



# "I Worship Black Gods": Formation of an African American Lucumi Religious Subjectivity

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**“I Worship Black Gods”:**

**Formation of an African American *Lucumi* Religious Subjectivity**

A dissertation presented

by

Lisanne C. Norman

to

The Department of African and African American Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of African American Studies

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**“I Worship Black Gods”:  
Formation of an African American *Lucumi* Religious Subjectivity**

**Abstract**

In 1959, Christopher Olanrewaju and Walter “Serge” King took a historic journey to pre-revolutionary Cuba that would change the religious trajectory of numerous African Americans, particularly in New York City. They became the first African American initiates into the Afro-Cuban *Lucumi* orisha tradition opening the way for generations of African Americans who would comprehensively transform their way of life. This dissertation examines the inter-diasporic exchanges between African Americans and their Cuban teachers to highlight issues of African diasporic dissonance and differing notions of “blackness” and “African.” I argue that these African Americans create a particular African American *Lucumi* religious subjectivity within the geographical space of an urban cosmopolitan city as they carve out space and place in the midst of religious intolerance and hostility. The intimate study of these devotees’ lives contributes new understandings about the challenges of religious diversity within contemporary urban settings. These African Americans cultivated a new religious subjectivity formed through dialogical mediation with spiritual entities made present through material religious technologies, such as divination, spiritual masses, and possession. Through the lens of lived religion, I examine the experiences of African American *Lucumi* devotees to better understand how their everyday lives reflect the mediation between a private religious life, defined and structured by spiritual entities, and their public lives in the contemporary sociocultural, economic and political context of urban American society. Based on more than 8 years of intense participant observation and semi-structured interviews and discussions, I analyze how religious subjectivities and religious bodies are cultivated as these African Americans leave their mark on this religious tradition, their geographical surroundings, and African American religious history.

## Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Christine Margaret Crewe; the *iworos* (priestesses and priests) who made it possible for the orisha to reach American shores; Karen McCarthy Brown; and all the ancestors upon whose shoulders I stand.

*Moferefun bobo orisha!*

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## Glossary

<i>achés</i> (Lucumi)	ritual items that all the warrior orishas receive particularly before a blood sacrifice
<i>adupe</i> (Lucumi)	thank you
<i>Africanos</i> (Sp.)	African spirits enslaved in the Spanish Americas
<i>ajubona</i> (Lucumi)	second priest that assists to perform an initiation
<i>albaca</i> (Sp.)	sweet basil
<i>aleynos</i> (Sp.)/ <i>alejo</i> (Yr.)	an orisha devotee who is not an initiated priestess/priest
<i>arimus</i> (Sp.)	the delicacies for the orisha
<i>ashe</i> (Yr.)	spiritual power/special talent/energy
<i>asho</i> (Lucumi) clothes	clothes worn during priestly initiation
<i>aso oke</i> (Yr.)	Yoruba hand-woven cloth
<i>babalawo</i> (Yr.)	priest of Ifa divination system
<i>banquito</i> (Sp.)	small wooden stool
<i>bembe</i> (Yr.)/ <i>tambores</i> (Sp.)	drumming ceremony for the orisha
<i>botanica</i> (Sp.)	supply stores for orisha devotees
<i>boveda</i> (Sp.)	Spiritist shrine
<i>canteros</i> (Sp.)	singers
<i>caracolero</i> (Sp.)	diviner of the sixteen cowries divination system, <i>dilogun</i>
<i>clavos</i> (Sp.)	railroad nails
<i>cocinera</i> (Sp.)	cook
<i>coco dulce</i> (Sp.)	sweet coconut candy
<i>cuchillo</i> (Sp.)	knife

<i>cumpleaños</i> (Sp.)	the celebration day of priestly initiation
<i>dilogun</i> (Lucumi)	16 cowrie shells divination used by <i>santeros</i>
<i>ebos</i> (Yr.)	sacrifice or offering
<i>ede</i> (Lucumi)	beaded bracelet for the <i>santero</i> 's tutelary orisha that a <i>santero</i> receives during the initiation ceremony
<i>efun</i> (Yr.) <i>cascarilla</i> (Sp.)	crushed egg shells
<i>egbe</i> (Yr.)	association
<i>eguns</i> (Yr.)	blood ancestral spirits and spirit guides
<i>el monte</i> (Sp.)	bush/wilderness
<i>epo</i> (Yr.)	palm oil
<i>Espiritismo</i> (Sp.)	Kardec's Spiritist system
<i>espiritista</i> (Sp.)	Medium specialist who performs <i>misas</i>
<i>estera</i> (Sp.)	a straw beach mat
<i>ewe</i> (Lucumi)	restrictions/taboo
<i>garabatos</i> (Lucumi)	a hooked staff
<i>guerreros</i> (Sp.)	warriors
<i>hutia</i>	a large rodent native to the Caribbean and found in abundance in Cuba that is sacrificed to the orisha during initiation
<i>hutia y pescado</i> (Sp.)	pulverized dried <i>hutia</i> and fish
Ifa (Yr.)	system of divination used only babalawos
<i>Iku</i> (Yr.)	death
<i>ile</i> (Yr./Lucumi)	religious house
<i>ilekes</i> (Lucumi)	orisha beads
<i>indio</i> (Sp.)	Native American

<i>ire</i> (Yr.)	positive energy or blessings
<i>ita</i> (Lucumi)	your personalized guide to life
<i>iyawo</i> (Yr.)	bride/newly initiated priestess/priest
<i>iyawoage</i>	time period in which one is an <i>iyawo</i>
<i>jicara</i> (Sp.)	calabash made from a gourd
<i>kimbombo</i> (Lucumi)	okra
<i>la montana</i> (Sp.)	the mountain
<i>libretas</i> (Sp.)	small notebooks from a master priest with religious notes, usually on divination
<i>madrina</i> (Sp.)	godmother
<i>maiz tostado</i> (Sp.)	toasted corn
<i>maniguas</i> (Sp.)	overgrown abandoned lot
<i>matuerzo</i> (Sp.)	type of weed that is sacred to the deity Ogun
<i>misas espirituales</i> (Sp.)	spiritual masses
<i>morena</i> (Sp.)	dark-haired woman
<i>muerto</i> (Sp.)	dead spirit
<i>mulato adelantado</i> (Sp.)	elevated mulatto
<i>obi</i> (Lucumi)	divination with four pieces of coconut
<i>ocha</i> (Sp.)	priestly initiation/initiation ceremony
<i>ocha cloths</i>	spiritual cloths for the orisha
<i>odubale</i> (Yr.)	salute by laying prostrate on the floor
<i>odus</i> (Yr.)	the sacred body of oracular knowledge
<i>olorisha</i> (Yr.)	owner of orisha

orisha (Yr.)	Yoruba deities
<i>oriaté</i> (Lucumi)	master of ceremony
<i>ori</i> (Yr.)	head/destiny
<i>oro</i> (Lucumi)	praise drumming for the orisha that is a shortened version of the full regiment of songs played in a <i>bembe</i>
<i>osobo</i> (Yr.)	negative energy
<i>otan</i> (Lucumi)	rock
<i>owo</i> (Yr.)	money
<i>padrino</i> (Sp.)	godfather
<i>palangano</i> (Sp.)	metal or plastic basin
<i>pañuelos</i> (Sp.)	large elaborately sewn square panels of cloth/large scarf
<i>patakis</i> (Yr.)	story/myths of the orisha
<i>pollo</i> (Sp.)	chicken
<i>quadro</i> (Sp.)	an individual's collection of ancestral and spirit guides
<i>santero</i> (Sp.)	priest
<i>santera</i> (Sp.)	priestess
<i>santeros</i> (Sp.)	<i>Lucumi</i> priestesses and priests
<i>soperas</i> (Sp.)	soup tureens
<i>tambaleros</i> (Sp.)	master drummers
<i>trabajo</i> (Sp.)	work

Sp. – Spanish

Yr. – Yoruba

Lucumi – used to mark words whose origins are either are uncertain or are specific to *Lucumi* orisha devotion

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## Introduction

### First Encounter

I went seeking the spirits in Brazil, for the first time in 1997, after reading Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit* in Paget Henry's "Comparative Slave Societies" class as a sophomore at Brown University. I first encountered the spirits in a plaza in the then run-down Lapa neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro. I was nineteen and had only been in Brazil for two months when I happened to meet an Afro-Brazilian *pai de santo* (Candomblé<sup>1</sup> priest). In the course of flirtation, I mentioned that I wanted to have a spiritual reading, and much to my amazement, he instantly volunteered to give me one. As he was in the middle of directing his band in a small community center turned nightclub on Friday and Saturday nights, we made an appointment to meet at a little past one in a secluded corner of the plaza across the street when the band took its breaks. Eventually one o'clock arrived and I went outside to meet him. While I anxiously sat there, he closed his eyes for a long moment and when he reopened them they seemed to be very distant and when he spoke I struggled to understand him as his Portuguese was very guttural and not the lyrical, sing-songy Brazilian Portuguese to which I had become accustomed. I later learned that this was because the spirit that possessed him was an old Bahian slave who spoke the broken guttural Portuguese of nineteenth-century slaves. He told me about things that had happened in my past and a few things that were going to happen in my future. I felt shaken to my core because nothing in my past could have prepared me for this experience. It was scary, but yet visceral at the same time. Afterwards, the priest could barely stand and I had to literally hold him up as we walked back across the street to the community center. The act of possession had left

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<sup>1</sup> In Brazil, Candomblé is the heavily Yoruba influenced African-derived religious devotion.

him noticeably enervated. I sometimes wonder if I had known what it would cost him would I have rejected his spontaneously generous offer because so much of what he told me came to pass and served as a catalyst to my discovery of the orisha (deities) and the eguns (ancestral spirits) in Brooklyn, New York.

Alternately known as Yoruba, *Lucumi*, *Regla de Ocha*,<sup>2</sup> or *Santería*, this religious devotion is characterized by its propitiation of eguns and the orisha, a multitude of deities that represent various forces of nature and natural phenomenon. Devotees adhere to the individual advice offered by these metaphysical entities through various spiritual technologies, the most prominent being divination. A transnational African-derived religious practice brought to the Americas by enslaved ethnic Yoruba from the West African coast (modern-day Nigeria) beginning in the 18th century, it was initially preserved in places like Brazil and Cuba and has only more recently proliferated in the United States among African Americans beginning in 1959. The religious devotion can be found throughout the Caribbean, Latin America, and in Europe. Orisha devotion is simultaneously a communal and individual religious worship, and although devotees perform most rituals and ceremonies within a community of devotees, there are, however, numerous acts of devotion that individuals perform on their own on a daily basis. There is no prescriptive code or book of laws, and thus morality, achieving balance, harmony, and wholeness are fluid and flexible and are very individualized. Overarching religiocultural ethos include respect for eldership, gratitude, and a struggle for wholeness and balance. These ethos guide and structure the worship, but there are few generalities and absolutes. What is true

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<sup>2</sup> *Lucumi* is one of names used for the tradition among Cubans, and it connotes the African roots of the religious practice. Oral tradition among the Afro-Cubans tells that it was the name of the ethnic group from which a large number of the Yoruba slaves came. There is speculation that it is derived from the Yoruba phrase *oluku mi*, “my friend” (Verger 1981; Clark 2007). It is also used, at times, to distinguish the Cuban tradition from that of the African American and the Nigerian. The religion is also popularly referred to in Cuba as *La Regla de Ocha*. In *Santería: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion*, Mary Ann Clark explains that “‘*Ocha*’ is a contraction of the word ‘Orisha,’ so that *Regla de Ocha* [another name for *Santería*] means the rule or order of the Orisha” (2007, p. 3).

of Vodou is also true in orisha devotion in that this African-derived religious tradition “offer[s] thematic modalities of lived ethical life” (Michel 2007, p. 51).

It is estimated that there are at least 100 million orisha devotees in the United States and Latin America who practice some form of orisha worship (Fisher 2006). This number goes a long way in justifying why scholars such as Jacob Olupona and Terry Rey (2008) call for its recognition as a world religion on par with other world religions such as Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. In post-revolutionary 1959 Cuba, Christopher Olanrewaju and Walter “Serge” King became the first two African Americans to initiate into the Afro-Cuban *Lucumi* tradition. Upon their return to the United States, they founded first the Shango Temple, and then subsequently the Yoruba Temple in 1960 to teach and share the knowledge with their fellow spiritually seeking African American sisters and brothers of this African-based religion that the descendants of Yoruba slaves in Cuba had managed to preserve for nearly three centuries. Like many African Americans at this time, both had been struggling to form a new identity that would privilege their African heritage. In all the work that has previously done been this community (Clarke 2004, 2007; Hucks 1998, 2012; Hunt 1979; Pinn 1998), this initiatory journey and the subsequent events that unfolded are told from the perspective of only Nana Osejijman Adefunmi (formerly known as Walter “Serge” King). These works have also largely focused on the religious community that Osejijman Adefunmi began constructing in 1970 when he and a number of other African American practitioners moved to rural South Carolina and decided to reproduce the ancient Yoruba capital, Oyo, and named it Oyotunji (Oyo rises again) to practice what he subsequently dubbed, “Orisa Voodoo” (Hucks 1998; Clarke 2004). The move was a manifestation of King’s desire to distance himself from Cuban *Santería* devotees whom he believed to be in denial about the complete “Africanness” of this religious practice,

particularly because of their continued use of Catholic saints and Catholic-derived ancestral rituals. What most scholars have ignored is the majority population of African American orisha devotees who remained in the New York metropolitan area and who, often working under the guidance of or alongside Christopher O'Connell, continued to develop a spiritual working relationship with the Cuban community.

My research explores the lived religious experience of African American *Lucumi* orisha devotees in New York City to better understand how their everyday lives reflect the mediation between a life defined and structured by non-physical divine and spiritual entities and the contemporary sociocultural, economic and legal reality of doing so in contemporary American society. Through analysis of their every day lived experience within this African American faith community, I will touch upon some of the social, cultural, and economic consequences of their choice of religious pathway.

At this phase in my research, I wanted to focus on individuals whose stories have yet to be told. Every time I mentioned to someone that I study African American Yoruba devotion, I was immediately asked if I had spoken to Wande Abimbola or John Mason, or if I would be visiting Oyotunji Village. My answer mostly appeared to confuse or disappoint the querent. The two priests and the village are well-known entities, who have all been quite adept at representing themselves and sharing their own narratives. My work is about illuminating the lived religious experience of African American *Lucumi* devotees whose voices and narratives have not been heard, and who normally wouldn't agree to speak with an academic. My objective is to provide an intimate portrait of their lives and struggles, and examine the ways in which they make their own particular African American *Lucumi* subjectivity through mediation with sacred entities, material objects, and spaces.

Over the past ten years, I have been attending and participating in ceremonies in the *ile*<sup>3</sup> (religious house) of the Balogun, an African American *santero* (priest)<sup>4</sup> with over 40 years of *ocha* (priestly initiation) to the deity Ogun, god of war, matter, and technology. He is what is known in the community as a “working priest,” meaning he has been ordered by the orisha to serve as a diviner, healer, counselor, and senior officiating ceremonial priest to the community. Through my connection with him and the members of his *ile* (religious house), which includes his adult children Carolina, Alex, and Sean, I have had the opportunity to meet a significant number of “first—” and “second—” generation African American *santeros*—that is, African Americans who were among the first initiates into the priesthood here in the United States. I also had the opportunity to speak with the younger devotees in the *ile*, who eagerly shared their lives, knowledge, and experiences with me, which allowed me to gain a broader perspective of how being a *Lucumi* devotee differs (inter)generationally across time and space. Not just a religion, but a “way of life,” orisha devotion for these devotees encompass the social, political, and economic facets of their lives.

I posit that as these African Americans engage in a daily struggle to cultivate their religious subjectivity and navigate the strictures of the larger society, they are charting a new way of being *Lucumi*, combining Cuban, African American, and African elements, and thusly leaving a mark on “their traditional religious” path that signals their religious ownership and deep engagement with not only the preservation, but also the transformation of their religious devotion.

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<sup>3</sup> Yoruba word for both house and land, depending on the context in which it is used; often used to refer to either the house in which a priest keeps his orisha shrine and/or the spiritual family over which a priest presides. You will often hear practitioners referring to their “house of *ocha*.”

<sup>4</sup> The term *santero* is more commonly used among African American and Cuban *Lucumi* practitioners. There is a newly initiated cadre of African American priests and priestesses who are aiming to reduce the use of the Spanish term, and instead employ the traditional Yoruba term of *iyalocha* (female priestess who has already initiated another individual) or *babalocha* (male priest who has already initiated another individual).

## **The Multiplicity of Orisha Devotion**

In the United States, orisha worship is widely perceived as a deviant largely Hispanic religion. The reality is that there exist many different types of communities of orisha worshippers within the United States. I will delineate a few here that intersect with the community of African American devotees, and of which I have some knowledge. This list is by no means exhaustive, as there are significant communities of African American (both *Lucumi* and non-*Lucumi* (Perez 2010)) and White devotees in Chicago, and a sizeable and growing community of a mix of various Black ethnic and Hispanic/Latino devotees in California and Texas. To further clarify, there are of course individuals who belong to more than one of these groups. I delineate the groups as follows:

### **African-American orisha community on the East Coast (New York City metropolitan area, Philadelphia, Boston, Oyotunji, and Miami)**

1. African American *Lucumi*-descendant devotees
2. African American non-*Lucumi*-descendant devotees
3. African American Oyotunji Orisa Voodoo devotees
4. African American Yoruba Religious Tradition devotees

### **Latino orisha community on the East Coast**

1. Cuban *Lucumi* in Miami
2. Cuban *Lucumi* in New Jersey
3. Hispanic (Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Mexican) devotees in the New York/New Jersey area

Unfortunately, there are no quantitative studies that parse out the percentages that each of these various groups comprise of the overall population of orisha worshippers in the United States.

I use the terms ‘*Lucumi*-descendant’ and ‘non-*Lucumi*-descendant’ to differentiate between the two larger groups within the African American community in the northeast. ‘*Lucumi*-descendant’ refers to those individuals who were either initiated by a Cuban, or whose godparent was initiated by a Cuban, and who identify with, and adhere to, that tradition of religious devotion. The ‘non-*Lucumi*-descendant’ refer to practitioners who have stridently sought to disengage themselves from the Cuban community and their religious tradition, and who have as Mary Curry (1997) states in her work “de-Hispanicized” their devotion. These individuals, however, do not share the same religious and/or sociocultural ideologies as those from the Oyotunji village, and, as far as I have been able to discern, maintain a distance from those devotees. Many of these devotees, however, have followed the recent trend of returning to Nigeria to become initiated as priestesses and priests. As one priestess of Oshun described it to me, she “went home to the original orisha people.” More often than not their religious “house” is affiliated with a *babalawo*, either one of the itinerant Nigerian *babalawos* or an African American *babalawo*, who has been recently initiated in Africa. This differentiation in where religious authority is geographically placed has caused a rift within the African American community, and in some places between the African American and Cuban *Lucumi* community.<sup>5</sup>

Within the last decade, many fascinating investigations into the phenomenon of Yoruba religious practice have been vehicles to explore theories of the African diaspora. Some of them

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<sup>5</sup> A famous on-line debated raged between Cuban *Lucumi oriaté* Miguel Ramos and members of the Yoruba Traditional Religion (YTR), an African American orisha community in Florida, in which most members travel to Nigeria for initiation. The debate centered around the inability of *Lucumi* priests to verify the authenticity of YTR devotees’ initiation, and therefore banning them from entering the room in which an initiation is occurring. Only authenticated priests are allowed entrance. See <http://eleda.org/obaoriatecouncil/agreement-convenio/willie-ramos-rebuttal/> (accessed July 10, 2010).

have centered on theories concerning home, authenticity, cultural essentialism, and African American religious indigenization (Clarke 2004; Hucks 2012), the relationship between religious movements and processes of globalization and transnationalism (Clarke 2004, 2007; Matory 2005; Olupona and Rey 2008), black agency in cultural transformations on a national level (Johnson 2002; Matory 2005), and transforming and configuring modernity (Palmié 2002). While others have focused on historicizing these practices and investigating the multiple agents at work in shaping their current modes of practice (Brown 2003), or the performance of the sacred and the blurred lines between sacred and secular realities (Hagedorn 2001). Regardless of their main theoretical focus, all these works deal with the struggle of these African descendants to assert, connect, and identify themselves with an “African” past thereby authenticating their practice and, in many cases, their authority. While authenticating practices and globalization figure in my work, my focus is more on presenting a phenomenologically driven examination of the manner in which these devotees create and make sense of their worlds and their place in it as African American orisha devotees in a largely Christian society.

Two of the most significant works done on the community in NYC, *Santeria in New York City: A Study in Cultural Resistance* by Steven Gregory (1999) and *Making the Gods in New York* by Mary Curry (1997), provide extremely informative and insightful inside looks into orisha worship in NYC during the 1980s. Curry’s work, *Making the Gods in New York*, aims to highlight the difference in social interpretations of orisha worship between Blacks and Latinos. She deliberately sought to conduct a “case study of an African American House,” in which she wanted to highlight that the “potent concerns” of the “Black American community did not coincide with those of the immigrant Cubans” (p. 126). Gregory’s ethnographic study, on the other hand, focuses on the sociohistorical significance of “Afro-Cuban *Santería*” and on the

“critical role that these religions have played in the conscious efforts of people of African descent to construct alternative and, at times, oppositional cultural identities and practice” (p. 11). Gregory based his work on ethnographic research he conducted in the multi-ethnic house of an Afro-Cuban priest who initiated a large number of practitioners in New York City. Although the study was not solely focused on African Americans, it did highlight salient problems faced by African Americans during their initial participation in the tradition: linguistic and ethnic discrimination, and adhering to new sociopolitical structures in a religious setting. Gregory calls attention to the ways in which the Yoruba tradition is practiced and lived in every day life. He demonstrates the ways in which ethnicity and religious identity influence and inform one another. Both authors point out that for African Americans in particular, this religion signified a “questioning of the legitimacy of American society” (Curry 1997, p. 168) and constituted a means by which they “challenge[d] their ascribed status as a ‘*racial*’ minority’ in American society” (Gregory 1999, p. 100). Though these two ethnographies are very similar in their intentions and goals, my work will differ significantly because I hope to also discuss the importance of the early period of African American religious transition, as well as focus the complications and challenges of carving out a life for themselves within the multicultural, multiracial, religiously and ethnically pluralistic space that is urban New York City. Instead of retreating to an isolated space in which to live relatively undisturbed, these African Americans wanted “to remain a part of American society,” and have their religiosity “recognized like everybody else’s.” These are just some of the key reasons my interlocutors state for having remained in New York City. Paradoxically though, many of them go to great lengths to conceal their religious devotion as a instinctive defense mechanism against discrimination from the larger American society as well as from other African Americans.

Elizabeth Perez's dissertation (2010), "Narrative, Seasoning and Song," resonates very strongly and closely with my own work as she too is interested in understanding how an African American *Lucumi* religious subjectivity is formed, however she achieves this through examining conversion narratives and analyzing how the spaces within the *ile* become different theaters of conversion in which devotees performed "proper" ritual behavior and bodily practices. The difference in our research is that: 1) I seek to analyze and understand their subjectivity formation as a result of historical geopolitical and social occurrences that created the space for the initial formation of an African American *Lucumi* religious; and 2) I don't focus on conversion narratives, but rather discuss and analyze devotees' lived religious experience and how it is reflective of the processual ways in which devotees transform their lives and "become orisha people." The loyalty that these devotees have to this particular religious way of life is noteworthy given the increasing alienation that exists between many of them and the remaining Cuban *Lucumi* community in New York City, and between them and the larger African American community that looks to Nigeria for religious authority.

The African American *Lucumi* community can be loosely defined by these key features: their allegiance to, reliance upon, and continued (though currently quite limited) interaction with the Cuban community; their use of Spanish words in their ritual practice, e.g., *cuchillo* (knife), *pollo* (chicken), *albaca* (sweet basil), *jicara* (calabash); and the Catholic-inspired practice of *Espiritismo* (Kardec's Spiritist system), including use of a *boveda* (Spiritist shrine), and *misas* (spiritual masses) for honoring and connecting with the dead through spirit possession. At the same time, however, many "Africanized" practices set them apart from the Cuban *Lucumi* community: 1) the renaming of the religious tradition as "Yoruba" (also commonly referred to as "the Religion"); 2) the stripping of all references to and mentions of Catholic saints; and 3) an

emphasis on what is perceived as traditional Yoruba sociocultural practices such as polygamy, particularly among the first African Americans to initiate during the '60s and '70s.

It is my goal in this dissertation to paint a complicated picture of the racialized religious identity of African American practitioners who consider themselves to be “Afrocentric;” but yet do not eschew all the Spanish-influenced practices common to Cuban *Santería*. While other studies on the African American orisha community focused on the visibly representative “Africanness” of a group of African Americans, I seek to explore more subtle but still staunchly held notions and embodiments of “African” and “Yoruba” that these practitioners articulate within the cosmopolitan urban setting of New York City.

### **Second Encounter**

It was a late spring evening in 2000, the kind where you only need a light jacket, and I was on my way to the Balogun's house for the first time in ten years. I had recently run into Carolina, a former classmate, on the street not too far from our former junior high school. During our conversation, much to my delighted surprise, I discovered that Carolina was an orisha devotee and had been one all her life. “Did you really never notice the warriors that were right by the front door when you came into our apartment?” she asked me completely surprised that I'd put such little attention to that detail. I told her about my recent experiences in Brazil and she invited me to accompany her and her family to an orisha event the following evening. “That's funny, you went all the way to Brazil to find some African gods and the whole time they were right here,” she said chuckling as she shook her head.

