fidel Castro remained in his sick bed, dispelling his followers' enthusiasm for seeing the invincible *Comandante en Jefe* back at the helm, despite his age, as if years didn't matter to him.

Never losing touch with reality, this religion's followers bring about—through their divine intermediaries—an acceptance of the ordinary, of moving and precise coincidence. They always await a burst of the supernatural.

Cuban practitioners and believers outside of Cuba know that this Sun religion has not left the island. They all feel a distance, because what they need or lost also makes them who they are. The eternity that accompanies them in their Diaspora moves to a powerful rhythm. Afro-Cuban religion has overflowed its geographical boundaries but exhibits a mature and more reasoned faith; it enjoys full maturity as a human

spiritual practice. And magical thinking makes us prisoners of an illusion.

The most powerful syncretic communion of African mythologies and Catholicism, Santería or Regla de Ocha, is notably present among the Cuban exile community. Its drums can be heard in an infinite number of places.

They left a large part of their memories, their torn souls, their families, their dead, and everything they had on that Caribbean island they so love with desperation. But nothing was able to wrench from them the eternal nature of Afro-Cuban magic, with its strong odor of tropical spells.

The religion of the *orishas* has lived in Cuba for centuries. The Spanish colonizers took African slaves of Lucumí (Yoruba) origin to Cuba. With them came their way of thinking, their worldview, their way of living and their religious belief. They preserved them in an effort to culturally resist the prohibition of their practice by slaver-owners.

Lucumí or Yoruba mythical-magical-religious thought survives very faithfully in Cuba, but also on this side of the sea, where Cubans reproduce their rituals and—with their deities—hang on to life's delicate threads. Today, Santería is a Cuban religion because those Africans had to recreate what they'd left behind, blending many elements and adapting others all the while. The black continent's eternity is today an essential part of this Antillean country's national culture and identity.