

Songs of Pluralism in Afro-Cuban Religion

Rodolfo R. Bofill Phinney
Journalist

Cuban residing in the United States

May there be two divination letters in Cuba, just as in other years, and four orishas rule 2010: Obbatalá and Yemayá as regents; Oyá and Chango as their seconds. May distrust not be scattered, nor faith be broken, nor the worst projections be disguised.

What rules over them is their passion for things magical. They are not dissidents or pro human rights oppositionists. Neither are they like the island's bloggers, as they engage in netocracy. They are priests of Afro-Cuban religion; as soon as the New Year starts, they announce their predictions in the auspicious Letter (u *Oddún*) that covers the next twelve months, and contains disquieting human and divine truths that increasingly irritate the regime.

They are two parallel omens whose interpretation exhales both magic and anguish: one, the Miguel Febles Padrón Letter of the Year Organizing Commission; the other produced by the Yoruba Cultural Association, which, due to its use of language and silences, and the stealth of its warnings and advice, is considered to be more in tune with the government. Yet, both represent voices expressing one same hardship and protest through prayer. They deal with restless gods, sometimes with more or less moderation.

First reclaiming their authority as spiritual advisors, the members of the Letter of the Year Organizing Commission made a series of

searing predictions: among them, profound changes in social order; treachery and abuse of rights at high levels of government; *coups d'états* or abrupt changes in political systems; a high number of deaths among public personalities; and, an increased struggle for power (political and religious), as well as potential wars and military interventions. They recommended acts of *Ebbó*—pacts, offerings and sacrificial or purifying ceremonies—to scare away the maze of predictions and dark spirits, inspiring or awakening energy and happiness in the capricious but grateful deities that are governing 2010.

The message for the inconceivable reality of today's Cuba, where it is no longer possible to tell any other story, was very basic: "Respect for the decision of the majority and the opinion of minorities," "organization," and "seek out new reforms." One from among the *babalawos*, whose loyalties are successive, tightly drew back the bow of Ochosi—an accurate archer god—and aimed straight for the Revolution's wrinkles, for the ghost of generational relief. For Víctor Betancourt, *Babá Ejiogbe's* sign speaks of renewal, of the importance of older

generations offering their experience to young people and allowing them act. He is convinced that the time allotted to mortals is not infinite.

In their evaluation of the world, they situate man in it while also espousing a set of ideas about how life should be lived amid new economic crises, worsening ecological risks, and ever-increasing political confusion. They make their predictions freely, exercising their right to tell anyone even what he does not want to hear.

Roberto Boulet's daily life may be in the United States, but his *casa-templo* [home temple] is Cuban. This Maryland *babalawo* moistened his head with milk and cocoa butter hours before the end of 2009. With this simple act, he called Orula, the divining god (syncretized into Catholicism as San Francis of Assisi), to confront the threats and curses of 2010. Then he focused deeply on studying and interpreting the two island letters of divination.

“The two letters are coincident and inter-related in *Iré Arikú's* prophetic prayer (“*Iré Arikú Oyale Tesi Lese Olofin*,” from the Organizing Commission; and “*Iré Arikú Lowo Orunmila*,” on behalf of the Yoruba Cultural Association). This year is marked by good or the benefit of a long life, and salvation from Orula, who is in the Palace, echoed Boulet, raising his arms and looking heavenward, to ask Oludumare, called the Most High in Afro-Cuban religious practice, for a blessing.

There will also be events that fulfill fate. This prophecy comes at an opportune time; exactly when a Washington, D.C. scholar of Afro-Cuban religion has a project to carry out a ceremony to the orishas outside the White House, in an attempt to use magic to bring about a reconciliation between the United States and Cuba. This project is enlightened by the presence an African-American family in the *Ilé*, or presidential residence, in the most important palace in the world.

This religion, with its mythology and nostalgia, is as old as the world. It is not trying to stir the heavens with dark venom and curses. “Orula gives good advice. And, Orula is never wrong!” said Roberto Boulet, for whom the contents of both letters are filled with predictions: ‘Dead king, Installed king; When the *paterfamilias* dies, there is destruction; The head rules the body, and only the King governs the people; Not all animals are restrained by the neck; Young palms grow taller and fuller than old ones.’

Media analyses of these derivations immediately found coincidences between the Cuban *babalawo's* words and the bombshells that were earlier published regarding 2010 by *Newsweek*. The magazine stated that sick leader Fidel Castro will die this year, and also set its sights on neighboring countries, predicting a new attempted *coup d'état* against Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez—all without even alluding to saints or stars.

Just days after the *santeros* issued their oracular missives; one, single newspaper managed to release evidence of Castro's state of health. At 83, he still has a great will to live. But this time, the image revealed him in a wheelchair, proving he is an invalid. Elsewhere, a picturesque Chávez was shown in a handy bit of verbal self-defense, warning that his response to anyone trying to depose him would be “radical.”