I arrived at the Balogun's house dressed in what I believed at that time was appropriate African attire for an African religious event. I was wearing a black head wrap and an orange and

black outfit a friend had brought back for me from Tanzania. When I entered the Balogun's living room, he was sitting on a *banquito* (small wooden stool), talking on the phone. "What do you mean they don't have room on the panel for an additional person? The lady told me I would be flown out West for the opening ceremony, and participate on the panel when I agreed to do the commission for this exhibit?...No, no, no. Just hold on a minute! What's the real deal here?" He was silent as he listened and then suddenly silent tears began rolling down his cheeks as he asked the individual on the other end, "What do you mean, they don't want any African American artists on the panel? Is that what they said?" Carolina immediately rushed over and crouched down to where the Balogun was sitting so that she was looking up at him and gently put her hand on his knee before she asked in a very concerned voice, "What's the matter, Dad? Please calm down. Dad?" The Balogun wiped his eyes with his hand and said, "Okay man. Bye," in such a defeated voice. Someone came forth and took the phone. Carolina kept asking the Balogun what had happened. She took his handkerchief out of his suit jacket pocket and handed it to him. He sat there and slowly wiped his eyes before he spoke. "That was one of the organizers for that exhibit I have a few pieces in and he just told me that the museum isn't going to fly me out for the opening because they want to just represent the religion as African and Hispanic. Isn't that some bullshit? I fucking worked my ass off on those pieces," he fumed, his voice breaking at the end as he began to tear up again. "This is my religion too! I'm just as much a Yoruba man as any Latino or African!" The Balogun looked up then and noticed me standing just inside the door and started apologizing to me for losing control in front of me when he hadn't seen me in so many years. I told him then as I have many times over the past fourteen years when similarly unfortunate incidents have occurred, "Please don't apologize to me for getting upset when someone's trying to diminish you."

From the beginning of my association with the Balogun, and then subsequently with the African American community of *Lucumi* devotees, marginalization and the struggle to make a place for themselves within the larger majority Hispanic *Lucumi* community of devotees has been a prominent recurring theme. They have found themselves at the crossroads of where (Afro)Cuban religiosity meets with what may be aptly described as an Afrocentric sociopolitical cum religious orientation. In other words, they worship in the way of the Cubans but with a marked emphasis on the Africanity of this way of life. As pioneers of what was then an unheard of or unknown way of life among African Americans, the first- and second-generation of African American *Lucumi* devotees had to sometimes navigate new and uncomfortable ways of belonging as their incorporation (or exclusion) in Cuban *Lucumi* houses and communities of worship were predicated upon spiritual kinship—materialized in the gifting of sacralized religious objects in exchange for pledges of loyalty and assistance—and not upon ideologies of racial solidarity or reclaimed African heritages.

They felt that they were (re)claiming a stripped away religious inheritance not premised on enslavement and Western doctrines of ethical and moral behavior. They were taking back their souls from a slave-imposed religious practice and rescuing and (re)creating a sense of self, a spiritual and religious foundation, not predicated upon their oppression but their mental and spiritual liberation from a White-structured and imposed religious reality that had been used to justify the enslavement of their ancestors and had cut them off from their ancestral inheritances, religious, social, and cultural. It was an ontological shift prefacing how they would in the future perceive and interact with the world around them.

### **Inspiration**

This dissertation is inspired by the work of the late Karen McCarthy Brown and her stellar work, *Mama Lola*, a story that concurrently the spiritual narrative of Lourdes' life and the transnational worlds and networks of spirits nurtured by Alourdes and her family, and also a homage to Haiti and its historical transformations. Though a family, in all its senses, figure prominently in my work, instead of using one individual as a focal point, I try to focus on the processes by which this community of African American orisha devotees has come into being—the transformations and diasporic encounters, and the spiritual mediations with deities and ancestral spirits that structure their lives and interactions with their larger social and geographical environment. Their non-immigrant status brings a different perspective to their diasporic encounters and the religious transformation that occurred physically, spiritually, and geographically.

I see this dissertation as a response to the call by numerous scholars of African diasporic religions, such as Charles Long (1986, 2003a, 2003b, 2007), Jacob Olupona (2011), and Dianne Stewart and Tracey Hucks (2013), to present more phenomenologically and ethnographically rich accounts of the lives of (these) devotees that take into consideration not only their experiences, but also the emic theoretical and hermeneutical approaches to be found within the traditions themselves.

### **Afrogenic Theoretical Approach**

In their edited volume on the contributions of peoples of African descent to American cultures, anthropologist Sheila Walker (2001) introduces us to the Afrogenic perspective.

An Afrogenic perspective necessarily recognizes the special importance of terminologies associated with, and generated by the experiences of African an African Diasporic communities. These are our privileged expressions and interpretations of our lives and of our ways of experiencing and seeing them, and of pointing out what is important in them. (p. 9)

Employing an Afrogenic perspective as I conducted my fieldwork and as I reviewed my research has allowed for this dissertation to be guided by the emic theory and fundamental principles of orisha devotion. The principles that have emerged predominantly over the years are gratitude, sacrifice, and respect. Respect for life, the eguns, the orisha, and our elders and *santeros*<sup>6</sup>—the living repositories of our experiences, memories, and religious knowledge. While tenets of Yoruba religion have been outlined elsewhere (Idowu 1995; Mason and Edwards 1985; Valentin-Angarica 2010), here I highlight these three because they emerged and manifested in conversations, actions, and the narratives of my interlocutors, and were often the “moral takeaway” of *patakis* and oral (his)stories. Thusly, for these African American devotees orality is also a foundational principle of orisha devotion.

### Orality

One of the key characteristics of this African American *Lucumi* community is their belief that religious knowledge should be transmitted orally from godparent to godchild, or from elder to *aleyo* (an orisha devotee who is not an initiated priestess/priest).<sup>7</sup> In particular, this applies to learning the sacred knowledge of the *dilogun* (16 cowrie shell divination used by *santeros*). The diviner must memorize and know the full divinatory corpus that consists of 16 *odus* (the sacred body of oracular knowledge) that can manifest themselves in 16 different ways. Stories and myths (*patakis*) about the orisha are passed down from elders to novice devotees in conversations, consultations, or subtle warnings. Although this has changed in recent years in

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<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that every living thing should not be shown respect, but elders are embodiments of lived history, memory and knowledge simply from having lived and survived to old age; and *santeros* as embodiments of the orisha are to be treated as sacred beings here on earth.

<sup>7</sup> In Yoruba language, *alejo* means visitor, stranger; or someone that must be taken care of. It would appear that Spanish speakers simply adapted the word to their linguistic sensibilities so the ‘j’ became a ‘y.’ The sense of the word though is still the same. I thank Professor Olupona for bringing this to my attention.

many orisha devotion communities in the United States and in Cuba, my African American interlocutors still follow this “traditional” way of religious knowledge transmission. The Balogun constantly used *patakis* and historical narratives as teaching tools, some passed down to him from elders and others from his early days as a priest among the immigrant Cuban and nascent African American community of devotees.

In certain African American orisha communities, African diasporic religious scholars have highlighted how a turn to written texts has played a significant role in devotion and subjectivity formation (Clarke 2004; Curry 1997; Hucks 1998, 2012;). In Cuba, the state has sponsored numerous books and projects collecting the stories and myths of orisha in an attempt to further the folkloricization project that seeks to find a way to allow the communist state to control, tolerate, and somehow modernize the presence of this vibrant religious culture in Cuba (Ayorinde 2004; Knauer 2008; Mirabal 2005). Some of the elder Cuban and African American *santeros* view this textualization of religious knowledge as inherently dangerous to the foundational religious technology of oral religious transmission. In their view, textualization of religious knowledge allows for esoteric knowledge to be freely shared with anyone who can afford to buy the book, and it also threatens to concretize dynamic and organic living religious knowledge. This is not to say that diviners or senior devotees have the right to simply change praxi, although some do, but rather that they believe orality allows the religious culture to adapt to new times, new surroundings, and environments as it has throughout the centuries. “They couldn’t bring no books with them on the slave ship now could they?” one senior priest of Obatala commented at a community event in Harlem when a younger devotee asked about the possibility of the elders writing an instruction manual. Many of them believed that orality aided

in safe transmission of the orisha religious knowledge from African shores to the shores of the New World.

While a few *libretas* (small notebooks from a master priest with religious notes, usually on divination) are prized, I have only seen one elder priest take out one of his old notebooks (and it took him nearly an hour to find it) when instructing a junior priestess on how to use a notebook in the beginning of training to help initially, but he warned her, “Don’t let it become a crutch!” Though one can find numerous books on Yoruba religion and history in their personal libraries, devotees do not use these books as sources of religious knowledge but rather for historical information, or as examples of the kinds of erroneous knowledge being passed around both within and outside of the orisha community. As a novice devotee, one soon comprehends that it is a great sacrifice of time and energy to have to learn orally and to train the memory to retain volumes of information about the divinatory corpus, accompanying *ebos*, sacred plants, rituals for initiating a priest, symbols, diagnosis and remedies for physical, spiritual, and mental ailments.

The use of oral histories within the tradition serves multiple purposes: 1) it is a way to call upon the spirit of the deceased *santeros* (Bacigalupo 2014); 2) they are lessons and cautionary tales about how the orisha work and negative consequences of not following offered advice; and 3) they reflect cultural memory and the ideals and principles that elder *santeros* have deemed to warrant repetition and contemplation, e.g, avoiding tragedy, knowing the African American *Lucumi* history of struggle, understanding the orisha, and knowing your limits. In these ways the oral histories become excellent teaching tools because stories told and retold by the elders reflect *patakis* or *odus* of the orisha that have been played out in real life by devotees. For this reason, I recount many of the oral histories passed down by the elders that are retold at

communal gatherings, during ceremonies, or just in conversation. I also include many of the personal narratives of African American devotees because now their stories, and voices, will become part of the larger oral historical trajectory. Their contribution to this collection will be stories told by our generation and the next that will pass on the history, values, warnings, and advice that aid in the continuation the (re)production of this Black religious culture. These African American elders are now the bearers of this ancestral legacy of oral history, and through repetition and emphasis they strive to successfully pass on this legacy to the next generation.

### Materiality

Respect for things and sacred spaces is also an integral aspect of orisha devotion. Material objects are integral to religious devotion and are often repurposed objects. An abandoned railroad spike or track is still the deity Ogun and therefore can either become a part of the deity's shrine or used in *ebo* (sacrifice or offering) for the deity. A brain coral that is removed from the ocean physically dies, but in the hands of a *santero*, it is "given new life," when it becomes Elegba, the deity of crossroads and communication. Objects, both natural and man-made, taken from sacred places like an ocean, a river, a cemetery, railroad tracks, or parks among many other sacred places can be transformed and/or consecrated to become deity or serve in some other spiritual capacity. Therefore materiality is essential to conceiving how African American devotees seeking to create, navigate, and negotiate a particularly African American *Lucumi* religious subjectivity and way of life in a cosmopolitan urban setting that does not readily accommodate or willingly acknowledge their religious presence.

In analyses of African American orisha devotion, the intersection of materiality and religiosity has not received any scholarly attention. Rather studies about material culture in

orisha devotion here in the United States are by and large about the Afro-Cuban and Cuban community of orisha devotees. David Brown's (1999) extremely detailed and well-written account on the "altaring" of space within the household of two *santeros* (*Lucumi* priests) in New Jersey opened up a new space for theorizing about space and materiality within this African diasporic tradition. It also contributed to understanding how space is religiously (re)conceptualized, (re)organized and demarcated in tight quarters within an urban setting. His study, however, focuses on two immigrants who are seeking to (re)create religious spaces that invoke the religious spaces in their home country. In her dissertation, "*Asho Orisha*," Mary Ann Clark focused on highlighting how devotees demarcate and differentiate spiritual space within their homes. Through a semiological lens, she deconstructs the orisha thrones of her Houston interlocutors to demonstrate how the thrones simultaneously tell the (his)tory of both the orisha and the *santero*. To fill in this gap in the scholarship, I seek to draw attention to how this religious practice is (re)produced through this embracing of materiality in all its forms and manifestations.

### *Everyday Lived Religion*

Michel De Certeau (1984) introduced the concept of analyzing everyday practice to counter tendencies to ignore and obscure the significance of practice and action and their function as building blocks of social action, and therefore society. This became very significant for religious studies as it influenced scholars and gave them a theoretical avenue to expand their understandings of what constituted religious behavior and religious action. Lived religious studies pioneer Robert Orsi reminds us of the necessity of this conceptual tool when he states, "Rethinking religion as a form of cultural work, the study of lived religion directs attention to

institutions and persons, texts and rituals, practice and theology, things and ideas—all as media of making and unmaking worlds.” (Orsi 2002, p. xxxvi). Lived religion as theorized by Orsi and other religious scholars and social anthropologists (Fisher 2006; McGuire 2008; Schielke and Debevec, 2012) helps to render individual lives and complex lived religious experiences more acute; and it allows for better analysis of the multiplicity of religious practices and experience within a larger religious group. There are many different kinds of self-identified orisha practitioners, and the ways in which each individual relates to his or her orisha will be significantly different, though often delineated at least by the “tradition” of the *santeros* who serves as a spiritual guide for both the newly initiated and the uninitiated. I have had a number of *santeros* tell me that Yoruba is “a way of life,” not simply a religion or a practice. The theoretical lens of lived religion frames the ways that spiritual entities shape and guide quotidian life in ways beyond the imagination of non-practitioners. In a religious tradition that does not distinguish between sacred and profane, spiritual and material, lived religion allows for a detailed analysis of everyday embodied practices, religious mediation, and an intimate view into the making of a black Yoruba/*Lucumi* religious subjectivity. I rely on Meredith McGuire’s concept of religion-as-lived because as it enables me to take “an ethnographic approach that accounts for the motivations, experiences, complexities and ambiguities of everyday lives” (Schielke 2010, p. 3) of individual devotees. McGuire’s examination of how individuals live religiously through embodied devotion and material engagement challenges notions of doctrinal and popular religion in addition to blurring the line between materiality and spirituality. Her accounts render the more tactile manner in which spirituality is enacted in daily practice.

Lived religious theory allows one to examine how these devotees understand themselves in the world and how the religious world they make and therefore informs and guides their social

and political and economic everyday interactions is one which being is understood differently. It is only through actual everyday experience that one can grasp and thus render comprehensively the complexity of the African American *Lucumi* religious subjectivity. For those devotees who chose to remain in urban cosmopolitan areas, the history and reality of their lived religious experience was one that while marked by triumphs, spiritual, growth and development.

### *Religious Place and Space*

New York City is home to some of the larger communities of African Americans orisha devotees. These African Americans interact with and engage with the religious, social, cultural, and economic diversity that is inherent to urban living. The juxtaposition to that diversity makes them much more vulnerable to the dissonance, tension, and the abrasiveness of living in a society that does not respect, accept, or even acknowledge your religious way of life. The challenges this created in devotees' lives continually surfaced and emerged within my field research. The difficulties in performing certain rituals, using certain spaces, or obtaining essential ritual ingredients were all experienced by these devotees and were all acknowledged to simply be a part of the adversity of being orisha people in the city. Devotees face challenges that require creativity and ingenuity to overcome, and as a result they have become very resourceful and adept at improvisationally making sacred space.

The notion of geopolitical realities was a very central aspect of Brown's (2005) work on the Liverpool-born Black community in England. In her work, she demonstrated how central "place" is to racial identity in this community and how transnational diasporic exchanges with both Africans and African Americans were central to the identity formation of this particular community. I will build upon Brown's conceptualizations about "place" in order to highlight the

importance of New York City as having been the site of the significant social, political, cultural, and religious transformations that made possible the transnational diasporic exchange, which occurred in the '60s and '70s. These kinds of exchanges did not occur in Boston, Miami, or Washington D.C., but were possible in New York city due to the specific geopolitical forces that already existed in this dynamic city.

### **Methodology**

Over the course of my more than ten-year association with the African American *Lucumi* orisha community, I have attended initiation ceremonies, *bembes*,<sup>8</sup> *misas*, *cumpleaños* (annual priestly celebrations), and public *orisha* (deities) festivals and performances. As an *aleyo* in training for the priesthood, the Balogun calls upon me to aid him and be present for divination sessions, healing ceremonies, and sacrifices for individuals seeking his expert assistance. Prior to beginning my PhD in African and African American studies here at Harvard University, I underwent my first initiation into the *Lucumi* tradition with the Balogun. The field research for this dissertation was conducted initially in short one to three months stays in New York from 2009-2012, and then in 3 longer six-to-eight months-long stays in New York between 2012 and May 2014.

In addition to the participation and observation, I also conducted formal and semi-formal interviews with 13 African Americans elders, 31 junior African American priests, 5 Cuban priests, and 18 younger African American devotees who have not yet been initiated into the priesthood but who are still active members in the community. I have interviewed across the spectrum of age and ethnicity to gain a broader understanding of the changes that have occurred over time within the religious culture as well as to see how the younger generation of devotees

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<sup>8</sup> Ritual ceremonies where there is drumming and dancing for the orisha.

are thinking about and envisioning the future of their religious community. Between the dwindling number of Cuban devotees in New York City, and the increasing distance between the African American and remaining Cuban community, I have encountered fewer Cuban devotees in communal religious spaces.

The orisha community is a very social one, so I spoke with numerous devotees at community events in community centers, people's backyard or basement, on the beach, and sometimes over dinner and drinks. A few times, I was able to organize small all-female get-togethers in which we discussed topics that were relevant to our lives as female orisha devotees in New York City. These informal get-togethers yielded intimate narratives and perspectives that were extremely insightful in broadening my understanding of the joys, trials, and challenges that these young devotees faced, and continue to face, as they "become orisha people."

### Positionality

The imaginary divide between sacred and secular mirrors the imaginary one that anthropologists perceive exists between the 'native' or 'indigenous' anthropologist and the 'foreign' anthropologist. Another ongoing debate with which I will be in dialogue is that of the African American 'native anthropologist' who does fieldwork at 'home' that began with Zora Neale Hurston and continued with scholars such as St. Clair Drake, John Gwaltney, Delmos Jones, Sheila Walker and more recently even, J. Lorand Matory. Although there is now an increasing number of European descendant anthropologists who assert that "the production of difference 'at home' can 'illuminate contemporary articulations of power circulating both within and well beyond North America'" (Goode 2006), when the race of the anthropologist changes so does the content of the conversation. There is an assumption of ethnic homogeneity (Cox 2009), which

obliterates objectivity and analytical ability for black anthropologists but does not seem to cause any epistemological crises for white American anthropologists. The presumption here is that somehow by virtue of being of African descent and studying other African descendants that it gives you a deeper insight into your interlocutors or somehow facilitates all your interactions with them (Barrett 2009, pp. 211-214).

This notion of ‘insider’ is usually false as many African American anthropologists had either social, economic or political identities quite different than their interlocutors that were sometimes met with suspicion, life-threatening violence, or simple indifference. This binary also does not take into the account the interlocutors’ own powers of inclusion and exclusion, which is something that Graciela Hernández calls our attention to when discussing Hurston’s decision to use the subjective in her two ethnographies, *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*, thereby “destabilizing [her own (Hurston’s)] ethnographic authority” (1995, p. 151). The ethnographic gaze does not always guarantee authority or authorship. In my own case, undertaking this project with the religious advantage of being an ‘insider’ as an orisha devotee has facilitated some of my interactions with the community; but my ‘outsider’ status as a recent initiate did of course place certain restrictions on spaces into which I could enter. I was also deeply privileged by my status as the Balogun’s goddaughter. As an elder *santero*, he is a well-respected member of this community and a repository of knowledge and history. I was vouched for and was rarely ever treated with suspicion when I approached other devotees about conducting interviews, as I have witnessed with other scholars who solely join the community for research purposes. As the African American *Lucumi* community is not as large as it once was, the network of *santeros* and godchildren with whom I interacted were largely, but not entirely, individuals with whom the Balogun had religious kinship ties or close friendships. The largest benefit, however, was the

trust that was given to me by these devotees who would not have otherwise spoken to me in my role as an academic if they did not know of my deep love and appreciation for the ancestors and the orisha. I was fortunate to be invited into these devotees' homes and allowed to observe intimate private actions and moments in order to gain a deeper understanding of the processes through which these African American devotees cultivate and (re)create their religious subjectivity.

Throughout the dissertation, the reader will see that I shift between the use of 'I,' 'us,' 'we,' and 'you' or 'one.' As an ethnographer, I was in a complicated position of participating as much as I observed, and therefore, in many instances I am both narrator and interlocutor. As the Balogun repeated often, "This is a hands on religion," and "my hands" were always expected to lend assistance first and analyze later. The use of 'we' and 'us' denotes the communality of orisha devotion and shared experiences.

## **CONCLUSION**

### *Chapterization*

Chapter 1 examines the historical context of the inter-diasporan encounter between nascent African American orisha devotees and the Cuban *Lucumi* community that settled in New York City after the 1959 Cuban Revolution. These devotees, like the deity Ogun, opened the way and built the foundations upon which the African American *Lucumi* was created. Chapter 2 looks at how materiality is integral to the mediation between devotees and these spiritual entities, and how that manifests in everyday lived religious experience. Chapter 3 highlights the importance of community building within *Lucumi* devotion. From the smaller community of the *ile* to the larger body politic of orisha devotees in the New York metropolitan area, these religious co-

actors contribute to the shaping and formation of *Lucumi* religious subjectivity. Chapter 4 offers a close intimate examination of the process of cultivating an African American *Lucumi* subjectivity and the effect this has on all aspects of devotees lives, both interior and exterior. Chapter 5 delves into how these devotees have come to perceive, relate to and create religious place and space in New York City. Having to share this urban landscape with other religious and non-religious actors has proven to be extremely trying for devotees over the years, especially as the city's landscape has changed so dramatically even within the past 10-15 years. Devotees navigate obstacles and maneuver around geographical challenges to avoid religious taboos and to effectively complete religious tasks and rituals.

### Contributions

Orisha devotion, as with any other religion, is a mechanism by and through which these individuals make sense of their lives and everyday experiences. In this time period, I have been able to observe the lives of these devotees and have been surprised by the degree to which their religious lives are in constant tension with their larger environment. This dissertation provides a different perspective on orisha devotion that illuminates the difficulty of carving out space and place for alternative religious ways of life with a diverse urban setting. This dissertation also offers a different perspective about what constitutes African American Religion and religious experience. As it stands now, that moniker primarily refers to Christianity, specifically the Black church, and in small instances, African American Muslims. There needs to be an expansion of what the African American religious landscape looks like so it can include non-monotheistic and African-derived religious worship and experience. African American *Lucumi* devotees are religious actors who span both the studies of African American and African Diasporic religion.

African American spirituality is not confined to the church or the mosque so the terms we use and the manner in which it is represented can and should alter to include those whose worship falls decidedly outside of this purview. Expanding African American religious history to include the voices of those who have been marginalized is hopefully a task to which those of us working on African diasporic spirituality will continue to apply our energies and time.

## Chapter 1

### Uncompromising Blackness: History Lessons in Inter-African-diasporic Dialogue

I understand blackness as a contested terrain of memory, identity, culture, and politics, a historical arena in which different political projects, historical narratives, cultural logics, and self-designations are enunciated and debated.

- (Agustin Laó-Montes 2007, pp. 118-119)

but i have a daughter/la habana  
i have a son/guyana  
our twins  
santiago & brixton/cannot speak  
the same language  
yet we fight the same old men

-(Ntozake Shange 1983)

In Yoruba culture, and in most African cultures, before beginning any family or community event, any enterprise, or ceremony, one thanks the ancestors by invoking their names and acknowledging the sacrifices they have made in charting the way so that we, their descendants, can enjoy the fruits of their labor. In this chapter, I would like to thank both the deceased and living *santeros* (priestesses and priests)<sup>9</sup> who were the African American religiocultural pioneers for those of use who now live this way of life by highlighting the sacrifices they made to learn

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<sup>9</sup> From here forward, I will use the Spanish masculine plural *santeros* when referring to the group of both initiated priests and priestesses.

and chart the path for the existence of an African American *Lucumi* community in New York City.

Sometime in the mid-to-late '80s, I was asked to be an *ajubona*<sup>10</sup> for an *ocha* (initiation ceremony) out in Jersey, this African American brother was the *padrino* (godfather). So we were at the *ocha* and I was talking with this White Cuban—I mean he was White—and his goddaughter—she was a light-skinned *mulatta*—and she was making comments about African Americans, and her godfather stopped her and asked her, “Who are your friends?” She didn’t really answer him so he asked her, “Do you have any Black friends?” She hesitated then quietly answered, “Well, no.” Then he burst out, “You fucking *mulattos*!! You guys treated the Black Cubans worse in Cuba than the Whites did!” Shit, I couldn’t believe he’d just said that. I had to keep myself from laughing. Later that night, she and I sat up talking a bit and I could tell from our conversation that she had given some thought to what her godfather had said to her. Don’t you know the next morning we got up and I said good morning to her, she didn’t even reply. I found out later that her mother—the cunt—who was a *mulatta* also—a little bit darker than her—had told her not to speak to me because I was African American. Isn’t that a bitch?

The Balogun, the African American *santero* in whose *ile* I primarily conducted my ethnographic research, related this story to me one day as I was inquiring about the earlier days of African American adoption of the *Lucumi* way of life. His is just one of the many stories I have heard about the harsh discrimination that African Americans faced from the Cuban *Lucumi* community. Over the years, I have heard numerous stories about the difficulties encountered by African Americans in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, as they sought to assimilate into the Cuban *Lucumi* religious community in the New York/New Jersey area. Their transformative stories

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<sup>10</sup> Each initiate must have two priests to take them through the initiation ceremony. The main priest is the initiate’s godparent (teacher and guide in all spiritual and religious matters) and the second priest that is assisting is called an *ajubona*.

serve to provide insight into the history of interactions between two diasporic agents with two very different notions of “blackness,” and the “Africinity” inherent in orisha worship. The African American Black Power/Pan-African ideal encountered the Cuban exclusivist nationalist concept of “*cubanidad/cubanía*” (Cuban national pride based on a shared culture) (Ayorinde 2004), and a host of very tense and complex relations ensued. While they were discovering the African deities of their ancestors, they were simultaneously encountering the racism and ethnocentrism of some of the descendants of those Africans who had preserved it and brought it to the New World. Some of who were adamant about the fact that their religion was “Cuban,” and not “African” (Ayorinde 2004; Hucks 1998; Rodriguez-Mangual 2004), thereby creating an even further divide between these two communities. These encounters, interactions, and exchanges powerfully impacted and shaped the kind of religious subjectivity that these African American devotees would go on to cultivate and live.

In his work, *The Practice of Diaspora*, Brent Edwards Hayes reminds us that African diasporic encounters “as much as they allow new and unforeseen alliances and interventions on a global stage—they also are characterized by unavoidable misapprehensions and misreadings, persistent blindness and solipsisms, self-defeating and abortive collaborations, a failure to translate even a basic grammar of blackness” (2003, p. 5). Desires for Black collectivities have often had to face the sometimes strident reality of Black “misrecognitions” (p. 110). Discord and dissonance largely characterized the initial and many subsequent encounters between African American aspiring *santeros* and their future Cuban teachers. At the heart of this discord were political and racial questions about ownership and authority. Did White and mulatto Cubans feel threatened by African American attempts to locate this religious way of life definitively in an

African purview from which they felt excluded? African American elders felt that this was not a question but a foregone conclusion. Anthony, a senior priest of Elegba commented,

I don't recall ever hearing a clearly identifiable Black Cuban say that this was only a Cuban religion or that it wasn't African in its roots...Those White Cubans felt threatened. Not only by us but even by the other Afro-Cubans. Before Padrino (his Afro-Cuban godfather) came to New York, they were the only ones here. I mean Pancho Mora was White and he wasn't thrilled when he found out that African Americans were initiating into the religion. I was told that he said, "What? Blacks in the religion now? There goes the *ocha*." Can you believe that?...When Padrino came here, those White Cubans gave him hell, but that man knew his shit so they had to back the fuck up and pipe down.

The other African American elders all agreed that a change occurred within the *Lucumi* community in New York City when this Afro-Cuban priest emigrated to the United States in the early '70s. Although it didn't make the Cuban community embrace them with any more facility, it did lessen the instances of publicly stated derogatory comments at *ocha* functions.

The different conceptions of blackness held by African Americans and Cubans were, and to some extent continue to be, a large source of the tensions between these two groups of practitioners. Although both nations were "structured by specific, historicized racial hierarchies" (Farred 2006, p. 229), the historical and social contexts in which these two groups of African descendants were integrated into their respective post-slavery societies were very distinct. In this glimpse into the practice of *ocha* in New York-New Jersey in the 1980s, we see the meeting of two African diasporic communities who were unable, and are still unable, to build a sustained "bridge" or "linkage" out of which a larger geo-political<sup>11</sup> religious community could emerge due to their different ideologies of race and what constitutes 'Africanity.' Instead the divisive

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<sup>11</sup> I echo Laó-Montes' (2007) term because it refers to the geographical region of the Afro-Atlantic and encompasses all communities of African descent in the Americas.

nature of these interactions was the catalyst for the movement by a younger generation of African American devotees to “de-hispanicize” (Curry 1997) their religious devotion and turn their attention, and their American dollars, to African shores.

I focus on notions of “blackness” because racial identification and markers have been a source of tension between African Americans and Cubans (Ayorinde 2007; Clark 2007; Hucks 2012). I focus on “Africanity,” a belief that a concept, idea, or object contains an inherent Africanness, because African American practitioners, and some Cuban practitioners, describe the religion as “African”, and it is this claim to “Africanness” and the inherent implications of “origin” that endows the religion with its spiritual, social, and political salience for African Americans. In his latest project, *Africa of the Americas* (2008), anthropologist of the African diaspora, Stephan Palmié, challenges those writing on Afro-Atlantic religions to investigate the historical conjunctures out of which these different conceptions emerge. He enjoins us to adopt “a perspective that addresses “Africa” and “Africanity” as theoretical problems instead of ontological givens also ought to enable us to ask how and to what extent these terms have variously come to take on ethically, morally and politically salient meanings not only in the African Diaspora, but among individuals and groups located on the African continent itself” (p. 14). It behooves those of us who study African-derived religious devotion to conduct analytical investigation into the larger contexts and origins of the epistemological notions of blackness and Africanity that inform and influence the inter-diasporan religiocultural interactions and exchanges. My intention is to show how complex these constructions are and how they have shaped the ways in which these practitioners have interacted and how these conceptions are influencing transnational movements and religious revivals (Clarke 2007; Olupona 2008). In consideration of the larger African-diasporic dialogue, such an exploration will contribute by

providing a concrete example of a sustained and intimate interaction between two African-diasporic communities to aid us in understanding how the particularities and similarities of the varied experiences of African descendants in the New World are represented and negotiated.

### **Differing Historical Contexts of Constructing “Blackness”**

Albeit race is a social and ideologically-driven construction, it is still one whose salience and power has not waned since its inception, and it is still one in which many individuals, particularly African Americans, invest a great deal of their personal identity (Gordon 2007; Fanon 1967; Omi and Winant, 1994). As long as these socially constructed and still socially significant categories continue to illuminate how phenotypical differences “structure access to resources,” (Harrison 1995, p. 62), race will continue to remain a powerful tool of analysis and oppression. Understandings of blackness, however greatly differ depending on geographical locations due to the social, political and economic historical forces at work in that particular place and time. For African Americans, blackness was always constructed as the ‘other’ and in stark opposition to the White American normative (Gordon 2007; Gordon and Gordon 2005). The one-drop rule has made everyone from Charles Chesnut (who could have passed for White) to Harriet Tubman, and all shades in between simply identifiable as Black. The social and political climate of the United States both during and after slavery, left no doubt in any African American’s mind that s/he was the ‘other.’ It is hardly surprising that in a country where legalized segregation and regulatory measures against miscegenation were the norm, that it would in turn prompt an internalization and embracing of an uncompromising identity of blackness.

In Cuba, however, there were no laws against miscegenation, and no one-drop rule. Between the racial identifiers Black and White, there exist a large number of classificatory gradations that are measured on the basis of how much White blood an individual has. This is common in Cuba, and throughout many Latin American countries. From slavery to forced acceptance and cooperation during the revolutionary wars against Spain, followed by a return to exclusionary policies and great repression and persecution for manifestations of “Africanisms” to the national identity building project beginning in the late 1920s that produced the illusive policies of integrationism and *Cubanidad*, Cuba has always had a paradoxical relationship with its population of African descent, what political scientist Mark Q. Sawyer has termed “inclusionary discrimination” (2006, p. xx). The emphasis placed on the notion of *mestizaje* (racial mixture) instead of racial difference has resulted in more fluid, but often contradictory, notions of blackness than those that exist here in the United States.

Although this was the first encounter for many of these first African American *santeros* with Cubans, *Cubanidad*, and African-derived religious expressions, for some it was simply a new chapter in a story that dated back to at least the late 1800s and the time of Cuban anti-colonial exiles and their concentration in New York City. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century African Americans looked to Cuba as a model for what a society based on equality could potentially look like (Mirabal 2005). These African American intellectuals were aware of the significant role that Afro-Cubans were occupying in the Cuban revolutionary war to liberate themselves from Spanish control and closely monitored the movement’s leader, Jose Martí’s, discussion about how the new Cuba would be configured and what role Afro-Cubans would play in its future (Mirabal 2005, pp.190-193). These intellectuals interacted through political writings in each other’s Black newspapers, through letters sharing ideas on how to

achieve Black advancement and progress in their respective countries, and through organizations such as the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) (Guridy 2010). Martí was the first to call for a united Cuban nation of both the Black and the White and this idea that came to be known as *Cubanidad*, a distinctive national identity that was meant to celebrate Cuba's particular multicultural and multiracial composition. *Cubanidad* represented and acknowledged Afro-Cuban participation within the Cuban revolution and the subsequent nation-building project, however, much of that nation-building project emphasized the eventual civilization of the Afro-Cuban population through an erasure (abandoning) of Afro-Cuban religiocultural elements such as adherence to African-derived religious devotion. However, this identity belied racial difference in Cuba, and was not really open to directly addressing the concrete problems in society that barred Cubans of African descent from enjoying true social, political and economic equality. It was also no more open to embracing Afro-Cuban religious practices, a very definitive feature of Afro-Cuban culture and heritage, than the previous colonial government (de la Fuente 2001). The massacre of Afro-Cuban political activists in the 1912 "Race War" saw a drastic shift in the way that African American intellectuals and other African diasporic intellectuals, like Arthur Schomburg perceived the reality of Cuba's purported "rainbow society" or "raceless nationality" (Mirabal 2005, p. 190).

The 1920s in Cuba saw a shift in ideology in many different sectors of Cuban society: an emergence of young intellectuals dedicated to creating a nationalist identity, the inclusion of Afro-Cubans in labor unions and communist party rhetoric, the tentative acceptance of African-influenced music like the *comparsa* and the *son* in public performance spaces, which would later burgeon into the popular *Afrocubanismo* movement. Simultaneously, on the global scene, the

Harlem Renaissance was blossoming and changing the face of art, music and literature in the United States; and in Europe a strong interest in ‘Africanisms’ was sweeping the art, music and literary scene, particularly in Paris. The music and culture of Afro-Cubans were gaining social currency in Europe and this was a significant influence on the subsequent work of both Ortiz and Cabrera (who had been living in Paris at the time of Josephine Baker’s cultural emergence and Picasso’s African-influenced cubism (Rodriguez-Mangual 2004)). It is not accidental that the timing of Ortiz’ ideological transformation, and his push to “nationalize blackness” as part of the nationalizing project of Cuba in a process he labeled transculturation, coincided with this European “vogue.” Africanness was suddenly rendered acceptable and even “useful,” but within very White prescribed limits and boundaries. In the first stage of nation building immediately following the Revolution and the ousting of American occupational forces, White nationalists believed that with repression and rhetoric about national unity, certain cultural elements would simply fade away as Afro-Cubans progressed within Cuban society. The problem was that for Afro-Cubans there was little to no progress except for a few elites (Ayorinde 2007). The first folklorization of Afro-Cuban religious culture began because White nationalists realized that their attempts to obliterate this religious culture had failed. Elements such as myths, dance, and music were glorified and separated from their religious foundations (Ayorinde 2007, p. 155). The government was interested in fostering an ideal sense of national unity across all sectors of society, Black and White, rich and poor alike.

The next two decades, 1930s and 1940s would see the beginning of the cultural exchanges between Afro-Cuban and African American musical artists (Knauer, p. 1262). In his bibliography Dizzy Gillespie confirms the awareness that existed among both groups of musicians of the African religious roots of the music when he said “All of the Nanigo, the Santo,

The Ararra, all these different sects, the African things in Cuba, he knew, and he was as well versed (Gillespie 1979, p. 319 qtd. in Vega 2008, p. 329).<sup>12</sup> These were days when Afro-Cuban jazz as a separate genre of jazz came to fruition. One of my interlocutors, a senior priestess of Yemaya, attests to the presence of Afro-Cubans in Harlem from the 1940s onwards, particularly musicians. She met her Afro-Cuban musician husband when his family moved into her Harlem neighborhood in the late '50s. Marta Moreno Vega (1995, 2008) chronicles the numerous religiously-inspired musical events that these Afro-Cuban musicians were having, particularly in Harlem, in their homes or later in small clubs and even in the Palladium. This information begs the question, why didn't more of the native New York elders know about the religion to which this music was attached if there was so much public display of orisha music at this time? Many of them replied that they "felt that the music was African" but had no knowledge that it fit within a larger cosmological spiritual context. In addition, the language was still a barrier that made it difficult to engage the Cubans in conversation that might have revealed the cosmological connection.

Despite the fact that *cubanidad* and the appreciation of the equal contributions of both African and European culture to the construction of the Cuban identity is, in theory, a laudable national social project; the reality, however, was that only certain forms of Afro-Cuban culture, i.e., dance and musical composition and performance, were deemed acceptance by the White elite establishment. Any African-influenced cultural practice that could be "sanitized" and incorporated with European elements was passed off as "Cuban." Many African American practitioners find it hard to believe that any Cuban of African heritage could realistically take pride in this fallacious notion of racial equality. For African Americans, a Cuban mulatto is

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<sup>12</sup> One *santero* even told me that in an oral story that had circulated within his house, Dizzy Gillespie was said to have been initiated to the goddess Oya.

Black, whether or not she sees herself as such. In taking advantage of the Cuban conceptions of *mestizaje*, and identifying herself as *morena* (dark-haired women), *mulato adelantado* (elevated mulatto), or *indio* (Native American), she is, in their opinion, in denial of her African heritage and personally insulting other Black people. As one African American *santero* lamented, “Nobody wants to be Black.”

### **Post-Revolutionary Diasporic Encounters**

Beginning in the late 1950’s and continuing through the early ‘70s, a huge transition in political aspirations for people of color swept the globe. Ghana became Africa’s first independent nation in 1957. Fidel Castro successfully carried out the Cuban Revolution in 1959, bringing more of a semblance of equality to Cuban society, at least in the sectors of education and healthcare.

African American youth were agitating and protesting against the uncivil and unequal treatment of people of African descent here in the United States and all around the world. Their fervor was pushing them away from the older, slower and more careful machinations of the Civil Rights Movement, toward more fiery and dynamic movements such as Black Power and the Black Panther Party. These “spheres” of radical transnational political transformation were not simply interconnecting but were colliding and clashing and intruding on every aspect of these young African Americans’ lives on a daily basis. It is extremely important to highlight the conglomeration of geopolitical and historical factors—the combating of theories of biological racism by Melville Herskovits, the Civil Rights movement, the Cuban revolution, the Black Nationalist Movement, the Black Arts Cultural Movement, and the Anti-Colonial Movement in the Third World—that all contributed to creating an environment in which concepts and notions

of blackness and Africanity were at the forefront of African American social, political, and cultural identity.

Into this maelstrom of Black agitation arrived the second wave of post-Revolutionary Cuban emigrés with whom aspiring African American devotees would begin to make more serious and sustained religiocultural contact. The mid-60s to early '70s saw a significant increase in the Cuban population in the greater New York metropolitan area. This second wave was comprised of a more mixed group, both racially and economically from the first initial wave that was mostly elite White Cubans who had settled in Miami, hoping for a swift return to their homeland (Aja 2006; Pedraza 2004). Scholars of contemporary Cuban history and immigration attest to the fact that many Afro-Cubans settled in the northeast rather than in Miami to avoid American racism in the south, but also within the elite White Cuban enclave (Aja 2006; Knauer 2008; Mirabel 2010; Sawyer 2006s). From what the African American devotees tell me about the Cuban population with whom they interacted, they were a mixture of White Cubans, phenotypically Black Cubans and, others that although the African Americans considered them to be Afro-Cubans, these individuals self-identified predominantly as mulattos.

The context of the interactions between these diasporic groups changed drastically. Earlier in the '30s to the early '60s, it was a musical exchange between skilled musicians, creating and collaborating with one another. In some cases, such as with the musicians that Katherine Dunham brought over from Cuba (Vega 2008) or the musicians that Dizzy Gillespie invited to play with him, it was the African American opening the way for the Cuban musicians, and making space for them on their stages and within their musical spheres. However, in orisha devotion, the power dynamics of the exchange shifted and it was the Cuban *santero* who would open the way and make space (or not) for African Americans to enter into their religious spheres.

Some of the elders expressed resentment about the fact that while these “African American brothers were more than willing to give these Cuban brothers a play,” when the situation was reversed, the Cubans were ethnocentric and deliberately excluded African Americans from learning the ways of the orisha.

Many of these elder African American *santeros* were very active in a variety of Black political movements and organizations at the time. Some were, or had been members of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the NAACP youth group, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Black Panther Party, and the Black Arts Movement. The reason that many of these devotees had decided to pursue this religious way of life was because they were seeking new ways of socially, politically, economically and spiritually negotiating an identity in which their sense of self was not defined by or limited to racist perceptions of blackness and Africanness. This meant a total rejection of the most pervasive and deeply embedded beliefs and practices of the dominant White culture—its religion. In a time that was characterized by what Tracey E. Hucks has termed, an “Anglo-cultural and religious rejectionism” (Hucks 2008, p. 339), they sought to reclaim an African religiocultural identity. In his article on how the Black Arts Movement constituted an integral part of the Black social movements of the ‘60s and ‘70s, John Runcie emphasizes how “black culture was seen as a form of identity therapy which would liberate the Negro psychologically [and] erase the negative self-image so prevalent in the black community” (Runcie 1976, p. 187). From hairstyles to music to plays and short stories, political and social leaders advocated a “ ‘return’ to Africa philosophically and culturally” (Barbour 1968, 244). These devotees believed that a true ‘return’ to an African way of being could only transpire by adopting an African way of life, and that transformation could only begin with an African religious foundation. Anything short of embracing African traditional religious practice was

perceived to be a “cop-out.” Devotees sought to operate in a new faith system that they believed to be the faith system of their African ancestors. *Lucumi* religious devotion became a means by which they could create a space for Africa in a new configuration of an Africanized American subjectivity.

The invocation of “Africa” by these African Americans was also a way in which to remind themselves of their own humanity. It served as a reminder of a Black existence prior to slavery. At this point in African American history, in the midst of transforming how the United States government and society would treat and relate to them in the future, they were seeking to assert their humanity by laying claim to their human rights. In pursuit of this goal they suffered the indignities of being spit upon, having rocks thrown at them, fire hoses opened on them, being arrested and being called “nigger” in public spaces among many other atrocious heinous acts of oppression. Orisha devotion was restorative in that it helped to heal battered souls and spirits, and it shed light on another way to express and **live** humanity, one cultivated and expressed through an African religious system.

Such an assertion of Africanity though was perceived as a challenge to the authority and ownership of the religiocultural system of *Santería*, especially for the White and mulatto Cubans who could not (or would not) easily lay claims to an African ancestral past (Ayorinde 2007). In this religious tradition, knowledge is power and thusly the power rested with the Cubans because they possessed the knowledge of the orisha. The experience of an elder senior priest of Sango illustrates how these politics would manifest themselves in ethnically-mixed *iles*. He described how he was snubbed and viciously gossiped about behind his back as a newly initiated African American priest simply because his Afro-Cuban *padrino* had chosen to train him as an *oriaté* (master of ceremony) over the other Cuban priests in the house. He noted that it was his White

Cuban god brothers who were particularly hostile towards him. With knowledge comes power, and if the White Cuban *santeros* perceived a threat to their status as knowledge bearers because this African American priest would possibly surpass them in knowledge and therefore power, then it would explain the increased hostility towards the African American priest.

### **“You Could Just Feel We Weren’t Welcome”**

Devotees recall that their first contacts with *Lucumi* Cuban devotees was through a divinatory reading from either a *babalawo* (priest of Ifa divination system) or *caracolero* (diviner of the sixteen cowrie divination system, *dilogun*) in regards to a recent tragedy in their lives, e.g., the loss of loved ones or recurring serious illnesses. The rapid and radical transformation of their lives following the successful completion of prescribed *ebos* (offerings or sacrifices) lead many of them to return to visit these *santeros* or seek out other Cuban *santeros*, whose *iles* were known for their continual communal events such as *misas* (spiritual masses), *bembes* (drumming ceremony for the orisha) or *cumpleaños* (the celebration day of priestly initiation). Christopher Olliana or one of the other first generation of African American *santeros* served as the intermediaries to these encounters. In the *Lucumi* tradition of orisha devotion, one is identified with a spiritual group, a house or *ile*, usually lead by the priest or priestess who have the most years of initiation amongst the group. The *ile* is figurative in the sense that it is used to imply a familial kinship structure, and it is also literal, in the sense that the physical home of the head *santero*, the godparent, becomes the location where most significant ceremonies and rituals of the “family” take place. By virtue of the sacred presence of orisha, any space or place is transformed into a shrine (Brandon 1993; Clarke 1999). All the African American elders with whom I spoke describe initially feeling unwelcomed by the Cuban within the *iles*, even when

they arrived with a Cuban national. The Cubans all assumed that they did not speak Spanish, so they did not seek to initiate conversation with them or include them in ongoing conversations. Those African Americans that did not know Spanish, immediately sought to learn some as it severely limited their ability to understand and interact within the Cuban *ocha* community.

Almost instantly, they became aware of the contradictory nature of racial identification and association, especially as it informed the religious practice. They described hearing some Afro-Cubans (or rather self-identified mulattos who they still thought of as Afro-Cuban) describing the *ocha* as Cuban as opposed to specifically Afro-Cuban. They read this not as Cuban nationalism and the mapping of *cubanidad* onto all Cuban religious and cultural practice, but as people of African descent taking the Africanity out of what was clearly an African-derived religious practice. This is quite surprising considered that throughout its history in Cuba, these religious practices were always marked as African and therefore dangerous to the Cuban nation-building project until their performance proved useful in helping to, at least, visibly assert the ideal of Cuban *mestizaje* or *cubanía* (Ayorinde 2007). I surmise that this insistence on the *cubanidad* of *Lucumi* religious tradition was a strategy that the Cuban immigrants used to not only maintain a sense of being a distinctive immigrant community but also to stake a claim of ownership and reinforce a hierarchy of religious power with them squarely at the top.

Nancy Raquel Mirabel posits that “the multiple uses and articulations of race, was common among Afro-Cuban migrants who chose to operate within, and continually cultivate, the spaces ‘in-between’” (2005, p. 198). Afro-Cubans became adept at avoiding a certain kind of race talk so as not to place themselves outside of being identifiably Cuban, although their skin tone in the United States’ racial configuration would mark them as “Black.” Like most immigrants of African descent (Gordon 2007; Rogers 2001; Waters 1994, 1999), they

did not wish to be identified with African Americans because of the stigma associated with being African American. The fear is that this association would relegate them to the lowest stratum of the American racial, social, political, and economic hierarchy. Instead they chose to highlight and assert a Cuban identity that allowed them to hold on to what cultural capital they had within their immigrant Cuban communities.

As these African Americans made the decision to join Cuban houses and spend much of their time learning and “working the *ocha*”<sup>13</sup> among the Cubans, it is in these spaces where they experienced outright racism, and/or ethnocentric and linguistic prejudice. In my conversations with them, they identified tactics they watched mulatto and Black Cubans employ to aggressively assert their identities as *cubanos*. “They would speak Spanish louder than anyone else present. You could hear them as soon as you hit the door.” Anthony, an elder priest of Elegba described how he, and the other African Americans in the *ile*, were often linguistically marginalized specifically by darker Cubans who would enter a room with a mixed group of Cubans and African Americans speaking in English, and instead of joining in the conversation in English, s/he would immediately say something loud and culturally specific in Spanish so that the whole conversation then switched to Spanish, thereby effectively excluding the few present African Americans.

Some African American devotees had learned Spanish growing up in Harlem due to the growing population of Spanish-speaking immigrants that had been consistently moving into East Harlem—Cuban immigrants included—during this time period. These African American devotees were extra vigilant as they were more prone to understanding the insults. One elder priestess of Yemaya related a rather disturbing story about Cuban racism one night during a

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<sup>13</sup> Devotees often employ this functionalist language to discuss the ritual activities and ceremonies, which are performed with the orisha. Generally, when they use this term they are referring to ceremonies in which the orishas are ritually fed live animal sacrifices or full priestly initiations that take place over a number of days.

discussion at a *cumpleaños*. A White Cuban woman married to an Afro-Cuban priest inquired out loud in Spanish amongst a room of mixed company—Cuban and African American—whether or not it was possible to initiate a “nigger” into the Yemaya priesthood, and no Afro-Cuban person present uttered a sound. Her comment had been in reference to the newly initiated African American priestess of Yemaya who had just entered the *ile* with her African American godfather. The African American priestess spoke fluent Spanish, and before anyone knew it had flown across the room with her hands outstretched to choke the woman. As she advanced, she yelled at the White Cuban woman, “I’m gonna show you what a good nigger can do!” She recalls that her godfather dragged her out of there kicking and screaming, and that they argued from downtown all the way up to 125<sup>th</sup> Street. Her godfather was upset with her because as a *iyawo* (newly initiated santero), she was not supposed to curse, yell or fight, all three of which she had done that night. The priestess expressed regret that she had disrespected her orisha and sacred *iyawo* status by flying into such a rage, but every time she tells the story she always ends with, “I’d a choked that bitch to death if I’d a had the chance.” These discordant and negative inter-diasporan encounters have unforeseen spiritual consequences within these religious spaces. As a result of this incident, the priestess had to do an *ebo* to clean the negative energy and “cool” (calm) her head after this incident. During this time of *iyawoage*, the body and spirit of a devotee is very fragile and must be stringently guarded against any and all negative energy.

### **Cohesive Elements**

The notions of continuity, heritage, and genealogy are key concepts within Yoruba religious practice (the emphasis appears to be stronger in the New World because of the sense of loss and disconnection felt by the descendants of African slaves) because without the ancestors, or “those

who came before us,” no one would be here. This logic extends itself to the “spiritual family” which always consists immediately of the godparents, godchildren, and extendedly, the person who initiated the godfather and all the other individuals initiated by that person and so on and so forth. There is a spiritual lineage, to which respect is due. Language is one of the most tangible ways in which this respect manifests itself. Many of the “elders” use Spanish words to refer to individuals, e.g., *santero*, as well as for ceremonial objects, e.g., *cuchillo* (knife) and *jicara* (calabash). When I inquired about this, I was told that using Spanish words instead of English ones was a way of not only paying respect to Afro-Cuban godparents, but also invoking their spirits to lend greater spiritual strength to the ritual. As the progenitors of African American priests and priestesses, the Afro-Cubans are due the respect of ancestors. The lack of disrespect with which the younger generation of African American priests approach, interact with or completely ignore these spiritual forebearers deeply disturbs and disappoints the African American elder *santeros*. Although these elders suffered the most discrimination at the hands of racist Cuban devotees, they still hold dear the sacred Yoruba principle of gratitude. They are grateful and appreciative of the fact that they have “found their way back” to what they consider to be the pre-slavery religious tradition of their ancestors. More than a connection with their past, they have found a crucial way to transcend the spiritual, political, and sometimes economic burdens of an overtly oppressive racist White majority Christian society.