Chávez is well aware of the fact that *babalawos* can predict troubles and their consequences. It was precisely a Cuban Regla de Ocha priest, Olofista Hermes Oturazá (whose surname reveals his Ifá sign), who in using Orula's divining chain—the *ékuele*—and interpreting a prediction by this orisha, foresaw Chávez's election victory and saved him from a 2002 *coup d'état* and lengthy prison sentence.

The actual Obá, Oturazá, revealed to Roberto Boulet the religious work he did on

behalf of his godson Hugo Chávez, to whom he gave the *guerreros* [the warriors, a union of Afro-Cuban gods Elegguá, Oggún, Ochosi and Osun), so he could employ them in battles, and win. The god of the ocean requested a significant offering—a fearsome crocodile; once satisfied, he brought about the destruction of the powerful *coup* that freed Colonel Chávez from his prison sentence.

In the opinion of Ramón Martínez, with his 18-year long consecration in Regla de Ifé, the Letter of the Year's essence is neither stated nor seen, as is the case with famous novelist Ernest Hemingway's "Iceberg theory of prose." Everything remains hidden in metaphors, and then is later constructed by the priests and their interpretations. Even Orula, who is discreet and patient, prefers to deal with minimally lit spaces.

Hundreds of priests offering their clarity and wisdom participate in the solemn ceremony that determines the Letter of the Year, and who the holy rulers will be. They represent Orula on Earth, and scan the horizon with Ifá's most complex system of divination. This entails using *Ekine* (*Ikine*), the magically charged palm nut or seed, which serves as the god of prophecy's receptacle and representation (or source). This liturgical ceremony involves an act known as *tefea*, through which is revealed the precise talismanic ritual that is needed. This is why Martínez is not surprised by the fact that some predictions are very specific about place and space.

May there be two divination letters in Cuba, just as in other years, and four orishas rule 2010: Obbatalá and Yemayá as regents; Oyá and Chango as their seconds. May distrust not be scattered, nor faith be broken, nor the worst projections be disguised. Recurring fate is at work in both texts, and the *Ikines* are sounding hope because of the idea of a change that will resolve problems and detain the

island's revolution descent into Hades. For this Miami priest, there is wealth and a certain essential charm in that diversity, which doesn't betray inevitable human complexity.

Faith should not and cannot be a battleground for settling political differences. They always tend to be the most irrational, in and of themselves. Mixing beliefs with human suffering is like selling principles to a dead man and then suffering from the neuroses and psychological disorders that those who always think they've been hexed endure. Any religiously defined space should serve as a conciliatory haven for the spirit where all souls should feel at home.

There are all sorts of spirits behind this Cuban Regla de Ocha priest. They dream with him and even more about him. He was initiated as an Ifá priest in Havana, with the well-known Miguel Febles Padrón religious family, at a place known as La Casona. This is where this year's Letter of the Year's Organizing Commission determined that the ruling divinity would be Obbatalá, the Catholic pantheon's holiest Virgen of Mercedes, and Ramón Martínez's guardian angel.

On the island, those who are truly attentive to the religion of the orishas know that every year these predictions are becoming harder to believe—because of their complexity and the long suffering situation in Cuba. In this reality, what it is impossible to feel is actually done, said and experienced; consequently, every man or woman who embraces a faith and dreams of a peaceful future loses some of his or her essence.

Peaceful times have not been seen on the horizon. "Ifá has sung loudly," insisted Havana writer Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui, one of the most respected scholars of Afro-Cuban religions. She is a fervent follower of the academic legacy left by great Cuban researchers Lydia Cabrera and Fernando Ortiz.

In Cuba, there will be suspicion in the air for an entire year. Santería priests predict with little emotion, as if tempting fate, but they know their ‘stuff’ and offer their advice convinced by the fact that few will follow them—particularly those in the Palace. Religious belief and disbelief are evidence of human diversity; those who believe in this religion understand the dark and tragic reality that man, too, is the creator of his own misfortune.

Lucumí or Yoruba mythological-magical-religious thinking survives and is an essential part of Cuba’s memory, like untouched, virgin spaces. Its vigorous verses, prayers, fables and legends came to the island with the African slaves the Spanish colonists brought to it.

Yorubas and Greeks see gods in everything; they worship over 400 deities. One part nightmare, another part fascination, this specific combination fortunately ended up being Santería, with its powerful oracle. It is a divining system with 256 *Odu*, or signs, which out-

number the general philosophical commandments of other religions. These reveal to one where he or she stands in the eyes of Olofi, Supreme Being of Regla de Ocha’s pantheon.

It is often assumed that all religions enjoy a certain measure of validity, infallibility and universality. Yet, it is also true that nothing has been able to keep mankind from being frenetically curious about the unknown. An oracle that answers our questions makes us see our personal faults and shortcomings, and serves to guide us through life. It has illuminated keys.

These predictions are finely tuned and have been made by those who profess an indefatigable faith. This may not be a cause for vanity but rather for an understanding that divinity can exist within anyone. With a certain measure of disdain or generosity, the inscrutable orishas concede life’s opportunities. Immediately afterwards, something inexplicable happens, that empowers human beings to save their destiny.