The house as a cohesive element in which the spiritual bonds that bind come to supercede, at times, even consanguineal bonds. While studies on the existence of a more pronounced communal value orientation amongst African Americans are not definitive (Bowman 1991; Cox et al., 1991; Warfield-Coppock 1995), for devotees the sense of a Black communalism is very real, borne of the struggle of people of African descent in the New World

to maintain their humanity and ultimately achieve equality. The ideal of the strength of communal bonds within the spiritual kinship family was one of the most attractive features for some of these early African American devotees. One elder, Albert, a priest of Obatala, shared a story of how he ultimately came to know that he was truly a part of his godfamily, although it was an unsettling experience. He was visiting Miami in the early '80s with his godfather and he was staying at a godbrother's home when he asked his Cuban hosts, both White and Afro-Cuban, about the possibility of visiting Liberty City—a well-known African American enclave—during his trip, and he was asked, “Why do you want to go there? That's where the Blacks live,” and when he reminded them that he too was African American, they laughingly informed him that “no, you are more Cuban now than American.” Although he understood that they were attempting to communicate that he had been accepted into the community, he still resented what he perceived to be their racist attitude because he recalled that he “didn't see them avoiding any White areas like that.” The priest found this discomfiting because although he had gained a modicum of respect within his house and he was no longer marginalized or gossiped about behind his back, he still did not like the feeling that he had been assimilated in such a manner that it erased of his own ethnic and national identity and all the sociopolitical and cultural trappings that it entailed. He said it reminded him of “all those discussions White people were having about the Negro problem and if you just get those Negros to act like us then they'd be okay.” The priest's remarks about the assimilation strategy that White conservatives and academics espoused as the solution to the Negro problem is quite apt in that his Cuban godfamily felt that through association with them somehow he had been stripped of his African American identity and had become just like them. Seemingly a necessary occurrence that would enable

them to accept his presence in what they considered to be “their *ile*,” and most likely “their religion.”

For some devotees, the racism and preference shown to Hispanics in their house was so terrible that they left the houses in which they had originally been made (initiated). Ruth, a senior priestess of Oya, who had been made in one of the largest Puerto Rican-led *iles*, ultimately left after ten years in which she had to:

suck it up and watch all the Latino godchildren’s problems get taken care of. They all got what they needed. Now everybody in the house spoke English but yet the teaching about the orisha, the *ebos* and throwing *obi* (divination with four pieces of coconut) were all in Spanish. I tried so hard to keep up but I always got lost and was so afraid that I would end up doing the wrong thing. When I tried to get one of my godbrothers to explain it to me in English, I would get the run around...I did complain to my godmother but she said what did I want her to do if the majority of the house spoke Spanish then it was only fair to do things in Spanish and didn’t I know that this was a Spanish religion when I joined. That’s when I broke and told her, “No actually I thought it was an African religion that was Yoruba!” I left the house after that because I knew that I would never get what I needed there and that she didn’t have my back.

As our conversation went on, she explained that’s why she had chosen an African American house for her son’s initiation. She felt that an African American priestess would be able to teach her son without all the hardships that she had endured, and he would learn that this was indeed an African way of life.

Ironically enough, her son’s godmother, Anne, a senior priestess of Oshun, had previously been in all-Black *ile* before coming to the Balogun’s *ile*. The priestess had chosen her initial *ile* because she had heard such horror stories about the treatment that Blacks were receiving in Cuban houses and she made a conscious choice to avoid such negative experiences.

However, the house she'd initially been a part of had not been well-managed and had gained such a negative reputation that neither the other African American nor Cuban devotees would allow any *santero* from that house, or any of their godchildren, to participate in any *ocha* ceremony. A mutual friend introduced her to the Balogun in order to help her leave her ill-reputed *ile*.

### **Culture is What Separates**

In 1922, Afro-Cuban lawyer Bernardo Ruiz Suarez wrote about the difference in “culture” between the Afro-Cuban and the African American. This “culture” amounted to the fact that African Americans had been excluded from the nation-building project in the United States, while Afro-Cubans had played key roles within the nation-building project and in the defining of what Cuban nationality represented and therefore were full citizens of their nation. Predicating his definition of culture on nationality and visibility, Suarez effectively dismisses and diminishes African Americans and their contributions to the American nation (Mirabal 2005).<sup>14</sup> What was astonishing for me was that 80 something years later, “culture” was still being used as one the ways in which contemporary Afro-Cuban devotees thought of themselves as distinctly different from African Americans. In conversations, when I pressed them to be more specific, I was usually given answers that related to family structure and how for Cubans “*familia es todo*” (family is everything), but they did not see that foundational principle reflected in the African American community here. In response to questions about racism in Cuba and here, I was given vague answers that amounted to the fact that “*el racismo de aqui no existe en Cuba*” (the kind of

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<sup>14</sup> It is odd that Suarez can be so easily dismissive when as a well-read man he must have been aware of the work and contributions of Frederick Douglas, Martin Delaney, Henry Highland Garnet, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman just to name a few of the most well-known Black Abolitionists, and the significant role they played in bringing about the abolition of slavery 21 years earlier than in Cuba.

racism here (in the US) does not exist in Cuba) and when I pointed out that dark-skinned Cubans cannot enter into certain establishments this was dismissed as a class issue and not one of race. One priestess, a dark-skinned woman, assured me that she was able to go wherever she wanted. I decided not to point out the facts that she returned to Cuba often with American money and that her husband's whiteness had to be considered as significant factors in her ability to enter into spaces that would probably otherwise be closed to her if she were to attempt to enter them on her own and with only *pesos*. The other two Afro-Cuban priestesses with whom I spoke about this issue at one of the Balogun's *cumpleaños* commented that to them everybody was the same and that they made no difference between Cubans and African Americans. I couldn't help take note though that when they arrived, they went to sit in a corner removed from the rest of the completely African American attendees and spoke with me only in Spanish. They stayed for only forty-five minutes and left without interacting with anyone else besides the Balogun and me. Although their words said one thing, their actions seemed to bring those words into question.

In Cuban society, what one finds is the "double dynamic" (Wade 1993) of "both pride in African-influenced culture and [yet] persistent racial bias and discriminatory policies" (Moore 1997, p. 15). This "double dynamic" was evident in the approach that many of these Cubans had towards *Lucumi* devotion. While they recognized that its origins were African, they still believed that as it had developed into its present-day form in Cuba over a period of more than 100 years it had become Cuban. This attitude even resulted in tensions and openly hostile relationships between some White Cuban *santeros* and Afro-Cuban *santeros*. The Balogun told us about the many vicious rumors that used to circulate about his Afro-Cuban godfather during the late '70s and early '80s, and when he asked his godfather the reason behind this attack, his godfather tapped his arm and in his broken English replied, "Because I Black."

The African American elders who initiated with and learned from the Cubans were looking to orisha worship as a means of forging a Pan-African alliance with the Afro-Cubans. They did see the religion as a “bridge” or at least a step towards constructing a geo-political movement “based on commensurable experiences of racial subordination and analogous repertoires of resistance, cultural expression, intellectual production, and political action” (Laó-Montes 2007, p. 119). But the manner in which these two groups perceive racial subordination is so disparate that it has become a contested ground instead of a given. For African American practitioners so steeped in the racial ideology of the one-drop rule there is no room for elasticity in racial identification. African American devotees, however, did not consider the strength of national discourse, ethnolinguistic pride, and the pull of immigrant solidarity.

Given the global currency of African American culture one has to wonder whether these African American devotees are in danger of being like the “Black Orientalists” whom Sherman Jackson criticizes in his work for exhibiting “the distinctive tendency among Blackamericans to stress their African heritage over all other aspects of their genetic makeup” and universalizing it in the process (2005: 118)? These devotees’ notion of “blackness” often finds itself critically, and even harshly, judging the perceived “blackness” or sense of “blackness” of other people of African descent without taking into careful consideration the realities of the sociocultural, historical, religious and political contexts of those individuals. When questioned, some of them are unaware of the specifics of the history of Cuba, and cannot imagine what it would be like to live in a society where everyday interactions between Blacks and Whites are not overtly colored with racist tensions. Their perceptions of the state of Cuban race relations were largely informed by their interactions with the Cuban emigrés within the *Lucumi* community, which in their opinion, only served to confirm the fallacy of the “rainbow democracy.”

## **Current Issues**

The links between the African American and Afro-Cuban communities of devotees become weaker and weaker every year. I have noticed over the past six years that not one has attended the yearly priestly celebration of the Balogun, and the few that are purposely invited have repeatedly failed to show up. The shame of the disintegration of this bridge lies in the fact that coalitions with the goal of achieving legal status<sup>7</sup> for priests, legal assurance for the observance of rights for devotees in the face of police and neighborly harassment, positive public relations with local societies, and sustainable businesses that serve the community. These problems are now currently facing the African American and Latinos communities of worshippers but without some sort of collaborative effort, small achievements are made by individual groups without benefit to all devotees. The younger generation of devotees is beginning to take on the responsibility of these concerns, and they are aware that the future will require a new way of interacting both within and without the community.

The most difficult problems in forging an alliance between African American practitioners and Afro-Cuban orisha devotees lies in the difficulty they have in transcending national and ethnolinguistic boundaries. The architects of such a movement will have to find ways to address these issues of disparate concepts of blackness and degrees of Africanity, and how they influence the politics of inter-diasporic exchanges. If African American *Lucumi* devotees are to take part in the community-building dialogues that are taking place in the Latino *Lucumi* community,<sup>15</sup> then they will have to find a way to negotiate these inter-diasporic

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<sup>15</sup> Ernest Picardo released a video of the signing of the *Lucumi* alliance that took place between him, as head of the Church of Babalú Ayé, and Manuel Erice, the president of Kola Ifa Miami (a Miami-based group of Cuban *babalawos*). There was no African American present to represent their community or have a say in a discussion in which they clearly have a stake.

differences and form stronger bonds with other African diasporic orisha communities so as not to be excluded from the planning and formation of religious organizations aimed at civically representing these religious agents.

*Lucumi* orisha devotion can be seen as a “diasporic resource” (Brown 2005, p. 50) to describe strategies, tactics, politics, or cultural elements diasporic agents will appropriate from other diasporic communities to help them to navigate in their own sociocultural and political environments and contexts. These early African American *santeros* employed this diasporic religiocultural system to help them (re)connect and (re)claim what they perceived to be a lost African past. The African diaspora is a particular space in which a high level of creativity and innovativeness was implicit in the survival tactics and strategies African diasporic agents employed to survive the dehumanizing experience of chattel slavery. Orisha devotion played a significant role as a site for maintaining humanity by cultivating ties to the ancestors and the gods brought from Africa as well as being a site of religiocultural resistance (Ayorinde 2004; Clark 2007). Sociocultural memories are maintained and passed on through religious rituals and ceremonies, and through this embodiment humanity is reaffirmed and maintained.

## **Conclusion**

Much of the tension between African Americans and Cubans, their spiritual genealogical forebears, has centered around the identification of the religion as “African” and the ethnocentric linguistic prejudice that many African Americans felt prevented them from learning ‘the secrets’ of the religion (Clarke 2004; Hucks 1998; Matory 1999). In attempting to understand the extent to which the multi-layered ethnic and national tensions which are manifesting themselves currently in Yoruba religious practice between some African Americans and Latinos, between

African Americans and Africans, I think it is necessary to investigate the historical and social contexts of these national communities, in order to see the disparate histories which have produced these disparate notions of “blackness,” “Africanity,” “authority” and “origin” that have contributed to the current tensions. An examination such as this one also serves as evidence to the fact that the nation-building project of *Cubanidad* did indeed permeate every stratum of Cuban society, unknowingly and indelibly.

This interaction between two African diasporic communities established through the linkage of orisha worship serves as a historical example of the kinds of “transdiasporic alliance” (2007, p. 136) for which Laó-Montes calls for in his stimulating article on the need for the incorporation of Afro-Latinidad into the larger discourse of African diaspora. One of the greatest barriers to this “alliance” or “constellation,” however, was, and is, the inability of these respective diasporas of orisha worshippers to transcend nationalist tendencies and embrace a greater geo-political movement. Orisha worship were moments of possible transcendence in more ways than one. At the same time practitioners were transcending body, space, and time (through possession), they could also have been transcending petty nationalistic boundaries to engage in diasporic community building. Unfortunately the ephemeral bridges built at those moments were not well maintained once the *ocha, cumpleaños*, ceremony, or ritual was over. I do not wish to imply that there were no strong relationships formed between the African American and the Afro-Cuban community, but in terms of a strong alliance in which these communities acted as a one political or even religious body never materialized despite the fact that both communities experienced racism and religious isolation in the United States.

The elders were very diligent about recounting these stories to us, the younger generation because they wanted us to understand and know: 1) the history of African Americans in *Lucumi*

orisha devotion; and 2) the price, the sacrifice, they had made to gain the knowledge that was being passed on to us and that we would hopefully pass on to the next generation. “We don’t want you all to suffer and go through the humiliation and suffering that we did. We took all of that shit from the Cubans so you wouldn’t have to. So make damn sure that you make the most of this (religious knowledge) and you appreciate it!” In forging an African American *Lucumi* subjectivity and in striving to respect the foundational tenets and theories of orisha devotion, the younger generation of African American *Lucumi* devotees must look to their past to inform their future. Just as their spiritual forebearers adapted orisha devotion from Africa to the New World, the next generation of devotees feels that they have the responsibility to continue to build upon the foundation that the elders have laid for them. As they continue to do so, it is worth taking note of the specificities and particularities that are integral to constructing and negotiating an African American *Lucumi* religious subjectivity within a cosmopolitan urban context.

## Chapter 2

### Power and Meaning of Materiality in African American *Lucumi* Devotion

–“Ogun is matter! Mama, he’s everywhere. The world couldn’t exist without our father.”  
- (the Balogun, Oct. 2008)

–In one way or another, championing materiality signals the need to pay urgent attention to a real, material world of objects and a texture of lived, embodied experience.  
- (Meyer and Houtman, 2012, pg. 4)

“Don’t just throw things away!” the Balogun yelled at me two years ago as we were cleaning the house for the annual celebration of his *cumpleaños* (the celebration of his priestly initiation). I had inadvertently thrown away what had just looked like a pile of crumpled up newspaper ready for the trash that had contained precious magnolia seeds that he had left to dry out on the counter. It was one of the many items that I had perceived to be a pile of junk in the corner on the counter in the far left side of the kitchen. There were empty pill bottles, delivery takeout sauce containers, numerous packets of plastic utensils, and empty padded envelopes. To my inexperienced eyes, it looked like a pile of junk waiting to be sorted and put in the appropriate recycling container or garbage can. As it turned out, the Balogun was saving these items to re-use somehow in his spiritual work. The adage, “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure” had never rung so true.

Since that day, I have become hyperaware of the ways in which *santeros* re-use and recycle objects. Over the years at some point, those of us in the *ile* have used glass and plastic cigar containers, empty Grey Poupon jars, rum bottles, Prego Italian sauce jars, plastic takeout sauce containers, plastic straws, etc. in some capacity to hold spiritual baths, poultices, powders,

*epo* (palm oil) or even pins. Old pots are re-used to boil baths, prepare herbs or serve as incense holders when it is time to spiritually and ritually clean the temple. It is impressive the myriad ways that I have seen the Balogun use recycled and repurposed objects. Although we continually complain about having to find space for these containers in the Balogun's basement, we understand the principle that most things can be re-used to serve a new and/or different purpose in this spiritual temple. Even though it is not explicitly expressed, the *santeros* and subsequently their godchildren, that I have come to know, resemble environmental conservationists. I have visited many a *santero*'s home and found piles of things that were being "saved" everywhere. Space is taken up with books, containers, and especially dishware (every year, godchildren must present two plates to their godparents' on their *cumpleaños*). Although it is never explicitly stated *santeros* do their part to conserve our natural world, which only makes logical sense when one recalls that devotees view orisha worship **as** nature worship. Justifiably, how can you worship nature and not seek to protect it from the damaging, dangerous behavior of consumerism and discard mentality that typifies our contemporary behavior? For me, this contrast is even more stark because of the urban environment of New York City where trash and garbage overflow in the streets on every corner, and consumerism is very prevalent all around us in the streets and even within our homes.

This does not mean that these African American devotees are not consummate consumers but they discard almost nothing without some thought about how to recycle and re-use the objects they purchased. What would normally be discarded now becomes a useful object to aid in spiritual matters or "work." In this way one can say that orisha worship is spiritual environmental conservation. Within the principles of orisha devotion one finds directives from the deities Oshun (goddess of sweet waters) and Ogun (god of war) to be efficient and not waste our

resources, while Elegba (god of crossroads) reminds us not “to shit in the road because you never know who will come after you in the road.”

The lives of these African American orisha devotees resembles a rich fabric carefully woven stitch by stitch with layers upon layers to carefully preserve balance in their inner spiritual and outer physical worlds. The multiple textures that overlap and overlay to make up the complete fabric of their lives is filled with multiple patterns that require different stitches. I argue that a close intimate analysis of these devotees’ lives will offer new insight into religious transformation and the mediatory exchange between spiritual entities and material bodies. I will examine these weaves, patterns and stitches to bring about a broader understanding of the lived religious experience and how it encompasses materiality to illuminate the importance of everyday actions that create, (re)produce, and maintain an African American Yoruba Lucumi subjectivity, particularly in NYC.

It is a subjectivity made through, sustained and cultivated by mediatory interaction, “intersubjective exchanges” (Orsi 2011, p. 9), between devotees and the eguns (blood ancestral spirits and spirit guides)<sup>16</sup> and the orisha (Yoruba deities). Constantly in flux and flow, their subjectivity is in tension with the larger society, and devotees feel the need to defend themselves against judgment, negatively inquisitive gazes, censure, and stigmatization. Their subjectivity is largely sustained through the faith that devotees place in these metaphysical entities and the dialogical reciprocal relationship they form with them. This interaction consists of daily mediation (exchange) in which they seek to communicate with divine and ancestral forces through embodied ritual actions. Mediation is accomplished through the deep engagement with

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<sup>16</sup> I use the term *egun* to broadly refer to both ancestral spirits and spirit guides because in devotees’ speech this term was used generally. From the context, one could discern to which specific type they were referring. *Egun* is both plural and singular in Yoruba language, but as devotees primarily speak English, within their dialogue they usually pluralize *egun* by adding an ‘s.’

forces and entities that manifest themselves in and through material “things” in many different ways. Devotees call upon the orisha or their ancestors to offer light, guidance and direction as they go about their daily lives. In this process of “generating a sense of an extraordinary and immediate presence” (Meyer 2012, p. 25), devotees seek to make the intangible tangible or to request tangible material assistance to improve their lives. The eguns and orishas serve as guideposts and light in the life of devotees, and devotees turn to them not only for spiritual and divine guidance but to help solve material problems in their everyday lives. Devotees make *ebos* (sacrifice or offerings) to receive assistance with getting a job, securing a bank loan, navigating legal matters, curing both non-fatal and fatal illnesses, and to harm others or seek revenge on others. The list of possible ebos is endless but the desire to have some aspect of their material world altered for the better is paramount. Devotees believe that “goodies” should be experienced in life, in this realm of the living, and not only in the afterlife, the realm of the dead.

This reciprocal dialogical relation demands as much from the devotee as it gives. Orisha devotion is an encompassing bodily sensorial experience that requires devotees to use all their senses—smell, touch, sight, taste, hearing, and the sixth sense, *ashe* (spiritual power, special talent, or energy).<sup>17</sup> In this highly material exchange, the bodies of devotees can become vessels for the orisha and/or the ancestors. Philosophers understand “ontology” to refer to concepts about the nature of existence and being that ultimately help shape our worldviews and perceptions. An ontological shift occurs as devotees come to understand that they can, and most likely will be, at some point objectified by the orisha and/or the ancestors. This is one of many subjective transformations that devotees will go through as they begin to cultivate relations with these entities,; usually first with the spirits of the dead (egun) and then with the life forces of the

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<sup>17</sup> In the parlance of the devotees, I realized that *ashe* could mean any of these three things depending upon the context.

orisha. These relationships are at once processual, reciprocal, and developmental (in the sense of their spiritual growth). Devotees will go through stages of spiritual growth as they seek to “gain more light” (seek enlightenment) from the ancestors and the orisha. As they seek to deepen their relationship with these entities, devotees also hope that the egun and the orisha develop and grow stronger in their ability to assist with matters on both the material and spiritual planes.

In this chapter, I will explore the path these African American orisha devotees navigate as they create a Black *Lucumi*/Yoruba religious subjectivity by mediating with metaphysical entities, often manifested in material objects, used in their daily lives. A focus on lived religion among orisha devotees allows me to examine the manners in which this way of life—while rewarding, enriching, and profoundly transformative—is simultaneously also contentious, isolating, and, at times, disruptive. This chapter will explore how devotees “make the sacred present in the world” (Meyer & Houtman, 2012, p. 17); how the weaving (mediation) of the material and the spiritual play a large part in illuminating their lived religious experiences; and how the embodied practices centered around these material “things” impact, influence, and structure the lives of these African Americans.

Materiality in some shape or another has always been a part of the manifestation of religious or spiritual practice in human history.<sup>18</sup> Many creation stories and stories that chronicle cultural beginnings involve some aspect of materiality, whether it be the golden chain that Obatala used to descend from the heavens or an ear of corn for the ancient Mayans. The spiritual forces recognize that a tangible presence is necessary to manifest themselves on our human physical plane.

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<sup>18</sup> Despite trends in religious studies of separating the transcendent from the material world. See Chua 2012, Espirito Santo 2013, Meyer et al., 2011, Morgan 2013.

In the lived religious experience of these African American devotees, materiality takes on multiple meanings and manifests in multiple forms: from discussing concretely what materials are necessary to conduct a ritual, perform a sacrifice or ceremony, to improving material conditions by means of religious mediation with divine icons or ancestral spirits made “present” (or manifest) through consecrated objects within shrines. The specific placement of an object can obfuscate a spiritual offering or sacrifice. Materials become vehicles through which negative energy is transferred when devotees perform cleansing *ebos* (sacrifice) to clean (spiritually remove negative energy from) their physical and spiritual auras with inanimate and animate objects (e.g., fruits, prepared cloths, or chickens), thereby transferring the negative energy to the object, which is then discarded in a prescribed location. The multiplicity of roles that material objects play in orisha devotion signals its centrality in the lives of devotees.

The material carries great significance for the orisha, in particular for the orisha Ogun, the god of war, physicians, and metal objects, among other spheres. Within Yoruba myth and within the sacred narratives of the divinatory corpus (*odus*), it is Ogun with his metal cutlass that cleared a path on earth for the other orisha to descend. When devotees consecrate and charge items with spiritual energy they are calling upon the energy of Ogun in that moment without even necessarily calling his name or uttering a prayer to him. Ogun **is** matter, and therefore materiality and tangible things are very important to him. As such, he is present in the transformation of regular objects into sacred material items or icons. Ogun is the one who transforms ideas into tangible material just as he does in his role as the blacksmith, when he changes raw materials into useful objects to aid in the progress of humans. Embedded within orisha devotion itself is a deep appreciation, understanding, and respect for materiality and religious material manifestation. Although devotees would not refer to it as theory, it is an emic

theoretical understanding of the intrinsic necessity for the material in orisha worship. Simply put, matter matters.

### **Lived Religious Mediation**

Orisha devotion is characterized by its propitiation of spiritual entities, the orisha and the egun; and adherence to the individual advice offered by these metaphysical entities primarily through dreams, *misas* (spiritual masses), and divination. Religious activity largely centers around the *ile*, the religious house, that consists of the godparent, his godchildren (individuals who have made an official religious commitment to that specific priest), and any newcomers seeking to be initiated into the house. The priest's godchildren may also be priests and priestesses and have their own godchildren who are also members of their immediate house and the larger house. Traditionally, after the passing of the elder godparent, divination indicates which most senior or best-trained godchild inherits the leadership of the house from his or her godparent. The journey to priesthood begins with the forging of a spiritual bond between a godparent and a potential godchild in a first-level initiation ceremony called "beads (*ilekes*) and warriors (*guerreros*)."<sup>19</sup> During this first initiation into the *Lucumi* tradition, every initiate receives her own set of deities, "the warriors," who protect, consult, and guide her. In the Yoruba pantheon, the deities Elegba (god of the crossroads), Ogun (god of war), Ochossi (god of the hunt), and Osun (guardian of the house and the protector of one's personal health) are referred to as "the warriors." Through divination prior to the beads and warriors ceremony, each orisha is tailored for an individual devotee's life journey. The orisha comes equipped with his or her associated tools, in addition to special tools to help the devotee better navigate her life path. The *ilekes* are made of glass beads

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<sup>19</sup> In the tradition of the Balogun's *Lucumi* lineage, this is one ceremony; but in other *iles*, these are two separate ceremonies. Most of the other African American devotees with whom I interacted had also only participated in one ceremony.

that correspond to the colors sacred to each individual orisha. For instance, Elegba's *ileke* traditionally consists of the colors red and black, but may sometimes have white in them. An initiate receives an *ileke* for each orisha that has been indicated for her through divination.<sup>20</sup> A devotee wears her *ilekes* for personal protection and/or to invoke the energy of a particular orisha.

The beads and warriors ceremony is a binding between a new devotee, the godparent, and that godparent's tutelary orisha. Within this ceremony, the devotee commits himself to the guidance of his godparent just as the godparent commits herself to the care for the spiritual growth, well-being, and protection of the godchild. The godchild is also making a commitment to honor and respect the other members of the house and to continue the traditions of that house. It is at this point that the newly initiated godchild becomes an *aleyó* (an orisha devotee who is not an initiated priestess/priest) and an *olorisha* (owner of orisha). Once made, this contract is not easily broken, especially because the orisha expect a devotee to honor their word and follow through on all commitments. Of course, there are times when tensions and problems arise between the godparent and godchild and a parting of ways is considered the best option. In this case, the godchild usually returns their warriors and *ilekes* to the godparent, and in doing so officially breaks the ties to that *ile*. Sometimes this can be because the godparent has wronged the godchild or the godchild has simply decided that this way of life is not for them.

This ceremony is similar to making *ocha* (becoming initiated), wherein *aleyos* are stripped of their old clothes, bathed in an herbal mixture prepared by the *oriaté* (officiating priest/master of spiritual ceremony and ritual), and then dressed in all white signaling a rebirth into a new "way of life," the path of an orisha devotee. The *aleyó* is referred to as *iyawó* (bride) and is treated like a newborn baby for a period of seven days. Within this time period, the *iyawó*

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<sup>20</sup> Not every initiate receives the same number of beads or even the same orisha beads.

does not prepare her own food (unless she lives alone and no godsister or godbrother can come to her residence to assist her), must eat sitting on her *estera* (a straw beach mat) on the floor, must sleep on a thin palette on the floor, must not watch TV, listen to the radio or look into any mirrors, and must wear all white (even down to underwear) for the entire seven-day period.

Instead, throughout these seven days the *iyawo* is supposed to spend time with her godparent learning about how to take care of the warriors, and most importantly, how to communicate with them in a weekly divination session. The newly initiated *aleyo* is expected to sit with them and begin to form a relationship with them through prayer and by using four pieces of coconut in the divinatory communication of *obi*, to divine answers to yes or no questions. Each warrior orisha has his own character, and it is up to the owner to discern it and learn the best way to communicate with the warriors in order that they aid, guide, and protect the owner in this life.

### **Lived Religion**

Heinz Streib, Astrid Dinter, and Kerstin Soderblom posit that “[T]he term ‘lived religion’ signifies a shift of focus in order to attend to the religiosity of individuals and groups as embedded in the contexts of [their] life-worlds” (Streib et al., 2008, p. x). This shift began in the early 1990s, when scholars sought to gain a different understanding of how religion functioned on a quotidian basis in the lives of religious practitioners. It was significant because it was a move away from viewing “religions” as doctrinal homogeneous practices that every practitioner experienced similarly. What could that look like? What could scholars learn about the sociality and culture of religion through using this new theoretical lens? Early major proponents of this theory, in particular David Hall, Robert Orsi, and Meredith McGuire, asserted the need for

attention to intimate personal religious experience. Most early work focused on how religious practitioners in major world religions lived their religiosity in unique ways. More recent work has begun to shift attention to other less mainstream religious traditions. Griffith and Savage in their innovative writing on lived religion and women in the African diaspora write that this “conceptual signpost” (2006, p. xvi) is most useful for its emphasis on how people navigated and negotiated relations of power and forged identities through their own religious practices. Their edited volume highlight the fact that through religious interpretations and actions, these women make meaning of their lives and their quotidian worlds.. I see my work as expanding this “rubric” to include the religious experiences of African American devotees of an African-derived religious tradition.

McGuire’s work on religion-as-lived experience emphasizes the need for closer examination of the embodied practices embedded in everyday religious praxis. Through religious mediation with material “things” and embodied practices (which can include making the transcendent physically present through bodily possession) orisha devotees construct their “life-worlds” in conjunction with metaphysical spiritual entities. The concept of “lived religion” gives religious studies scholars a new theoretical platform from which to analyze “thick contexts of intersubjective exchanges among humans and between humans and special others (gods, ghosts, angels, ancestors, and so on)” (Orsi 2011, p. 9).<sup>21</sup> In order to truly understand the religious lives of devotees, one must understand the significance of these “intersubjective exchanges” because these mediations order their lives, their living spaces, and their interactions within their social worlds.

In her inspiring work on the importance of materiality and religion, cultural anthropologist Birgit Meyer posits that by focusing on religious mediation, we can better

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<sup>21</sup> Also the basic perspective taken earlier in Palmié (2003), Matory (2005), and Brown (2008).

examine the materiality of religion and begin the process of shifting the discussion in religious studies away from abstract theoretical conceptions of religion toward more concretized religious realities. In her article “Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion,” Meyer (2012) puts forth a new way for understanding media: “Media, here, are not understood in the narrow, familiar sense of modern mass media, but in the broad sense of transmitters across gaps and limits” (p. 24).<sup>22</sup> The concept of “mediation,” when understood as transmission and communication, or more specifically as “any practice of communication that intermingles the body with the world around it such that modes of embodiment become the measure of what people claim to know or feel as true” (D. Morgan 2013, pg. 351),<sup>23</sup> opens up a new avenue for analyzing how religious individuals cross these “gaps and limits” to intimately engage with otherworldly entities.

Meyer, and her colleagues, Dick Houtman and David Morgan, have become leading scholars on exploring religious mediation and materiality. Their more recent works have sought to examine how taking “things,” as Meyer and Houtman refer to these sacred items, as a starting point for inquiry allows for “studying the processes through which the spiritual and the material—animation at work—are conjoined in religious forms” (2012, p. 16). Materiality occurs on multiple levels in orisha devotion. Here I focus on two specific areas: 1) that of the eguns and 2) that of the orisha. The sacred iconic representations serve as “instruments and mediators” (Espirito Santo 2013, pg. 38) between humans and the spiritual world of the ancestors and the deities. In the everyday lived experience of devotees, they invest time and energy (both

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<sup>22</sup> Meyer’s work echoes Brown’s earlier assertion about the “materialist history of the supernatural imagination” (2008, p. 5) in regards to the social and economic politics of power between the living and the dead on plantations in colonial Jamaica.

<sup>23</sup> Morgan acknowledges that “[t]he debt to phenomenology is obvious” (p. 351), and one can easily see especially given the primacy of place that experience is given in the theoretical of lived religion, that scholars have built upon certain aspects of phenomenology.

physical and spiritual), and money into the propitiation of consecrated material objects such as *otans* (rocks), cement-filled seashells or brain corals, etc. for the orisha. The eguns are equally demanding, if not more so in some cases, and will require items such as glasses, flowers, coffee, tobacco, alcohol, perfumes, fans, coins, or books to be used as tools on their religious altars. Devotees are involved in a process of constant mediation as they endeavor to make “the beyond” (Meyer and Houtman, 2012) present in ways that benefit and guide their everyday lives. Through embodied practices such as greasing their orisha with palm oil, lighting a candle or placing fresh coffee or tea on an egun shrine, they seek to connect with divine and spiritual forces that guide, structure, and shape their lives and their religious and sociocultural identities. Once consecrated, these objects become a sacred icon invested with the *ashe* of a particular orisha or egun. They become a way of materializing a specific aspect of the infinite forces that each orisha represents. In addition, these material objects and the mediatory processes associated with them are the focal points around which community is formed and maintained.

In general, material objects take on a whole new meaning as an orisha devotee. A rock that you find while running on the road one day could end up on an altar or as part of a shrine. Railroad nails (*clavos*) that have somehow been uprooted in the middle of the street may become part of your Ogun. As one devotee explained it, “It’s like once you have orisha in your life, you have to pay attention to all these things, right. You feel the pull of the energy towards something or you’ll trip over it and if you’re in tune with the energy of your orisha, I mean the universe really, then you won’t just dismiss it and be like, ‘whatever’.” Material objects acquire new and different meanings when viewed through the eyes of an orisha devotee. These material objects, although they may not undergo physical transformation, will undergo spiritual transformation before they are added to any shrine or altar.

The icons of Elegba, Ogun, Ochossi, and Osun that first-level initiates receive are made by the initiating priest and are comprised of materials considered sacred to that deity. For example, Elegba can be made out of a mixture of concrete, seashells, cowrie shells, or a brain coral. Once consecrated, these icons are seen as earthly extensions of these divine forces. The priest consecrates these items by “calling down” a part of the *ashe* of the specific deity to be made present in these material objects. However, devotees do not always believe that these forces reside in these sacred objects. Alex, the Balogun’s 28-year-old son, who has grown up in this religious way of life, explained to me one day, “Elegba doesn’t always live there. That’s why we have the *maracas*, the cowbell, Oshun’s gold bell, and the framboyan pod.<sup>24</sup> We call them when we need to communicate with them because they’re not always just hanging out there just waiting for us.”

Attending to the materiality of religion highlights how “the material world (things and their environment) may also be understood to be dynamic and changing, and to influence or—dare one suggest—direct human actions” (Daniels 2009, p. 167). Although Inge Daniels hesitates to say that these “things” or “objects” are capable of directing human actions, which is exactly what African American orisha devotees believe occurs. These sacred objects **do** direct human (re)actions and behavior, as well as social, political and economic engagements. Although once mere objects in the natural world, rocks, corals, conch shells, pods, and gourds become objects of worship, devotion, and guidance. Through the hands of consecrated priests, these once inanimate objects are given new life, and therefore become able to protect and assist devotees with the spiritual and material navigation of their quotidian lives.

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<sup>24</sup> These are sacred consecrated items used to summon the orisha before any rituals are performed in which they are involved.

## **Cultivating a Community of the Dead**

Before one can progress to the stage of the first initiation into the Yoruba religion in the *Lucumi* tradition, one should first have begun the process of cultivating a relationship with the dead.

Although a godparent will usually give some general instruction (and advice is often picked up from godsiblings or others within the community), this cultivation takes place in more private individual settings on a daily basis. Devotees are encouraged to create their own ritual spaces where they strive to communicate with these spirits through concentrated meditation in front of the tables they have carefully constructed. She must learn about how to set up an ancestral shrine and how to give light (literally and spiritually) to blood ancestors and the other spirit guides—all of whom have accompanied devotees on this particular reincarnation to help them better navigate the path and achieve the life goals that were set prior to birth. In the world of the spirits, there are different types of eguns. The first are direct blood ancestors, the second are eguns from former lives who have chosen to accompany a devotee's spirit on this journey to help them with some unfinished aspect of a former life or simply because they had formed an attachment to that spirit, and the third can be other spirits who have simply gravitated to the devotee to help them with the destiny that she has chosen for this life. The spirits vary in ethnicity, geographic locations, languages, and time periods, although for the most part even those with a different linguistic background still find some way to communicate their desires and message through images or dreams.

The particular type of ancestor worship that these devotees adhere to is unique to Latin America. It comes from the Christian-inspired practice of the *Espiritismo* (Kardec's Spiritist system)<sup>25</sup> and is characterized by the use of a *boveda* (Spiritist shrine), and *misas* (spiritual

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<sup>25</sup> Allan Kardec (Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail) was a French teacher and self-taught scientist who wrote the Spiritist books in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century based on the popularity of spiritual-tapping at the time. This practice was

masses) for honoring and connecting with the dead through spirit possession. In the case of the African American devotees in this *ile*, some instruction was given about how to begin constructing a *boveda*— the necessary “ingredients” were one glass of water, a cup of coffee, a glass of rum, possibly a white flower, a white candle, and a cigar.<sup>26</sup> This is usually the first introduction to the materiality of this religious devotion for both young and new devotees, and their initial experience of intersubjective exchange and dialogue with otherworldly entities. On the *boveda*, one usually finds a configuration of six glasses around one very large central glass. All these glasses are filled with water to provide clarity while the devotee prays. Offerings of coffee, tobacco, flowers and rum, or any liquor that might slake the thirst of the ancestors, are also placed on the table that is covered with a white cloth.<sup>27</sup> Two candles are lit to simultaneously provide a beacon to the eguns, to guide them to this spiritual space, and also to give them light to uplift them and aid in their development (the eguns’ ability to become spiritually stronger and therefore more able to easily communicate with the devotee). “They [*bovedas*] are places of communion and emotional bonding. But they are also organic and emergent ‘things,’ whose growth is tightly woven into the medium’s own growing sense of confidence, vision and spiritual presence, and whose direction may not be fully determinable.” (Espirito Santo 2013, pg. 50). Through continued use of prayer and meditation, the table becomes a spiritual nexus where the devotee goes to call, work with, and propitiate their ancestors and spirit guides.

I recall the instructions I received when I was instructed on how to set up a *boveda* table.

“Once you have your glass and your liquor, some kind of white flower, a cup of coffee and a

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brought to the New World by elite Spanish colonialists and found a strong following among the Creole slaves. Christian prayers are read from one of his books during *misas*.

<sup>26</sup> This is the initial advice given to anyone constructing a *boveda* for the first time. The idea is that it’s better to start small.

<sup>27</sup> For this reason, it also often referred to as the “white table.”

penny (Sabbath) candle, you sit there and look into the glass of water and try to clear your head and let your inner eye help you to see what spirits appear in the water. It may take a while but you sit there as long as you can and as often as you can until you see something or you begin to get a sense of the spirits who walk with you.” Other devotees in the house offered advice and shared their own experiences of beginning to “work” with their eguns. Devotees use the term “work” to signify that effort and energy is required in order to establish and maintain communication with these spiritual entities.

One devotee described how at first she just kept seeing two eyes that would simply stare back at her and she just kept pushing herself to see until the egun revealed his entire face. Another devotee described hearing the words, “doll” repeated over and over when he initially sat at his table. Yet another devotee said that she continually smelled curry whenever she sat at her table. Devotees describe an array of sensorial experiences that marked their initial and continuing mediation with their eguns. Once acknowledged the spirits begin to make demands for material goods that they either liked in life or are requesting for use in helping devotees improve some aspect of their lives. In an interview, another female devotee shared how she came to own an array of different perfumes:

So one of my eguns wants me to have seven different perfumes so that I can alternate on different days and have different scents for different things, like she may want me to wear a different scent when I’m going for a job interview than when I’m going out for dinner or drinks. Some of the scents are to entice others while some are meant to help me radiate confidence and serenity. Hey, it’s expensive but if it’s gonna help me get that job or that man, I am more than willing to spend the money.

Through the purchasing of material items for the ancestral spirits, devotees are not merely providing their egun with wanted items, but they are also acknowledging that they are in tune

with this particular spirit, showing that they respect the spirit and that they possess a willingness to build a relationship with the spirit that will prove mutually beneficial.. In many instances, these spirits need to do this work of mediation with humans in order to fulfill their own spiritual destinies or in order to become stronger in the spiritual plane. Just as many mediums will tell you that they “must serve the spirits,” many spirits must also serve those of us on the human material plane.

### **Sensational Forms that Bond**

In her inaugural lecture at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam “”Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion,” Birgit Meyer coined the term “sensational forms” to describe the fixed modes through which religious agents seek to communicate with the transcendental, “offering structures of repetition to create and sustain links between believers in the context of particular religious regimes” (Meyer 2013, p. 315). These sensational forms “are relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking, and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between religious practitioners in the context of particular religious organizations. Sensational forms are transmitted and shared, they involve religious practitioners in particular practices of worship and play a central role in forming religious subjects” (Meyer 2009, p. 9). In very specifically structured rituals and ceremonies for the eguns and the orisha, devotees use immaterial semiotic forms to bring about immediate presence and, at times and in prescribed spaces, possession (Boylston 2013). Thus, sensational forms are necessary vehicles by which to conjoin the material with the immaterial (Chua 2012).

Meyer's use of the word repetition is apropos here because it is only through repetitive mediation with the ancestors that devotees come to know them, hear them, and learn how to best "work" with them. These sensational forms are invoked daily in personal private spaces (*bovedas*) and also in *misas*, more public community-oriented ritual spaces. As a spiritual nexus, the *boveda* is also the place where devotees spiritually cleanse their aura through use of scented perfumes or colognes, although tobacco and rum can be used as well. At home, devotees learn to use Pompeia or another perfume or cologne indicated by their *eguns*, to spiritually cleanse themselves by rubbing it on the back of the neck and over the rest of their bodies and then "throwing it off" by flicking their hands over their table to pass the negativity to the *eguns* in order to cleanse their physical bodies and their spirit of any negative energy, or negative *eguns*, that may have been picked up while moving about in the larger outside environment. Pompeia is a French-manufactured perfume that was easily available in Cuba, and whose use has simply been passed on from the Cuban *Lucumi* community to the African Americans who were members of Cuban *iles*.<sup>28</sup>

Pompeia was the scent recommended to me and other novices when we were first instructed about how to set up a *boveda*. A young woman, whom I used to see often at the *ile*, informed me of the importance of using this scent but could not explain why this particular scent beyond the fact that it seemed to be a general scent that all *eguns* recognized.

I don't know. That's what we've always used. Especially in the *misas*. Whoever's running the *misa* always requests that scent even if there are others available. A lot of people use Florida water but that's okay (she makes a dismissive noise and hand gesture), Pompeia is stronger. The

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<sup>28</sup> Pompeia was a popular scent among the French elite in the early 20th century created by a prestigious perfume house L.V. Pivers. One could speculate as to the many reasons why the scent became such a standard scent in *Espiritismo* and subsequently, *Santería*. One reason might be its association with wealth and prosperity. Another may be the fact that the main scents jasmine, rose and ylang-ylang are believed to have strong spiritual properties to revitalize and refreshen the spirit. It could also simply be that at the time *Espiritismo* was growing, France had dumped its excess of this perfume into the Spanish American market (Morgan 1978, pg. 322).

eguns recognize and like the scent so they are able to sense you through the smell. As you develop, they may request other specific scents that work better for them and that may make it easier for them to find and identify you when they're around.

Olfactory senses play a large part in ancestral devotion. The ability to attract or repel or even be able to track an egun or devotee by smell becomes a key way of mediating with these spirits. This sense appears to be the one most commonly appealed to in regards to the eguns and even to the kinds of *ebos* (sacrifices) that they require. Over the years, I have seen how this particular sensational form has played a key role in devotees' cultivation of a community of the dead, and in the more public ceremonial *misas*.

On altars carefully constructed usually found in a corner space in their homes, under sinks in the bathroom, or in basements if they have one, devotees light white candles, give the eguns smoke by placing the lit end of the cigar in their mouth and blowing smoke over their altars, provide refreshment, and whatever other objects are requested. These smells, gestures, and objects are signs that are believed to be universally recognizable to those who inhabit the ancestral plane and I have indeed seen them employed on altars in homes of both African American and Latino devotees. Even amongst devotees who describe themselves as followers of the "authentically African" orisha devotion, whose altars are primarily on the floor and devoid of flowers and coffee, I have noted that they still give the ancestors rum and tobacco in some form. Tobacco is significant for two reasons: 1) it pays respect to the Native American ancestral spirits that inhabited the land of the New World before European invasion; and 2) the sacred rises

upwards carrying devotees' prayers to Olodumare (the Supreme Being). In this way, it serves as a vehicle for prayers.<sup>29</sup>

The use of tobacco, rum, flowers, and coffee are all very much associated with New World slavery. By using and giving these products to their eguns in devotion, devotees acknowledge their slave heritage and the value of their ancestors' labor. African American devotees continue to use these sensational forms because tobacco was precious and used spiritually in many non-European traditions; and coffee and sugar is a way of showing honor and respect to their ancestral Cuban religious kin. Additionally, these are two stimulants that devotees believe keep the eguns "awake" to ensure that they can be ready at a moment's notice to assist them. Many African American devotees also place actual cotton flower and leaves on their spiritual altars to represent the cotton their enslaved ancestors picked and to honor the value of that labor. I have also seen framed spirituals and/or African American mammy dolls.<sup>30</sup>

The *boveda*, or the white table, as it is sometimes referred to, is European in origin. Within Latin American middle-class, spiritual séances became extremely popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly as a vehicle to resist the strong doctrinal and social power of the Catholic church (Roman 2007). Viewed within the public gaze as scientific and structured, it was in sharp contrast to the untamed and often raucous spiritual rituals associated with Afro-Cuban religious practice (Bermúdez 1968; Palmié 2002; Roman 2007). It is not clearly documented in the research and social history conducted on Afro-Cuban *Lucumi* or simply *Espiritismo* in Cuba why and how this way of communicating and engaging/mediating with the ancestors became

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<sup>29</sup> Most Native American cultures used tobacco "as a sacred and powerful substance" in their spiritual ceremonies and prayers. Most used it to enter in trance and communicate with their ancestors and deities, while others used it for its healing properties (Winter 2000, pp. 9-59).

<sup>30</sup> In African American history mammy dolls have a contentious social history but for the eguns this was their reality and some of them will request these kinds of representations that seem wholly problematic to us as contemporary individuals.

absorbed into *Lucumi* religious devotion. Some speculate that it was due to the decline of egungun<sup>31</sup> practice among Afro-Cubans as the number of African-born devotees declined and the direct ancestral connection that is believed necessary to perform egungun was no longer present, *santeros* saw *Espiritismo* as an alternative way to mediate with their ancestors (Canizares 1993). Once, however, incorporated into *Lucumi* worship, it has become a fundamental element and is varyingly adapted by individual devotees. African American devotees have continued to adapt this ancestral mediation to suit their spiritual and environmental needs as they have come to propitiate their ancestors in this manner. For instance, some individuals initiated into the *Lucumi* tradition will still have an egun shrine on the floor and not on a table. And at times you will see bush and leaves placed next to the glass on the floor, but you will not see white flowers. I have found though that many who do use the *boveda* are unaware of the **specific** history of the practice. They are aware that it is European in origin, but have continued to employ it mostly because it is what they have been taught and they feel as if it is a useful mediatory tool for them because they know that they are of mixed racial and social ancestral heritages that can be easily accessed through the use of this spiritual technology, the *boveda*. It is another concrete link in the chain of embodied religious memory (Hervieu-Leger 2000).

The lack of questioning is not due to a lack of the ability and/or desire to critically analyze the spiritual technologies of their religious devotion, but rather due to the inability to see the necessity to transform this technology when it has been successfully working for these African American *Lucumi* devotees for many years. In their lived everyday experience, it doesn't matter that *Espiritismo* was European created and in *misas*, the Bible plays a prominent role, what matters is that it "works," and is effective. Devotees often say that if you have an egun that

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<sup>31</sup> Ancestral masquerades and festivals in Yorubaland were referred to as *egungun*. These masquerades were only seen at particular times a year and each one usually belonged to a specific lineage clan within a village or town.

doesn't work then you get rid of it, because if they are receiving food, booze, and other goodies then the eguns have to do their part. Religious effectiveness is gauged by whether or not the eguns successfully accomplish the tasks to which they have been set, and whether the eguns protect you from harm, ill wishes, etc. Devotees are aware of their own mixed heritages, and the transformations and adaptations in spiritual technologies that this necessitates. Anne, an elder priestess of Oshun, and my godsister, offered an explanation that help to further clarify:

We in the New World just aren't all completely African. We don't live in a compound where our ancestors are buried right there [points to the floor]. We don't have unbroken lines of ancestry that we can easily trace or have sung to us in a praise song. Although the white table is more European, it works and it's accessible by different spirits, even the African ones. No, most of them don't want to go on the table and will tell you to put things down for them on the floor but they can still communicate through the glasses of water on the table."

Even within the *ile*, there were many individuals—including the Balogun—who really didn't care for *misas* because of the prominence of Christianity and because of the fact that while some kinds of eguns will work from the table, many African-born eguns will not. He often said that he himself never really liked *misas* because they were about working with others' spirits and not with "our own." By using the term "our own," he was referring to the African spirit guides that he knew walked with him and also with his children who could not be mediated with through this spiritual technology that was framed and situated in New World spiritual politics and did not appeal to or "work" for African-born entities. "They don't go to the table," he used to say, "You certainly don't start with saying no Lord's Prayer."

The manner in which these African American devotees approach their ancestral worship is reflective of their varied and complicated New World African diasporic identity. While, on one hand they eschew Christian elements in their devotion, they still employ the spiritual

technology of the white table because they feel that is more reflective of the social and spiritual realities of being African descendants in the New World, where more than likely they are the issue of mixed racial and ancestral lines. Each individual or ancestral line comes with its own set of ancestral spirits thus the possibility of having a wider number of spiritual guides is much more common and highly probable. Many devotees have Scottish, Irish, English, Russian, or Nordic ancestors and believe that the white table is more accessible for non-African eguns than simply having a glass of water on the floor. For these devotees, it seems that the space of the table itself is desirable as it can be expanded, shortened, or raised if necessary to accommodate not only newer additions, but different spaces and environments. The increased flexibility that comes with using the *boveda* therefore raises its attractiveness for these African American devotees; and as a spiritual technology, it more adequately reflects the sociocultural and historical reality of their New World African diasporic existence.

These devotees also use the *boveda* as a way of showing respect to their *Lucumi* Cuban roots, of reinforcing the links in the chain of religious memory. By continuing to reproduce this method of ancestral mediation, they are also propitiating the ancestors in their religious lineage.

### **Ontological (Re)Orientation**

One young male devotee recounted how he decided he wanted to go visit an ex-girlfriend one evening when his current girlfriend was out of town. He and the ex-girlfriend were friends and they were used to occasionally visiting each other before he and his current girlfriend had moved in together. Although he had never discussed it with his current girlfriend, he knew that it would bother her. He thought what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her. From the minute he tried to leave his house, he encountered problems. First, he had trouble starting his motorcycle, which he

found strange because it was new. Then he kept having this feeling that he was being followed. At the ex-girlfriend's house things kept spilling on him, and his feeling of being watched intensified. Finally, he decided to leave, but when he got to the place where he'd parked his motorcycle, he found it lying on its side on the ground. What was even more disturbing were the three spirits he saw standing on his bike: They were his current girlfriend's deceased grandparents. He picked up his bike and, immediately upon returning home, called his girlfriend to let her know where he had been and what had happened to him. He asked her if she had "set [her] eguns to spy on him." She swore she had not, and he came to the conclusion that although he had told his girlfriend that he was a polygamous man, her ancestors either objected to his disposition or objected to his choice of spending his time with that particular ex-girlfriend.

Devotees find that as they allow the spirits to speak to them or at least open themselves up to the messages the eguns wish to convey that their lives and their ontological understanding of themselves begin to change drastically. Devotees begin to see their world and the manner in which they will journey through this "new" world very differently; immediate desires and individual will are no longer the driving engines or the only motivating factors that assist devotees in ordering and structuring their "worlds." According to my interlocutors, these solitary spiritual exertions in which they mediated with their personal eguns at the *boveda* were much more instrumental in their cultivation of a *Lucumi* religious subjectivity than attending and participating in *misas*.<sup>32</sup> Many mentioned how some eguns would insist on certain modes of grooming, dress, or even comportment. One devotee, Shannon, a 32-year-old African American woman who had been on the path to becoming a Rastafarian before she chose to become an

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<sup>32</sup> This was largely due in part though to the fact that there simply weren't that many *misas* held within the *ile*, and devotees did not feel comfortable attending *misas* outside of the community of their *ile* for fear of misinformation or even worse—the theft of a powerful *egun*, literally taking the spirit away from an individual. Unfortunately, this has been known to happen in the community, and therefore this wariness was very well warranted.

orisha devotee, recounts that among the first things one of her eguns communicated to her was a command for to take better care of her dread locs. She had been letting them just grow without really twisting them or even separating them when two would begin to grow together. This egun had been a well-groomed lady and she wished to see Shannon looking—what they egun perceived to be—more “feminine.” She began to do her nails regularly and to wear gold jewelry from the culture or ethnic group of that particular egun. When I inquired about her feelings on the matter, she replied, that at first it felt strange because she had subscribed to the Rastafarian aesthetic that championed naturalness, which included not using any makeup or any products that contained chemicals.

You think that’s only a societal concern or you don’t want to seem like you’ve been co-opted by popular gender norms, but then you get this egun telling you that you now have to do these things if you want to receive blessings from her. I resisted at first because I was like, I want to be natural and not feeling like I’m subscribing to Western norms of beauty. I mean, my hair is my hair, right? But then I saw that as I did these things opportunities started opening up for me, I got this promotion at my job that I didn’t even realize that I was being considered for. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, how you look and how you present yourself outwards really makes a difference. I also realized that I could find nail polish that was made free of chemicals and with a lot of natural ingredients so I wasn’t adding chemicals to my body just to look good, you know....Then it was confirmed for me at a *cumpleaños* when I was talking to this priestess and she was telling me that the egun was telling her how pleased she [the egun] was with me and how she would continue to bless me. She even described her.

In our modern Western society, the average person believes they have a great deal of control over their own life, and its destiny. If you look at daily TV shows, read a lifestyle magazine or even the ads on the bus, you are told constantly that you have control over your life

because you have the freedom of choice (Markus and Schwartz, 2010). “Your destiny is in your hands” other similar messages can be found on coffee mugs, T-shirts, the cover of self-help books, and all over the Internet. In our intellectual traditions, there exists an inherent trust in the rationality and logic as the building blocks of any civilization.

Personal freedom most aptly represented in freedom of choice is an intrinsic American value (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The ability to do what you want to do, when you want to do it is seen as a basic inherent right that democratic governance ensures. “It’s a free country” is a quintessential American motto. When one begins the process of becoming an orisha devotee, one quickly learns that this Eurocentric Western way of thinking is not necessarily true.<sup>33</sup> In the oral traditions of Yoruba/*Lucumi* thought, an individual’s *ori* determines her destiny with Olofi<sup>34</sup> before the spirit crosses the river of forgetfulness to the realm of the living. It then becomes the individual’s duty to recall what destiny and goals her spirit contracted with Olofi. The eguns and the orisha that accompany an individual on the life journey serve as guideposts to help her remember and achieve this goal. While an individual’s destiny was decided by her, and therefore one can say was “in her hands,” once she crosses over to the realm of the living, it is her spirit guides and the orisha who really know her destiny and are tasked with helping her to remember it.

Devotees, however, arrive at a new understanding of personal freedom and choice through their daily mediations with the eguns and the orisha. Devotees come to realize that everything has its limits, and its price. Within the limits of his *ori* (head, destiny), which a devotee sets in the destiny contract made with Olofi, an individual can do what he wants to do

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<sup>33</sup> Recent research has found that previous research on the universality of the ideal of personal freedom and choice actually applied only to middle-class, college-educated Americans. When studies were conducted in other parts of the globe, the results were drastically different (Markus and Schwartz, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Olofi is one of the praise names for Olodumare. It is used more often in everyday discourse.

(Abiodun 1975, 1987; Drewal et al., 1989). His tutelary orisha and eguns are committed to holding him to that destiny. This may seem as if they are his police, and in some instances they are; however, the eguns and the orisha do not always force a devotee to do what is best for him. Once they have issued a warning, some eguns and orisha will not warn a devotee again and/or they will not take measures to prevent him from performing those actions. These entities do acknowledge the will of the individual in ultimately making the decisions that will bring about positive or negative consequences.

Once the cultivation of a deeply spiritual mediation begins, individuals sometimes learn that past decisions that they have made on their life journey were all wrong. As devotees grow spiritually and develop a stronger relationship with their spirit guides and the orisha, they slowly begin to realize the power that these spirits possess to help them in this world, and the deep level of engagement that will occur with these spirits. When an individual asks for light, the eguns respond with advice. However, when he cannot (or will not) hear them, they can sometimes resort to more drastic measures.

A priestess related how she had wanted desperately to move to Texas and had consulted her orisha who gave their blessings and so she began to contact real estate agents to look into buying a house. One day at a *misa*, her main egun came down (possessed her) and told her that if she moved to Texas, she [the egun] would make sure she would get sick and waste away. The egun was “pissed” that she had not been immediately consulted because then she would have informed her horse<sup>35</sup> that moving to Texas was not the best thing for the priestess at that moment. Other devotees I interviewed related many experiences about having problematic

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<sup>35</sup> This terminology is used to describe individuals when they are possessed by these spiritual entities. The connotation is that the individual is being ridden by the spirit and is thus a carrier. This is one example of how a devotee’s body becomes objectified within orisha devotion. This discussion will be taken up and further elaborated upon in the next chapter.

encounters with their eguns or orisha about something they had decided to do or something they wanted to do, or someone they wanted to be with. They tell stories of being locked inside their homes, stuck on a train in a tunnel for hours, having their car stolen, being robbed, and numerous other debilitating, humiliating, and difficult situations that each one attributed to their not having listened or paid sufficient attention to a spiritual warning, or as the Balogun would call it “getting spanked by egun (or orisha).”

### **Conclusion**

It takes time and energy to cultivate these relationships and to arrive at the point where advice and warnings can be easily heard and accepted. In my research, I have seen how it is harder for some while easier for others (like Shannon with her perfumes) to accept this ontological shift in light of one’s limitations on this plane.

All of these events were interpreted as ancestral and spiritual guides attempting to get these individuals to either think twice about an action, individual or situation or to avoid it completely as the experience will either yield negative results or bring about unwanted and unnecessary negative energy. At the heart of this mediating dialogue is the understanding that the spirits with whom devotees seek to engage are there to guide and protect in devotees’ quest to ameliorate themselves physically, materially, spiritually and mentally in order that they can fulfill the destiny of this present life. As devotees cultivate this relationship, the spirits grow in their ability to guide and intercede on their behalf on the spiritual plane just as they grow in your ability to hear, see, or understand the spirits on this plane. Espirito Santo notes that “expansion of the [spiritual] ‘matter’ are also expansions of ‘soul’ (or consciousness)” (2013, p. 50) or in other

words, an individual's spirituality.<sup>36</sup> The interconnectedness of this reciprocal relationship is best illustrated in the mediation between the devotee and the eguns. In most cases, their growth depends on the devotee's growth and vice versa.

Ultimately, most of my interlocutors arrived at the point where they sought confirmation from their eguns and orisha before making any for all major decisions. Devotees are encouraged to accept these decisions as more or less final because defying the eguns and the orisha can come with negative consequences. As one young African American priestess of Oshun told me, "You have to accept that you don't have the final say." Essentially, devotees come to realize that by inviting these entities into their lives, they have ceded their right "to just do what they want, when they want" and instead must learn to adjust, adapt and (re)arrange their religious, social, political, and economic realities around the truth that even the smallest decisions can have ripple effects, and should therefore be taken with the blessings of their eguns and/or the orisha.

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<sup>36</sup> Some spirits are already "developed" and it is their task to help you to grow spiritually strong enough to be able to "work" with them.

## Chapter 3

### Making Community with the Dead *and* the Living

Community is a fundamental aspect of orisha devotion. Rituals and ceremonies often require at least two or three individuals. The house-*ile*-temple structure that is the foundational building block of the devotion is the living embodiment of this principle. Communitality is fostered, maintained, and promulgated within these spaces. The community begins within the *ile* but it expands to include the larger community through public events such as *bembes* and *cumpleaños*. This chapter will explore how the community of dead spirits, deities, godparents, religious specialists, godchildren, and godsiblings contribute to the honing of an African American *Lucumi* subjectivity.

#### MISAS

*Misas espirituales* (spiritual masses) are more public, community-oriented ceremonies in which devotees are given the opportunity to learn more about their individual spirits, the spirits of others in their *ile*, and sometimes (as happened in our *misas*) the spirits of different religious and ethnic communities, while at the same time work on developing spirits with whom they are already familiar and strengthen their ability to “see” spiritually. In *misas*, individuals have the opportunity to affirm personal individual spiritual “work” in a ritually consecrated and sanctioned environment, where very experienced mediums are on hand to guide as well as protect. The communal atmosphere is one within which a highly experienced medium spiritually guides the ritual and helps to guard the space to ensure that only positive spirits can enter and

negative spirits will be forcibly removed if present. Less experienced devotees and mediums (not all devotees are mediums) can begin to stretch themselves spiritually and gain confidence in their own “sight.” Some even possibly begin to help others in the community learn more about their own spirits and guides. There is a particularly strong emphasis on healing spiritually, mentally and physically within these spiritual masses.

Within the *ile*, in the period from November 2008 to September 2009, there were a concentrated number of *misas* in which the majority of the house participated. What I quickly came to realize is that there is a very specific structure for the preparation and execution of this ritual. The living room had to be physically transformed in order to accommodate a *boveda*, and the house ritually cleansed before the arrival of Constanica, the medium. Constanica provided very strict instructions about the specific placement of all ritual materials, and she stressed that it all be ready so that upon her arrival, the ritual could begin.

Constanica was a tall, big-boned, very healthily built dark-haired Hispanic woman. She had a raspy voice and despite how busy we knew her to be, she was usually in high cheerful spirits. She had laughing dark brown eyes and a round face that easily broke into smiles. Later we would all joke how she had told us all different things about where she was from. I recall her saying she was Guatemalan but then had moved to Colombia, while Sean said that he thought that she had said she was from Colombia. Someone else thought that she’d said Honduras. There was a lot of mystery surrounding her place of birth but we all remembered the story she had shared with us about how she became an *espiritista*. Her grandmother had been an *espiritista* and she was so good that there were always people lined up for consultations in her front foyer. Constanica would assist by taking down names and calling people when her grandmother was ready. One day she said, she felt something enter her body and later she was told that she had

been possessed by one of her main eguns who began helping the people in the waiting room. She didn't say exactly how old she was, but she spoke of being a little girl and how strange it was at first when people started coming to see her. She said she always remembered that they would bring her white flowers. Constancia was recommended to the Balogun by his friend Helen who had become acquainted with Constancia (and eventually became her godchild) during her years of being active in both the Latino and Black communities of orisha devotees in Brooklyn and Queens. Constancia had come highly recommended and from what we could tell from her professionalism and her godchildren, she was in great demand as a spiritualist. As soon as the *misa*s were over, she would quickly eat the prepared food and be on her way to conduct another *misa*. I was always amazed by the fact that she could conduct more than one *misa* on the same night. Other mediums and priests to whom I had spoken, talked about the enormous energy drain that occurred with possession of only even one spirit of orisha, but Constancia would pass a minimum of 5 or 6 spirits per *misa*. In addition, she would clean individuals present at the *misa* of negative spirits or energies which was considered dangerous work because no matter how skilled, how spiritually strong or experienced the medium is, there was always the possibility of that negative energy transferring to the medium. For this reason, we did not balk at the \$250.00 price tag Constancia charged per *misa*. Among the devotees of the house, there was an understanding that she was performing a serious and significant ritual and because she was putting herself at risk, adequate compensation was only fair. Most non-devotees have a problem understanding the monetary transactional nature of spiritual work within orisha devotion. This is due to the fact that many of them do not comprehend the risk that spiritual and ritual specialists undertake in performing rituals and ceremonies for individuals or the community. They also don't view these individuals as professionals who are performing the work that primary care

physicians, psychiatrists or even surgeons do. Unlike those doctors, these healers are providing healing services but at great risk to themselves. They do not have personal insurance to cover injuries sustained on the job, as was illustrated in a very disturbing event that occurred two years ago on New Year's Eve.

Every New Year's Eve, a ceremony called the *Awon* is conducted in most orisha *iles*. The ceremony is at once an honoring of the deity Babaluaiye (god of pestilence and disease), a cleansing of the body and spirit to ensure a positive and prosperous new year, and an act of charity. The ceremony is one in which everyone present, devotee or not, physically and spiritually cleans themselves with a variety of different grains, proteins, fruits and candies. After each person has performed the cleaning and left the used items with the deity Babaluaiye, the presiding priest, in this case the Balogun with the assistance of a junior priest, cleans everyone with a chicken and then sacrifices the chicken, along with a guinea hen, to the deity Babaluaiye. There is a very specific sequence to this part and at minimum two *santeros* are necessary to perform it. One year, the priestess who was supposed to assist the Balogun informed him at the last minute that she would not be there and the Balogun decided to do the whole ceremony on his own as the only priest present. Some of us *aleyos*, who had attended numerous *Awon* ceremonies, thought that this would be too much but the Balogun insisted and as an elder there was only so much we could, or would, argue with him.

The ceremony took hours longer than usual and was extremely taxing on the Balogun. We finished at close to three o'clock in the morning. I was just about to fall into my makeshift bed in the back of the house when I heard a horrible scream from the front of the house. When I ran to the front, Sean was assisting the Balogun up off the floor. He had been in the living room by himself and claimed that he had tripped over something in the middle of the floor but there

was nothing there. He had fallen and hit his head on the corner of the antique wooden TV stand. He was in considerable pain and had pulled his back in an attempt to break his fall. Collectively, we all acknowledged that the Balogun had taken on too much and this was the “spiritual kickback” so to speak. The cleansing work is usually shared between priests to avoid a situation in which the aftermath of a ceremony so negatively impacts a *santero* that he or she ends up physically hurt. Simply put, it was too much negative energy for one individual to clean alone. Although he had cleaned himself as well, the Balogun had still been left to carry the load of the *osobo* (negative energy), literally and spiritually, and had paid a price for it. Despite his pain and discomfort, he still had to get up early the next morning and sit on the hard wooden floor and conduct the divination called “The Reading of the Year,” that outlined upcoming events in the world and gave advice on how to live a prosperous year in addition to warnings about how to avoid sickness and death.<sup>37</sup> For two days after this incident, the Balogun had to wear a back brace and could barely get out of bed.

These priests perform their duties at great physical and spiritual risk to themselves but also to others. They do not have malpractice insurance if something goes wrong as in the case of a middle-aged priest of Sango, who did not have the proper training to deal with a very delicate situation involving a matter of leg surgery for a woman in her mid-40s. He did the wrong *ebo* (sacrifice) for her and her surgery left her paralyzed for the rest of her life. This is why there is such an emphasis and stress placed on the training involved with the transmission of religious knowledge. These priests, and many times spiritualists, literally have people’s lives in their hands and therefore they must be absolutely confident in their religious knowledge and their *ashe*

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<sup>37</sup> This reading serves as a spiritual and physical guidepost for the upcoming year for members of the *ile*, and also their families and friends.

to conduct these highly specialized risky rituals and ceremonies. For their service and their *ashe*, religious and spiritual specialists must be adequately compensated.<sup>38</sup>

The *misas* were done for each individual person that was able to pay for and make arrangements with Constancia, which ended up being 8 *misas* in total that I attended, one being my own. This meant that the *misa* would primarily be about exploring one person's spiritual *quadro*, an individual's collection of ancestral and spirit guides. The *misas* were usually held on Saturday afternoon to accommodate everyone's schedule. We would meet at the *ile* around 10am but depending on whose *misa* it was, sometimes that person would arrive at 8am and ask one or two other people to arrive at that time as well to assist with the numerous preparations. The shopping list for a *misa* was long and costly, but each item was a necessary component to ensure maximum benefit from the ceremony. We had to buy enough food to feed at least a dozen people, and all the specific liquor that the eguns of the Balogun (as head of the *ile*, his egun altar was the principal altar for the whole spiritual family), the eguns of the individual for whom the *misa* was begin performed, and any liquor specifically requested by Constancia for her personal eguns. At least 6-dozen flowers had to be purchased for each *misa*, which meant an early morning trip to the flower district on 28<sup>th</sup> between 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The best flowers were usually gone by 11am so we typically aimed to be there at around 8am or 9am at the absolute latest.

### *Carolina's Misa*

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<sup>38</sup> Individuals, devotees and non-devotees alike, usually seek the services of a priest or spiritualist when they have exhausted all other traditional avenues of care. Within some communities, these specialists take the place of a traditional doctor due to economic situations or the lack of availability of good healthcare providers (Garrison 1977; Gomez-Beloz and Chavez, 2001; Jones et al., 2001; Reiff et al., 2003; Romberg 2009; Viladrich 2006).

It was a cold December morning and I had been up all night the night before helping Carolina, the Balogun's 38-year-old daughter, to tidy the *ile* in preparation for her *misa*. I had decided to sleep over at the Balogun's house to make it easier for Carolina and Alex to pick me up in the morning. I had barely finished my tea, before I saw Alex's grey car pull up outside the house. I quickly grabbed my bag and my jacket and went out to the car. The traffic was light at this time and we arrived in the city fairly quickly. The flower district was bustling with people and trampled and discarded petals and stems were already strewn all over the streets. The smell of roses, wisteria and jasmine mixed with the smell of garbage and the smoke from the drilling machine that was being used by the construction crew obstructing traffic. Because of the construction, Alex dropped us off and went to circle the block. We got let off on 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue and had to walk up 28<sup>th</sup> Street towards 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Carolina was ahead of me and she called back to watch out for the small hole that the construction workers had opened up. Had she not said anything, I would have walked over it instead of around it. Devotees believe that walking over open holes is like walking over a grave or a place where dead spirits might reside. This is considered very disrespectful and therefore devotees take great care to find ways to walk around any open holes in the ground. In the midst of the continual construction in New York City, this has been a great challenge at times. "We don't need any problems with egun today, ok!" she laughingly remarked as she continued to lead the way to the nearest flower shop. There was lots of scaffolding so we had to squeeze by people as we went from store to store to see who had the best flowers for the least amount of money. We finally found a place that had the 2-dozen red and yellow roses we had to have and an assortment of white flowers and colorful bouquets. A dozen red roses were specifically for one of the Balogun's main eguns and the yellow roses were for Oshun because she was prominently displayed in the living room, and we didn't want her to

feel ignored as that came with its own set of problems.<sup>39</sup> After haggling with the owner of a flower shop, we gathered our flowers and went outside to wait for Alex to come pick us up. Carolina was very happy because she had been able to get really good prices on all her flowers. “I’m so glad that I got the flowers for so cheap. I was afraid I wasn’t going to have enough money. Yeah!” On the way back to the house, we had to stop to pick up a bottle of Amaretto because Constancia said her main egun told her that this liqueur would help to cleanse her body physically after the *misa* especially if she would have to pull off (remove) negative spirits from anyone. This would “prevent [her] from getting really sick” as she had stressed to us when we inquired about why it had to be specifically Disaronno Amaretto, because when we’d went to the liquor store for the *misa* before we had purchased another brand because it was cheaper. When she arrived it had been a big problem because her egun was very specific about the brand. That time, the *misa* had been delayed for 30 minutes while someone had run out to the liquor store to purchase the correct brand of Amaretto. We made sure not to make that mistake again. Constancia had been very upset and it had taken her a while to calm down, or as she explained, “*calma mi muerto* (calm my *muerto* [dead spirit]),” because she [the egun] had become pissed that her specific instructions had not been followed. It was one of the few times that I had seen Constancia get upset. At a later date I asked why did it have to be that specific brand and she honestly answered that she did not know but it was what her *muerto* had requested so that’s what she drank. Upon further research into Disaronno Amaretto, I discovered that its main ingredient, apricot kernel oil, has many positive health properties, it is both an anti-inflammatory and an

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<sup>39</sup> Although it seems that devotees spend much of their time carefully tiptoeing around the wants and desires of their eguns and the orisha, it is to their benefit as these entities assist devotees with their problems at any given moment. While the whims of these entities may seem overly demanding to non-devotees, devotees view these demands as requisite sacrifices to ensure blessings and assistance in their personal quests and goals. The nature of these entities are sometimes demanding, but in the case of deities like Oshun, this is simply reflective of her nature and devotees learn this over the course of their immersion within the religion.

antioxidant. The website also lists that it contains “the pure essence of seventeen selected herbs and fruits” (Disaronno 2009). One can only surmise that her *muertos* believe that the combination of the apricot oil with the herbs and fruits have a strong cleansing and healing power to rid their horse’s body of negative physical and spiritual energies.<sup>40</sup>

After we returned to the *ile*, Carolina immediately headed to the kitchen to begin preparing the flowers, by cutting them and then arranging them into separate vases, which usually took at least 45 minutes. While she did that I began to work on setting up the temporary *boveda* in the living room. Thankfully Sean, her 36-year-old brother, had already brought up the table that we would use. I began to carefully bring up the few glasses from the Balogun’s *boveda* in the basement that we would need for the *misa*. In the *misa*, only seven glasses go on the *boveda*, where as individual *bovedas* can have as few or as many as are required. The large glass went in the middle and the smaller six glasses were arranged around it. After setting up the glasses, I poured all the liquor into shot glasses and placed on them on the table. Once Carolina was done, she arranged the flowers around the front of the table in at least five different large vases. The living room smelled almost as aromatic as the flower shop because they were so many flowers in a rather small enclosed space. Folding chairs had been brought up and arranged in a circle within the tight space of the living room so that no one was directly behind the person whose *misa* it was. That person’s chair was placed directly in the middle of the circle. We kept our eyes on the time as we worked because we absolutely wanted everything to be ready before Constancia arrived. She had explained to us how important it was, “*Yo me prepare y prepare mis muertos para trabajar antes de llegar para hacer la misa. Yo los llama para empezar la*

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<sup>40</sup> As already seen, alcohol is believed to carry strong spirits and as such is used to cleanse the body spiritually and physically. I have encountered many instances in which a curative drink was specifically given to a devotee by a particular *egun* to cure specific ailments. At times within the *ile*, one of the Balogun’s main *egun* would pass a message to the Balogun or one of his godchildren either in a dream or by simply speaking to them as they refreshed her altar, and then her drink would be made and passed around for everyone present to drink.

*investigation sobre la persona para quien you voy a hacer la misa. Ellos me ayudan para ver sus muertos y para ver se hay negatividad y ver se hay algunos problemas de salud. Quando yo los llamo, ellos necesitan trabajar luego porque se no, causan problemas. Ellos se preparan tambien para trabajar y no quieren esperar. Ellos saben quanto me cuesta hacer una misa...[I prepare myself and my egun to work before I even arrive at the misa. I call them to begin to the investigation of the individual for whom I will conduct the misa. They (her egun) help me to see their egun and to see if there is any negativity or if there are any health problems. Once I call them, they need to begin to work soon or else they will cause problems. They prepare themselves to get to work and they don't want to wait. They know the toll it takes on me to do a misa...]*”

Once the table was set up and Carolina was done with the flowers, we turned to the food preparation. In the orisha community, food is always a requisite part of all community ceremonies and rituals. The food had to be prepared the day of the ceremony in the house where it was taking place. Carolina decided that she wanted my famous roast chicken with white wine sauce and green beans. I decided to make the rice then so it would be ready because we never knew how long the *misa* would go for and because I was the only one in house fluent in Spanish, I probably wouldn't be able to take a few minutes to duck into the kitchen later on to put the rice on or someone would have incomplete notes. Although Constancia, spoke English, she preferred to speak Spanish and once she was possessed her eguns almost all spoke only Spanish. Even though she was usually accompanied by one of her godchildren who was bilingual and who also took notes in both English and Spanish, the other members of the *ile* preferred to have their notes taken by their godsister, me. It also made it easier for things not to get lost in translation, which had happened a time or two.

The *misa* was set to begin at 1pm, and by noon we were ready with the exception that the house had yet to be smoked out, meaning it had yet to be spiritually cleansed with incense. This was usually done once the medium and her godchildren had arrived and we were positive that no one else would be coming so the door would not be opened again until the *misa* was over. This was to prevent any negative spirits from sneaking in during the *misa*, and also to prevent the spiritual energy from pouring out into the streets.

When Constancia arrived with her godchildren, Jerry and Helen, Sean immediately lit the incense and I assisted him to smoke out the temple. While we were cleansing the space, Constancia was setting up her things in the living room. She brought a medium-sized wooden cross with Jesus on it that she put on top of the large glass in the center and her Kardec *Espiritismo* prayer book. The first time she had taken out the cross, we had all looked at each other a bit uncomfortably because in the ceremonies and rituals we conducted in the house we did not use any Christian paraphernalia. The Balogun had not said anything so we had all kind of shrugged and thought that this was simply how it's done. (Later we discussed how we thought that it had to do more with her ancestral lineage and the fact that she practiced *Espiritismo* in a way that very strictly adhered to its Catholic roots and connections.) She then spiritually prepared the water that we would all use to clean ourselves during the *misa*. In a large glass bowl, she poured in Pompeia, added *cascaria* (crushed white eggshells), and then took the petals of at least six or seven white flowers and mixed that all together until she was satisfied. This time in deference to Carolina's eguns, she added Jasmine cologne water. The smells in the *ile* became a little overpowering as the scent of the mostly frankincense and myrrh incense blend, that was the Balogun's own secret concoction, blended with the scent of light lavender, rose and patchouli from the Pompeia and the more robust jasmine scent. In addition, there was the scent of the fresh

cut flowers. The combination made me feel a little light-headed. (I remember thinking, surely all the eguns can smell this!)

Once the house was cleaned and everyone was seated, the *misa* opened with recitations of “Our Father” which had also caused us all to raise our eyebrows the first time around. A few of us, including myself, did not know the full prayer beyond the “Our Father, who are in heaven, honored by thy name.” The first time we had read the prayer, I looked around and noted that I was not the only one under 35 that was struggling to recite these words. One of the Constancia’s godchildren, Helen, noticed the difficulty some of us were having and was kind enough to write the prayer out on a piece of paper for us. Then Constancia closed her eyes and flipped open her well-worn book of Kardec *espiritista* prayers. Her version was in Spanish but she also had an English copy that she gave to the rest of us to use during the *misa*. She showed Carolina the passage she’d chosen and asked her to read it out loud and then pray to her ancestors for light and guidance. Then she would pray in Spanish and then we would say another “Our Father.” After that, we began to clean ourselves spiritually in front of the temporary *boveda* one by one. We did this by taking water out of the bowl and wiping it on our faces and down our arms, across our chests, over our stomachs, and all the way down to our feet. The hands were done last because we shook all the negativity we had just cleaned off our bodies from our hands throwing it to the *boveda* where our eguns absorbed it and took it elsewhere.

After everyone in the room had cleaned themselves, Constancia began to put on one of the *pañuelas*,<sup>41</sup> of her eguns. She sat quietly for a moment as she spiritually “looked” at Carolina. She would do this sometimes depending on what her eguns were telling her about the person in the middle. This time it was about the state of Carolina’s house. She was picking up (spiritually sensing) that it was in serious disarray. She asked Carolina, “What are you things like in your

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<sup>41</sup> Large elaborately sewn square panels of cloth that sometimes are worn as scarves.

house? Are they organized?” Carolina responded, “They’re not really organized.” Another woman there, Grace, who was very close with Carolina and had recently been in her house was like, “Tell the truth. Your house is a hot mess.” “Why don’t you mind your business?!” Carolina said defensively. “Because you’re not being honest and this is about helping you to improve,” Grace answered back. Constancia stepped in and said, “My eguns are giving me the report on your place, mama, and it’s not good. You have too many places where negative eguns can hide. I can see your place right now.” Constancia closed her eyes for a moment and then when she next opened them, she stood up, stomped her foot and put both her hands on her hips, akimbo. One of Constancia’s main egun, an Afro-Cuban *palera*,<sup>42</sup> Josefa, had arrived. She wore her *pañuela* tied like a sash across her body. We had seen her before and she was very strict with a no nonsense attitude. She began to berate Carolina for not keeping her place clean and for not being more diligent about her spiritual obligations. Then she began to talk to her about possible problems that she may have coming up at work. She even went as far as to suggest that Carolina find another job as this one was not one that would lead to a successful future.

Over the next three hours, gypsy eguns, Congo spirits, and even an old male African spirit known to Haitian and Dominican *espiritistas* alike came to talk not only to Carolina but to everyone in the room. They offered advice, told individuals about spirits they needed to develop, told individuals about spirits they didn’t know walked with them, they alerted people to health problems, money problems, love problems, work problems, and even school problems for myself and Carolina’s then 8-year-old daughter. Carolina was cleaned with bunches of the white flowers at one point in front of the table. In possession of Constancia’s body, one of her gypsy egun took two bunches of flowers and beat Carolina’s body from head to toe with the flowers and then using a cigar with the lit end in her mouth, blew smoke all over Carolina’s body from head to toe

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<sup>42</sup> A *palera* is an initiated priestess in the Afro-Cuban religion Palo Monte Kimbisa.

as she turned Carolina slowly in front of the temporary *boveda*. At another point during the evening, the old African spirit turned to me, took a sip of the rum from the *jicara* (calabash made from a gourd) he was holding and sprayed me with rum from head to toe. As unpleasant of a sensation as it was at first to just suddenly be sprayed with rum and someone else's saliva, I was grateful to have been cleaned and then subsequently claimed by this strong male spirit. “*Tu parles francais, n'est-ce pas?* (You speak French, right?)” “*Ou, je parle un peu de francais* (Yes, I speak a little bit of French),” I replied. “*Bon, parle avec moi en francais quand tu as besoin de mon aide. Prie-moi en francais. Je suis ton protecteur* (Good, speak to me in French when you need me. Pray to me in French. I am your protector).” Then he switched to Spanish and told everyone in the room that he was my protector. I was only just learning to sense and distinguish energies, but I recall how much heat I felt radiating from his body. Later on he explained to us that he had been priest of an African deity associated with fire. Although there had been times when I had doubted Constancia's possessions, this was not one of them because we knew from her and her godchildren that she had no knowledge of French. I'll admit that I tried to test her afterwards a few times by asking her in French, where she had learned her French and she always laughed and said she didn't understand a word I'd said.

At each *misa*, Constancia chose someone from the *ile* to “sit at the table” with her, meaning that the individual took a seat at the temporary *boveda*, where he/she would assist the medium. The purpose of this was to allow *aleyos* a chance to develop their sixth sense, *ashe* (spiritual power), to be able to communicate better with the eguns. In addition, it was a good way to identify potential mediums and help them to begin to develop their *ashe* under the guidance of an experienced *espiritista*. As the table became a focal point and beacon for all the eguns of everyone present, it was easier to sense them while seated at the table. Sean sat at the table and at

times, he would tell either Carolina or someone in the room about an egun that he saw or something an egun was telling him that the person needed to do or get for that egun. You could see that as he sat there, he gained more and more confidence and Constancia encouraged him as she felt that his “sight” was good.

Finally, at the end of the *misa*, Constancia requested her Amaretto and after she consumed it, we all read a closing prayer and repeated one more “Our Father.” Afterwards, even though we all felt exhausted, we were also exhilarated and more informed than we had been at the beginning of the *misa*. A lighter energy permeated the space that was reflected in the light-hearted conversations that were taking place all around the living room. After eating, I copied the notes over for Carolina from the notes that both Jerry and I had taken, and we went through them to make sure that she understood what had been communicated to her and especially what baths, works or purchases she had to make over the next few weeks to fulfill the wishes of the eguns that had come tonight to help and enlighten her.

It is interesting to note that in most of the *misas* I attended conducted by different *espiritistas*, there seemed to always be certain kinds or groups of egun that manifested themselves during the ceremony. There were always gypsies, *Africanos* (African slaves enslaved in the Spanish Americas), and *Indios* (Native American spirits). I do not recall ever seeing an enslaved African American spirit possess the medium or anyone else at the *misa* though some of them would speak to different individuals during the *misa* and request that we sing African American spirituals from time to time. It was never clear if it was because the medium did not know how to access these spirits or if the spirits were simply too underdeveloped to be able to manifest themselves spiritually. Spirits grow from receiving light and if these enslaved ancestors

were not receiving light from their living descendants then they were not growing, or developing, in the spirit plane and may not be spiritually strong enough to manifest themselves.<sup>43</sup>

Using Pompeia to spiritually clean bodies and incense to clean spaces, lighting the candle, repeating prayers from the prayer book, smoking cigars to entice the eguns to make themselves present, all contribute the ability of the eguns to physically transcend the divide and be immediately present through the body of the spirit medium. The universality of these sensational forms are presumed within the community as I have seen them employed in *misas* held by both African American and Latino devotees. These sensational forms are learned over time and become second nature to devotees, but they are also dynamic and will change depending on what the eguns request or need in order to transcend the planes of existence to manifest through possession, dreams, incidents, or visions in this physical plane. But sensational forms do not only apply to egun, they comprise very significant parts of ceremonies, rituals, and routines for the orisha as well.

### **Sensational Forms in Working with Orisha**

Devotees engage in these sensational forms in order to please the orisha, show their appreciation, and also to effect some kind of personal transformation in their everyday lives. These sensational forms are recognized as necessary offerings to achieve the goal of maintaining positive relations with these entities. One of the first things a devotee learns upon embarking upon this life path, is that if your egun and orisha are happy, then you will be as well. You maintain the harmony by

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<sup>43</sup> In many discussions at *bembes* or *cumpleaños* or outdoor festivals, I have heard African American devotees lamenting the fact that most African Americans were Christians and Christianity had no mechanism for ancestral worship, in fact, disavows it in some cases such as in Protestant movements that view idol worship as antithetical to Christian worship. They believe that so many African American ancestral spirits are languishing in the spirit plane, unremembered and underdeveloped because of that lack of ancestral worship privately amongst their descendants and communally in public spaces.

learning and providing what they like and eventually what they need in order to best help you. They are as dependent on you as you are on them. It is universally understood among devotees that the warriors—Elegba, Ogun, and Ochossi—take *epo*, rum, and cigar smoke. Every so often they may request what are referred to as the *achés* (ritual items that all the warrior orishas receive particularly before a blood sacrifice)<sup>44</sup>—*maiz tostado* (toasted corn) and *hutia y pescado* (pulverized large field rodent and fish). The days on which it is best to propitiate particular orishas correspond to days that their energies are thought to prevail/dominate on that particular day.<sup>45</sup> An *aleyó* learns these facts through tutelage, observation, and ultimately practice. Alex's description illustrates the importance of the days, having knowledge about the things that your orisha like, and how and when to give it to them:

Every Monday, I go to Elegba. First, I take care of my egun, if the water on the boveda is dirty, I refresh it. I make fresh coffee and tea if anyone wants it and then I light a candle for them. Then I go to the front of the house where Elegba sits and I rub some *epo* (palm oil) on him. I grease him good because he likes that. Then I give him some rum but not too much. You don't want Elegba to be drunk out there especially if you got him on a job, doing some work for you. Then finally I take his cigar and give him some smoke (by this she means that she holds the burning end of the cigar in her mouth and blows out smoke all over her Elegba). You have to be very careful because you can burn the inside of your mouth. I've done that a few times trying to give Elegba a good smoke. On Tuesdays, I do the same with Ogun except I give him more rum. You know Ogun loves his rum.

*Aleyos* learn to communicate most effectively with these warrior orisha through the use of *obi*, a divinatory system that employs four pieces of coconut to answer yes or no questions. Once a devotee receives their warriors, they acquire the right to perform this kind of divination.

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<sup>44</sup> In this instance, it means foods that sustain. I will use the Spanish spelling to distinguish between *aché*, the foods that sustain and *ashe*, the spiritual power/special talent/energy. Though I can surmise that the Lucumis applied the same term to these ritual items to signify their importance, I haven't as of yet found any evidence to support this claim.

<sup>45</sup> One finds that this is also true in other nature worshipping religious practices such as ancient Nordic religion. Our current names for days come from this religious tradition, e.g. Friday was Freja's day and Thursday, Thor's.

The four pieces of *obi* will give seven possible answers that range from *alaafia* (peace-unstable yes), all white sides and *ejife* (stable yes), two white sides up and two dark sides down to *okana* (no), three dark sides up and only one white up to *oyekun* (the unknown), all four dark sides down. In between *alaafia* and *oyekun* there are four other variations on yes and no.

FIGURE 1. OBI DIAGRAM



The *aleyos* reads these *obi* “throws”<sup>46</sup> to figure out what the orisha are trying to communicate with them about a specific situation. In the *ile*, *aleyos* are advised to do this once a week, especially in the first year or two in which they receive their orisha, and particularly if they have no immediate plans to become initiated priestesses. During this time period, a devotee works on building a bond with her orisha so that they know her, and she can learn to sense their presence in all aspects of her life. She is encouraged to sit with them on their respective days and simply meditate and pray to them so that they come to know her specific energy and she theirs. As is the case with the *eguns*, the smoke serves to transport the prayers and wishes of the devotee to Olofi, the *epo* serves to grease the way, and the rum is a drink that the orisha enjoy.

These orisha belong specifically to this one person and work on their behalf to see that they progress in life or learn lessons when they have erred. You will hear devotees refer to them

<sup>46</sup> The term “throw” is used because although the *obi* is realistically dropped on the floor, the terminology used is indicative of terminology used with the more complicated and sacred system of divination, the *dilogun*. It would seem that this terminology is used to preserve consistency when discussing divination systems.

as “my orisha, or my Ogun.” As in “my Ogun likes small dark cigars and will take candy every now and then” whereas another devotee’s Ogun will never take candy and prefers long light cigars or doesn’t really care what kind of cigar he will receive. The orisha are personalized and thus even though they are one aspect of a larger deity, they are still an aspect primarily intended to serve that particular person. In the vernacular of orisha devotion, these aspects are referred to as roads. In the New World, some of the common orishas have roads, for example, Elegba has 21 and Ogun is believed to have 7. These roads correspond with the different ages and aspects of the nature of the orisha. For example, Ogun Alaguede is the youngest road of Ogun. It is said to be his “hottest” road and in it he is alternately the surgeon or the executioner. In contrast, there is the older road of Ogun, Ogun Arere, where he is less excitable and depicted as an older, more mature man. A devotee must learn to understand the nature of those different roads to be able to understand how best to entreat their orishas to assist them and to know in which capacity they are most useful. A devotee should seek to understand the fundamental nature of their orisha. For instance, if you have a problem with legal authorities, particularly the police, you would go to Ogun as he is the law and its enforcement. If you were having a problem though where jail or incarceration is looming, then you would go to Ochossi, guardian of all institutions. Elegba is the trickster deity, the deity of crossroads, communication, games, and children. If you are having a problem with communication or you are at crossroads in your life, you would seek his council. The aspects of the orisha are spoken of as residing within certain locales that correspond with their natures. For example, as a hunter you will definitely find Ochossi in the forest, but as the sleuth, you could find him in any city, village or town. Ogun, in his road as a blacksmith, initially lived way out in the forests away from humanity. A devotee would speak of their energies being present in these places or refer to them as the deity’s “house.” I recall one day I

was telling a priestess of Oya about my trip to Mexico and how much I had abhorred the three days I had spent in a hostel in the jungles of Palenque. She laughed at me and said, “See that’s what you get for trying to hang out in your father’s house.” Children of a particular orisha are usually warned to be careful when visiting the places and spaces over which their deities preside. The priestess asked me, “Did you check if you could stay in the jungle before you left?” I sheepishly replied that I had not, but that I had brought along a bottle of very strong Colombian rum as an offering that I had left in the jungle with the hope that it would have appeased him enough to let me stay there peacefully for three nights. She laughed even harder and said, “You know that’s the hardest orisha to bribe. Next time, do yourself a favor and check before you go.” Before I even bought my ticket, I had sought a divination and I had received very positive blessings for my trip. I assumed that meant all aspects of my trip would be a positive experience, but I did learn the hard way that obviously that would not be true. I think a part of me knew that the combination of the jungle and me was probably not ideal but I (like many of my interlocutors) rationalized it because the hostel was cheap, right down the road from the ruins, and exotically picturesque.

The formations of strong relationships and bonds with eguns and orisha are key to the creation of a new Black religious subjectivity that takes place as devotees strive to embrace this African religious path. While many of the *moraes* and *practicum* are based in the past, they are still (re)shaped and (re)produced in the present because just like the orisha they are dynamic and must adapt to new times and new environments. Devotees are not looking to relive the past, but to acknowledge and connect with it in order to help shape and ameliorate their future. In fact, this is evident in how many of these African Americans deliberately chose **not** to take trips to Africa in search of the “authentic” orisha worship as do other non-*Lucumi* African American

orisha devotees. Looking for “authentic” orisha worship in Africa would be akin to stating that the *Lucumi* tradition is somehow inauthentic. For them, their practice of and loyalty to the *Lucumi* tradition reflect a more accurate understanding of the reality of just how much orisha worship had to change in the New World during slavery. They are aware that although in the past in what is now Yorubaland, the *babalawo* was considered the highest priest and Ifa was thought to be the highest form of divination, however, 300 years of slavery, oppression, and adaptation necessitated the transformation that occurred within the *Lucumi* system.<sup>47</sup> Just as the number of orisha that are given at priestly initiation and the materials used within that religious ceremony have changed so has the hierarchical understanding of priesthoods and divination systems.

In orisha devotion, one learns that life is constantly changing, and therefore the only constant in life and nature is change and transformation. I observed the way in which these African American devotees, while clearly paying homage to the religious ancestors and following the tradition of their house, their “*ocha* line,” were still leaving their marks as they strove to create their own Black Yoruba/*Lucumi* religious subjectivity reflective of their African American historical, sociocultural, and political reality. The foundation of which is the relationship formed with their ancestors and their orisha. This relationship is primarily forged in private but is reinforced and strengthened in more public community rituals and ceremonies. While certain ritual behavior is learned in larger community settings, much of the cultivation between eguns, orisha and the devotee takes place in the devotee’s home. When devotees run into blocks, they are encouraged to reach out to their godparents whose experience and

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<sup>47</sup> Of course, this is not to say that *babalawos* did not exist within Cuba and that they did not have significant roles within some Afro-Cuban *Lucumi* communities, but within a number of them their use and function was deduced as unnecessary because they could not make *ochas*, divine the *ita* (your personalized guide to life), or birth other orishas besides the warriors, Elegba, Ogun, Ochossi, and Oshun. *Oriatés* were the ones doing all of this ritual work and so they became the high priests within many *Lucumi* communities.

knowledge will guide them through any difficulties. But there are times when that is not possible and a devotee must struggle through on his own, as is the case with Renaldo, a 30-something-year-old devotee whose godparent passed away some years ago and he has yet to find a new godparent or godfamily. This is not the ideal situation, in the sense that his *ajubona* (the secondary godparent) should have become his primary godparent, or he should have been able to turn to anyone of his godsiblings that were also in his house, but those weren't viable options for him.

Unfortunately, in Renaldo's case none of those were viable options. He tells me of the struggle he has in communicating with some of his *egun* that are very developed but as he is not "as developed" he struggles to understand their messages. He also talks of struggling to throw *obi* and interpret the messages of his *orisha*. When I asked him why didn't he find a priest to read him, he responded that there are so few out there that his godmother trusted that he's afraid. He once went to a priest who advised him (or rather, we should say who told him that *orisha* advised him) to throw away something that his godmother had given him with explicit instructions to "never throw it away." Conflicted, he attended a *misa* in the house of a friend, and was told by the spirit of his godmother that the priest had been deliberately trying to cause him harm and he was "absolutely under no circumstances" to part with the object. After that, "I was so afraid to go see anyone for a reading. So I just keep praying and praying that the *eguns* and *orisha* would answer my prayers and lead me to someone who could help me." Unfortunately, Renaldo's situation is not uncommon within the community. I have met a number of *aleyos* and even senior priestesses that have been in a similar situation. One or two of them have even sought alliances with the *Balogun's ile* and while they are not his godchildren, they attend and contribute substantially to ceremonies and rituals that take place in the *ile*.

These are some of the luckier ones. Many are not so lucky and must simply take their chances and like Renaldo choose to attend as many community events as possible in hopes of meeting and/or being connected with a possible new godparent and godfamily. One of the best places to do this is in open attendance community events like a *bembe*.

### **Communal Orisha Devotion**

#### *The Rules of Public Engagement*

Community events for the orisha are ripe ground for learning about “how to be” within the community of devotees and in contributing to the shaping of a *Lucumi* subjectivity in that it is a place where one learns about modes of behavior and dress, in addition to the rules of engagement with both the orisha and their priests, particularly the elder *santeros*. You learn what kind of behavior is acceptable within the community and what kind of behavior is unacceptable. These public events are some of the major ways in which devotees promote, sustain, and (re)produce community. The ins and outs of protocol when dealing with the orisha and with *santeros* is rather complicated, particularly for *aleyos* who have orisha but are not yet initiated to their orisha, in other words, who “don’t have *ocha* in their head.” These protocols structure the manner in which *aleyos* can interact and communicate with elder priests and how they interact and communicate with the orisha in sacred spaces like *bembes* (sacred drumming ceremonies) or *ochas*. In thwarting or not properly observing these protocols, *aleyos* not only embarrass themselves but also their godparents to whom the community look when transgressions occur because it is believed that it is up to the godparent, as with any parent, to teach their godchildren the proper ways to behave and interact in public community orisha spaces.

You learn to be vigilant in these matters because many eyes are watching and in some cases looking to see what kind of character you exhibit and if you are committed to this way of life or if you are simply “looking for some magic,” as I have heard many elders comment upon as they discussed individuals who they simply only ever saw at *bembes* or Yemaya’s annual festival on the beach, but whom they never really encountered during *ocha* rituals and who had no affiliation or solid connection to any one particular *ile* or *santero*. In a community where “family” ties are the foundational entities of socialization, authorization, accreditation, and regulation, an unattached and unaccounted for individual is seen as questionable and initially suspect. I have witnessed just how much elders do talk and because of the years of experience that they have had within the community of orisha devotees both African American and Latino, they are wary of new arrivals as they have seen many people come into the community, only to exit rapidly without having made any contribution but having taken advantage of the community’s knowledge base. These elders value their *ashe*, their time, and their energy so they don’t want to waste it on an individual that is only looking for material advancement and not spiritual light to keep pace with the material amelioration. As they continually reminded us *aleyos*, “*ocha* is a lot of work. Yes, you become a crowned head and everyone wants to come see you and are like Baba this or Iya this, but you are always asking yourself in the back of your head, ‘how much would this person sacrifice?’ Would they be willing to pay the steep price to learn that I did or do they just want to pick at my knowledge?” The knowledge that elders have is hard fought for and hard won. As shown in the history in the first chapter, they had to suffer through racism, ethnocentrism, linguistic, and social marginalization in order to learn about orisha and to gain as much knowledge as possible. After such an experience, it only makes sense that they: a) treasure what they have; and b) look to see that any individual with whom they share

it is willing to work hard for it and that the individual will also treasure the knowledge and appreciate the generosity, the time, and the energy of the elder who is willing to share it. Reciprocity and appreciation are just as important in the relationships between devotees as they are in those between the spiritual entities and devotees.

One of the most beneficial aspects of these events was to be able to observe the socialization that takes place at the *bembe* and the *cumpleaños*. As these are not events where everyone is required to work, as in the case of the *ocha* initiation ceremony, people, especially the elders come to talk and to see each other. Also too, as they are elders, they really won't be required to do any small tasks that might arise at one of these events. They have already put in their fair share of "work" to now warrant simply "sitting on their asses and twiddling their thumbs." They do still, however, maintain a level of vigilance over the religious space. I have seen elder *santeros* show younger devotees how to perform a dance move or how to listen for the rhythms to better understand when to move so that your movements, a language of its own, is in rhythm and tempo with the music and can be comprehended by the orisha. I have definitely observed over the years that when elders gather, eventually they end up having very intriguing and rich conversations about orisha, life, and the religion's development and growth over the years. For example, I have learned something about time, intuition versus logic, and how this relates to the orishas, Obatala and Yemaya, and their elements of air and water.

If young devotee is astute, she stays as close as she can to the elders without being noticed by being as inconspicuous as possible. The first time I attended a *cumpleaños* with the Balogun and other members of his *ile*, Sean and Alex shared this advice with me. "When we were younger and would go to *cumpleaños*, we used to pull our chairs near the elders and even sometimes when it got very late, we would kinda pretend we were sleeping so they wouldn't put

too much attention to the fact that we were still in the room.” They told me about how the elders would begin to discuss religious history and esoteric material that they could not discuss with *aleyos* and not even younger *santeros*, because they still had spiritual growing to do before they would become aware of and have intimate knowledge of the spiritual phenomenon being discussed. They would hold discussions about well-known now deceased *santeros* who had contributed to the knowledge base or who had been known for a particular spiritual specialty. They would engage in discussions about certain *odus* (the sacred body of oracular knowledge), which *aleyos* do not have the right to learn, but if you’re stationed in the right position, you can gain a certain level of insight about an aspect of the nature of a particular orisha and, in most cases, insight into an aspect of human nature.

The two community events that I have found that for devotees are most useful in learning and maintaining their religious subjectivity are *bembes* (also known as *tambores*) and *cumpleaños*. These two events are also usually the first event that potential devotees attend, and they are also the two community events that devotees will probably attend the most in any given year.

A *bembe* is primarily a drumming ceremony that is given, or “thrown” in orisha vernacular (as one would say about a party),<sup>48</sup> by a priest in honor of either her orisha, the orisha of her godparent, or the orisha of a prominent member in the community as it happened recently

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<sup>48</sup> It is not clear when this language usually associated with a party was incorporated into the vernacular of devotees. Many of the elders criticize the fact that in actuality these ceremonies have become more like parties rather than the serious sacred ceremonies that they are. Both Cuban and African Americans note that the distinct increase in the number of *bembes* being “thrown” is detrimental to the community as a whole because “orisha might get tired of being constantly summoned just because people want to dance.” As explained to me, any time you ask the orisha to descend that is a very serious and dangerous undertaking because “just as they come to heal, they can come to kill as well.” As one is dealing with life forces that control life and death, they are not to be trifled with or called lightly. One story that I have heard repeatedly over the years is the one in which during the late ‘90s at a *bembe*, one of the orisha came down and declared “One day you are going to call and we will not answer.” This was attributed to the increase in the amount of *bembes* being “thrown.”

before the passing of one of the great *oriatés* within the New York area community, Jose Manuel, Oya Dina.



Figure 2. Oya's Throne at Oya Dina's *Bembe*, Sept 2013

An orisha is celebrated and petitioned in this ceremony to extend blessings to the individual responsible for and/or being honored in the *bembe*. It is a ceremony in which the orisha are honored through drumming, song, and dance. Ceremonial drummers who are skilled in playing the sacred *aña* drums are contracted along with a singer that is experienced in singing the orisha chants. Both the singer and the drummers must all be initiated to orisha **and** possess the *ashe* for drumming and for chanting because the orisha must recognize not only the language of the sacred drums and the words of the chants, but also those who play and sing them.

A *cumpleaños* however, is a more individually organized but publicly celebrated event. The *cumpleaños* (birthday) is the day on which your *ocha* was made and is a celebration in honor of that day and the orisha to whom you were initiated. Depending on the tradition within the *ile* of the *santero*, this will be a celebratory feast featuring a lavish and elaborately constructed

throne for the orishas with beautifully sewn and embellished cloths that will cover the *soperas* (soup tureens)<sup>49</sup> that will either be dressed up in the cabinet or taken out and placed on stands of different height according to hierarchical order so that all orishas are visible. The orishas will be given their favorite foods and specialty items, which will include fruit, sweets, cakes, desserts, special wines and strong liquors. In addition, a meal will be prepared with enough food to feed anywhere from a dozen to two dozen individuals. The special feature about a *cumpleaños* celebration is that as it is a celebration for the orisha, your house must be open to any individual who wishes to enter.

Both events require significant planning, in addition to physical and monetary investment. The orisha must have their special foods and must be adorned as lavishly as a devotee's pocket can afford. These events are also significant because devotees learn and experience first-hand the high level of materiality involved within orisha devotee. While I have not observed or participated in the planning and executing of a *bembe*, I have observed for many years and then actively participated in the planning and executing of a *cumpleaños*. I have relied on the accounts of other *santeros* for the discussion on the execution and planning of a *bembe*.

### *Bembes*

*Bembes* are usually requested by orisha in order to assist a devotee with a serious matter, however, as stated above, they can also be to honor a member of the community. While in the 10 years that I have been officially associated with the Balogun's *ile*, no one has had to throw a *bembe*, everyone is aware of the amount of preparation, time, energy, and money that goes into successfully executing a *bembe*. First, one has to locate a basement, community room, or a hall

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<sup>49</sup> In the *Lucumi* tradition, orishas are kept in beautiful soup tureens whose colors and often times shapes, correspond to the nature and characters of the orisha.

in which to hold the *bembe*, where the loud sound of drumming won't cause problems with the neighbors. A good drumming group and a good singer must then be contracted. The *santero(s)* throwing the *bembe* must purchase and prepare enough food to feed at least 50 people. Within the *ocha* community, there are certain specific roles and jobs that some individuals specialize in and become known for within the community: the *oriaté* (officiating priest/master of spiritual ceremony and ritual), *tambaleros* (master drummers), *canteros* (singers), *cocineras* (cooks), throne designers, and seamstresses. Over the years, I have heard it repeated again and again that the *cocinera* (cook)<sup>50</sup> is the second most important role after the *oriaté*. The *cocinera* is the one that will, in an *ocha*, properly prepare a meal from all the sacrificed animals, or at other community events prepare a meal consisting of at least 8 different food options. It is imperative that this person be familiar with the general religious *ewes* (restrictions/taboo) of *santeros*, e.g., that they know to make black beans instead of red beans, because many *santeros* have a food *ewe* on eating red foods; that they know to not use any ingredients that may contain shellfish as that is a food *ewe* for some *santeros*. They must also know how to prepare, from scratch, the delicacies (*arimus*) that each orisha requests on special events. This person literally has the lives of *santeros* in their hands as they prepare food so this is thought to be one of the most significant and highly respected “jobs” in the *ocha*. If no one in your house is a *cocinera*, then you must hire one to cook for your *bembe*. Fruits and other delicacies have to be bought specifically for the throne. If necessary, new cloths may have to be bought for the throne and sewn into lavish finished *ocha* cloths (spiritual cloths) for the specific orisha. In addition, you may have to hire someone to construct the throne if you are unfamiliar or do not possess that *ashe* (talent).

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<sup>50</sup> I use the feminine form of this noun because I have only once seen a man in the kitchen doing the cooking for any *ocha* event. It is predominantly women who occupy this pivotal role in the *ocha* community. As with many non-Western religions, it is the women who prepare the ritual foods (Sinha 2014).

Some orishas like Oshun, for example, may request a violinist or classical pianist to play before the *bembe*, so that additional expense must be paid for as well. All of this can add up easily to \$2,000 plus dollars. A hefty price tag by any standards, but for devotees a price well worth paying to ensure or maintain the blessings of their orisha. Even to complain too much about the expense is seen as insulting and can create negative energy as the orisha could interpret it as resentment. Devotees come to understand that sacrifice comes in all shapes and sizes and that the sacrifices they make will be recognized by the orisha and often will be rewarded. In this reciprocal relationship, you do for the orisha and they will do for you. The orisha do much for the devotees in turn they expect to see that devotees through sacrifice and propitiation are willing to do as much for them.



Figure 3. Drumming and Dancing at Oya Dina's *Bembe*, September 2013.

*Bembes* usually start early in the day as they must be finishing as the sun sets and there are a lot of songs to cover. In specific order, chants must be sang for all the major orisha in addition to the chants of the orisha in whose honor the *bembe* is being thrown. The *bembe* becomes sacred space for the orisha because as the drums and the chants call, they will answer and begin to descend and come to life through the body of one of their initiates. Everyone present prays for the orisha to come and that they “come down happy,” that is that they come down bearing positive news and not news of tragedies or harsh reprimands. As the drummers play and the *cantera* (singer) sings, initiates gather to dance to the rhythms in prescribed movements that mimic the energy of the particular orisha being chanted for. For instance, in Sango’s (god of thunder and lightning) dance, devotees reach up with their arm and pull it down rapidly and forcefully, mimicking a bolt of lightning coming from the heavens and striking the ground. His movements are quick, whereas the movements of Obatala (father of all the orisha, and the god of wisdom) are slower and softer. The movements seek to bodily manifest the characteristics and natural actions of the orishas. As *santeros* dance, their orisha hear their physical and spiritual call, and can descend suddenly to possess them. Once this happens, another *santero* will instantly bring items that they know this orisha likes. Usually the first thing the orisha request is their proper clothing. Many *santeros* travel with the clothes that they know their orisha prefer to wear so that if they get possessed their orisha can be dressed in those clothes. If they request the clothes and they are not there, that horse will have to answer for it later and possibly even others there will be berated publicly. Once attired and sufficiently supplied with their favorite foods, honey in the case of Oshun or *epo* in the case of Sango, the orisha will walk around and as individuals literally throw themselves on the ground to *odubale*

(salute by laying prostrate on the floor) the orisha, they will sometimes offer those individuals advice, clean them with either the *pañuela* (large elaborately sewn square panels of cloth) they are holding, or with their foods, or with their hands. As it is a blessing to salute the orisha and to receive their advice, there is often jostling and a long line. I was literally told, “You have to just throw yourself on the floor,” because no one is going to wait for you. If you hesitate one second, someone else will take your turn.

The energy in the room where a *bembe* is being held is usually very strong and hot. It can feel like an assault on the senses. I have never attended any *bembes* held outside largely due to the fact that the loud drumming would attract unwanted attention and complaints so usually they are held in rented out basements or community halls. No matter the size of the room though the heat level is always high, and shortly upon entering the room you begin to sweat. I once asked the Balogun why this was and he responded that it was “the heat of the orisha. All their energies are present in this room because they’re being summoned and then you have all these *santeros* gathered in one space. It’s bound to get hot!” If the energy of each *santero* is always with them, then imagine the intensity of a large number of *santeros* in one small space. Additionally, there is the heat of the sacred drums, which are orisha in and of themselves, calling for the orishas themselves to descend. All that concentrated spiritual energy in one space produces a high degree of heat. The spiritual energy of the orisha becomes physically tangible in these concentrated spaces. The room swells with the sound of dozens of voices chanting in rhythm, a collective contribution of energy to summon the orisha. The first time I attended a *bembe*, I was quite nervous because I knew none of the songs or the dances, and I was more than a little apprehensive about witnessing a possession.

*Bembes* are ripe ground for learning the orisha chants and dances, and for gaining enlightenment on different situations, and for receiving the blessings of orisha, if you are lucky enough to salute one, and **especially** if they speak to you, offer advice and/or clean you. I have been fortunate enough to have the orisha speak to me upon a few occasions at *bembes* when they have descended. One particular instance I recall was with the orisha Sango, who is the only orisha I have been blessed enough to speak with twice. The first time I encountered Sango, it was before I had received my beads and warriors and I had been told that I could not *odubale* for the orisha (or any *santero*) until I had received them, i.e. until I had been officially recognized by the orisha and the community through initiation. I was actually on my way to use the restroom and walking straight ahead so I did not see Sango approaching on my left. Just as I reached the door, I felt his presence right next to me. I froze because I knew that I was not supposed to *odubale*, but I didn't want to disrespect the orisha by not saluting in some manner. I also knew that you were not supposed to look the orisha in the eye so I nervously tried to focus on his lips. I decided it would be best to just *odubale* and was beginning to lower myself to the floor when Sango stopped me by touching my hand and saying, "Do not fear me." He then embraced me in the way that devotees do in the final part of a full *odubale*, which is done while standing. I crossed my arms over my chest in an 'X' and then we touched first our right shoulders together and then our left, as I asked for Sango's blessings, "*Benediccion*," to which he replied "*Santo*," before releasing me and moving on.

The second time I encountered Sango, it was four years later at a *bembe* given in the honor of an Oshun priestess who had recently moved away from NYC by her godchildren who still lived in NYC. It was in the basement of a Brooklyn house of another priestess of Oshun who regularly rented out her house for orisha functions. We entered after the *bembe* was well on

under way and followed the Balogun, who due to his seniority was taken to the front of the line, to salute the lavishly beautiful throne set up for Oshun in a corner at the back of the large basement. After saluting, Sean and Carolina went outside with the Balogun while Alex and I stayed inside to watch the dancing and the chanting. I was still in the process of learning the dances and the chants, so I made a space on the edge of the dancers that occupied the center of the room. I began to simply just copy the moves of the dancers around me. Every now and then, Alex would correct my rhythm or join in to show me the correct movement, because (I later I learned) that he thought that most of the people were not quite performing the dance motions correctly. As the chant changed to Sango's chant, Sango came down on a devotee not too far from me, whom I recall meeting at a *bembe* a few years earlier because we'd had a long conversation about her daughter, a recent initiate to Ogun. We had discussed the complexity of being a daughter of the most masculine of the orishas. When Sango came down on her (possessed her), he called for his red sash, immediately removed the skirt she had been wearing, and began to roll up the pants that she had worn underneath, probably in anticipation of this very event. Once he had his red sash on, he started looking around while he made eating gestures by continually bringing his cupped fingers to his mouth. Another devotee appeared with a plate of *epo* (palm oil), from which he leaned over and took a huge lick.<sup>51</sup> As soon as Sango finished, Alex threw himself on the floor and I got ready to go right after him, especially as I didn't recognize anyone near me as having *ocha*.<sup>52</sup> After Alex saluted Sango, I "hit the floor" and Sango began to slowly walk over me from the top of my head to my feet and then back to my head. I thought I heard him say the ritual words to rise, "*dide*" but when I tried to rise he pushed me back down and held me there with his hand. Finally, he allowed me to rise and after I

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<sup>51</sup> *Epo* is one of Sango's favored foods.

<sup>52</sup> If there is someone with *ocha* near you, they are always to be allowed to *odubale* first as they are automatically the elder of anyone without *ocha*.

completed the salute, he pointed to my eyes and the attending *santera* with him began to “translate” his gestures. He made the shape of an egg and indicated wiping them over my eyes. I nodded that I understood and then before he left I made sure to ask him how long was the *ebo* supposed to sit and where could I dispose of it. Sango answered all my questions and moved on. I was very happy to know that the orisha were concerned about my ability to see clearly and had provided me with assistance to help clear up any negativity around my physical and spiritual ability “to see.”

The orisha do not always physically speak. Rather they rely on gestures, and mental and spiritual communication. It is imperative that a priestess or a priest is present to translate their gestures and messages, or at least someone very familiar with that orisha that can “tune” in and receive the transmitted message. Melissa, a young female devotee who is also a child of Ogun told me in detail of an experience she had six years ago at the annual Yemaya festival held in September on the beach in Far Rockaway, Queens. Although I’d witnessed the scene from a short distance, I had not been able to hear exactly what had transpired.

Ogun had come down on a female devotee and after she’d *odubaled*, Ogun embraced her and upon releasing her had pointed to her and then thumped his chest. The priestess attending him instantly understood that he was communicating that this was indeed his daughter. Melissa’s boyfriend Damien, a longtime orisha devotee, stood nearby keenly watching the interaction. Ogun reached out and touched her shoulder length dread locs and shook them while shaking his head. The attending priestess interpreted this as Ogun saying the devotee needed to cut her dread locs and when she said it out loud, Ogun grunted and shook his head. It still wasn’t quite clear what he was trying to say. He looked at the boyfriend, Damien and began to stroke the female devotee’s locs in a manner that Damien interpreted as cleaning and he asked Ogun if that was

what he was saying. Ogun nodded emphatically. “What should she clean them with?” He pointed to himself and the boyfriend asked, “with something for you?” Ogun nodded again. “Herbs, rum?” Damien asked and again Ogun nodded. The boyfriend then asked, “Can she ask her godfather to tell her which ones?” Again, Ogun nodded yes, “Is that all Baba?” Ogun confirmed that was it with a nod. “*Adupe* (thank you) Baba. *Adupe*,” Melissa responded. Ogun nodded and Melissa moved aside as others were waiting to salute Ogun. Observing and experiencing these incidents have made it clear that one needs to be sure that the messages from the orisha have to be carefully interpreted. Had the boyfriend not been there, the young devotee who later informed me that in that moment she had been “very, very afraid right then” because she had previously been told by the goddess Oshun that she could not cut her hair, and she was not sure what she would have done had Ogun ordered her to cut her hair. “I breathed such a sigh of relief when Damien spoke up because he realized that the priestess just wasn’t getting it right. He said he just synced in with Ogun and could hear him speaking in his head. I hope I get there one day but then he’s been around this all his life so I guess he’s got an advantage, right?” Under normal circumstances, as her boyfriend was not an initiated priest, it would have been seen as disrespectful for him to insert himself in the exchange, but given that the priestess was clearly at a loss, and Ogun had turned his attention and focused in on Damien, this act changed the dynamics of the usual accepted norms of behavior and hierarchy because now it was the orisha who was indicating who in essence had the *ashe* to comprehend his message in this exchange. Even though Damien was not a priest, he was very familiar with the orisha Ogun and was clearly recognized and acknowledged as being “knowledgeable” or having the capability to correctly interpret Ogun’s message. I had watched the attending priestess during the exchange but I didn’t detect any resentment towards Damien but I did notice that she seemed to usher Ogun on to the

next devotee rather quickly. Had there been a larger crowd, it is possible that she may have tried to intervene or found some way to save face that may have proved embarrassing for Damien. I have seen priestesses in similar situations, who rather than put their ego aside and allow an *aleyo* to assist, have instead outright asked the other individual “if they have *ocha*” and if that person responds “no” then priestesses have responded, “Then you have no right speaking right now” or the blatantly rude “Well, then what do you know about what orisha is trying to say?” The implication is that because you are not initiated to your tutelary orisha, then you cannot possibly have built a solid foundational relationship with that entity or be spiritually developed enough to be able to discern messages from orisha.

Unfortunately, this kind of public chastisement, or abuse of power one could say, is not uncommon in *ocha* community events. Some *santeros* feel that priestly initiation gives them the right to belittle those who are their junior to them. This has caused serious disputes and tension within the community, and is a source for serious concern among some of the elders who themselves have been disrespected by some of these junior priests. In this ontological religious view, *santeros* are living embodiments of parts of their orisha and thusly are due respect within the community and in general because you could offend that individual’s orisha as well, however, with that power comes “great responsibility” as it has been explained to me. “It’s not a license to treat *aleyos* or anyone like a peon, or demean them. It’s actually a license to enlighten, to help, to guide or to teach the *aleyos*” the Balogun often states, “It’s like *noblesse oblige*. We don’t become kings and queens to simply just lord it over others or just take from them because you’re more powerful, but because it was our destiny...part of that pact that you make with orisha is to then extend yourself to your family, your community, and even the world.” Within his stated philosophy of a *santero*’s responsibility is a commitment to service, and an obligation

to a community. How and where this is being lost within the younger generation of *santeros* is a question that the community will need to address in order to ensure it's continued reproduction and growth.

### **Cumpleaños**

The annual celebration of a *santero*'s initiation day is a special occasion in the life of the priest. Within the community, the number of years that a *santero* has *ocha* becomes his "age" within the community, and a marker of status because the more you have the higher you are within the religious and social hierarchy of the community. Thus as you "age," your esteem and hopefully your spiritual development and knowledge should increase as well.

Within the tradition of the *ocha* lineage of the Balogun, *cumpleaños* are to be celebrated on as grand a scale as possible and as lavishly as your resources will allow. These devotees believe that the more lavish and well attended your *cumpleaños*, the more blessings you hope to receive from the orisha. In 2008, the Balogun gave the most lavish *cumpleaños* that I have seen within the 10 years that I have been a part of the *ile*. That year was particularly special because the Balogun decided to play *oro* (praise drumming for the orisha that is a shortened version of the full regiment of songs played in a *bembe*) for his orisha, and as such he had contracted a group of drummers and a very well-known African American *cantera* to play drums and sing for his *ocha* (Nodal and Ramos 2005). The preparations for this event usually began almost three weeks in advance. After years of doing it off-the-cuff, someone had the wonderful idea about 7 years before to create an Excel spreadsheet that listed all the steps to prepare for the *cumpleaños* and a list of all the items that had to be purchased for the event. This was one of the first steps in creating some kind of systematic record for institutional memory. The list included everything

from when to begin cleaning and organizing certain parts of the house to a list of bakeries and *botanicas* where certain foods and ritual items had been found in the past. Most importantly, it included a price list for most of the items and the figure of how much in total had been spent the year before. Days were designated for when the cloths used for the throne had to be carefully inspected to see if any were in need of repair or if new ones were required. The Balogun has had some of his *ocha* cloths since he was made more than 40 years ago, and some of them became so worn over the years that they had to be “retired.” The *cocinera* designated on the list was no longer available and therefore we had to contract a *cocinera*, as none of us women in the house were fully capable in that role at that time. Luckily, there was a young woman who the Balogun had recently met that came highly recommended and they were able to work out a fair price.

The *ocha* landscape of New York has changed dramatically within the last 10-15 years as many Cuban devotees have moved out of the New York Metropolitan area to places like Miami or California. This has resulted in a shortage of *botanicas* (supply stores for orisha devotees), experienced spiritual specialists, live animal markets easily willing to sell you anything from a chicken to a bull, and Cuban pastry shops that carried all the specialty desserts usually given to the orisha (*arimus*), especially on *cumpleaños*, e.g. *coco dulce*, merengue, and dark *coco dulce*.<sup>53</sup> These foods have become so standardized that if years go by and the orisha do not receive their favorite delicacies, they will request them, and *santeros* will have to find them or make them from scratch. This becomes difficult for younger generations of African American devotees who have no familiarity with cooking Hispanic pastries. These delicacies have become hard to find

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<sup>53</sup> Many of the foods on this list clearly reflect the Cubanization or Hispanicization of the foods of the orisha. *Coco dulce* is sweetened coconut with syrup, dark molasses. Chocolate pudding is another New World delicacy that I would imagine they were not presenting to Yemaya in Africa. When this was brought up in discussion amongst a group of *aleyos* and elders, they commented that although it was clear that these were New World delicacies for the orisha, the ingredients were food items that were still sacred to these orisha and that was the important thing, the form they took were different but it was the content that mattered most. In addition, one elder pointed out, these things were not available in Africa so apparently the orisha have acquired new tastes as diverse food items have become more readily available.

now that quite a few years have went by without the orisha receiving them on the *cumpleaños*. Finding these *arimus* for the orisha has become the hardest task of the *cumpleaños* preparation. In 2008, we drove around Spanish Harlem (located on the east side of Manhattan) and then through Bushwick, another well-established long time Hispanic neighborhood in Brooklyn, unable to find the delicacies that the *santera* driving recalled being easily available in any Cuban bakery uptown Manhattan or in the Bronx ten years ago.

### Typical Cumpleaños at the Balogun's Ile

We purchase the majority of the food items in Hispanic neighborhood supermarkets as they usually have the food items we need year round, such as papaya, mangos and other tropical fruit that some of the orishas “take” (request).<sup>54</sup> The night before the *cumpleaños* is usually the hardest because in that one day the *boveda* has to be refreshed with water, flowers, liquor and tobacco, all the *ocha* cloths (lavish cloths that have been made specifically to reflect the color preferences and sometimes nature of each orisha) that will go on the throne have to be ironed and laid out in order for ease of assembling the throne, and then the throne itself has to be constructed. In total, 9 different orisha are adorned in *ocha* cloths, but at least four have three separate cloths, while Obatala has 5. In addition, any cloth used for a backdrop must also be ironed. The ironing takes almost two hours for one person to do it alone. Once the *boveda* and the ironing are complete, the *aleyos* must leave the part of the house where the orishas’ throne room is located because the orishas have to come out one by one and be refreshed in preparation for being put up on the throne. As an *aleyo*, I have no right to know what “refreshing the *ocha*” specifically entails, but one of his crowned goddaughters assists the Balogun with this task. After the Balogun and his goddaughter refresh the orisha, then the work of “putting up throne” begins.

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<sup>54</sup> The word “take” is a direct translation from its Spanish equivalent, “*tomar*.”

Tables and crates are employed to elevate the orisha in specific hierarchical order, and then they adorn each *sopera* in their respective *ocha* cloths. Oshun's cloths are usually gold, yellow or orange satin and have a sparkly quality to them, while Ochossi's will be blue cotton with green trim to reflect more the warrior status of Ochossi. The cloths are specifically chosen in color and material to reflect the nature and characteristics of the orisha, e.g., a hunter will take a rougher, cruder material while the choice of satin reflects the glamorous and delicate nature of Oshun.



Figure 4. Throne for the Balogun's *Cumples años*, 2013.

The *santeros* usually finish with the throne anywhere from 1am to 3am the morning of the *cumpleaños*. On the day of the *cumpleaños*, Carolina and I usually begin preparing the evening meal and making the orishas delicacies at 8am. We will work steadily until guests start arriving at around 4pm. Once the house begins to fill up with *santeros*, *aleyos*, friends, and even strangers off the street (a *santero* cannot deny anyone entrance to his house on the day of the *cumpleaños* because it is orisha's celebration and they turn no one away), the Balogun opens up the throne room for everyone to salute (pay respects to) Ogun. This can go on for hours as people arrive throughout the evening and into the night. Dinner is served when the number of people coming slows down, usually around 9pm or so. If there is space, a table for the most senior *santeros* is set up in the living room. If not, then we simply begin to feed people according to their age in *ocha*, starting from the eldest *santero* in the room and finishing with the youngest *aleyo*. By midnight, most of the guests have left but the elder *santeros* will usually talk through the night until the following morning. I can only recall one instance within the past 8 years that we were able to get to bed before 5am in the morning. As the Balogun's godchildren, we cannot leave until everything has been cleaned up and put in its rightful place. We force ourselves to stay awake though to listen to their conversation to benefit and gain knowledge about the oral historical biographies within the tradition, orisha, and life in general. We benefit two-fold from these long late night conversations: firstly, we get to hear rare deep philosophical conversations about the principles of orisha worship which are usually discussed through the vehicle of the *odus*; and secondly, these elders recognize our willingness to sacrifice sleep in order to learn more about orisha, and therefore more about life and the spiritual entities that govern our universe.

## Conclusion

The high level of materiality within these rituals and ceremonies is both symbolic and transformative. Devotees make offerings in the hope of improving their material conditions. A plate of sweets made with honey offered to Oshun is simultaneously an offering of the deity's favorite food and a request for her to extend sweetness into your life. Giving Ogun or Ochossi an ornate bow can demonstrate the respect you have for the realms over which these orishas hold sway, but it can also be a request to protect you and your interests with that bow should the need arrive. A gift is not always simply a gift, but can also be an expectation of or down payment for future benefit (Mauss 1967). The eguns and orisha are given symbolic "things" so that **they** may transform varying different aspects of your life and ensure your well-being. The process of driving or riding the train all over the city to find and then purchase these items demonstrates on the devotee's part that the devotee is willing to sacrifice time, money, and energy to receive the assistance and *ire* (positive blessings). It begs the question as to whom: Whom really serves whom?

In these public and private spaces, materiality constitutes religious bodies on multiple levels. The most obvious is, of course, the amount of money that is being spent on enticing, pleasing, supplicating, and worshipping these spiritual entities. On deeper levels, however, materiality is constituting religious bodies through an investment of time, the possession of bodies wrought through French colognes, flowers, sacralized water, rum, lavishly sewn and ornate scarves, drums, fruits, and cooked foods. Without these materials, the eguns and the orishas will not be as likely to make themselves present in these moments and assist their children and horses. Through the proper attainment and arrangement of these material objects, religious professionals manipulate and appeal to get the sacred to manifest itself in their present.

The sacred drums call the orisha from the realm of deities and supranatural energy to our mundane human world, and a sacred space is constituted immediately for the orisha to safely descend.<sup>55</sup> Spaces cannot be sacralized with solely the *ashe* and spirit of the *santeros* or mediums; these material “things” assist with and aid in the creation of sacred space through smell, taste, sound and feeling. These objects also assist devotees to “see” and know that an egun or an orisha is present. The faces of eguns will appear in the smoke, or in the bowl of flower, water and Pompeia on the *boveda*. These entities, especially the eguns, make themselves known, by physically constituting themselves in tangible manner through material things. Sometimes the light making a certain kind of shadow on a *pañuela*, or marks left on a towel by the *epo* from an Elegba or an Ogun, give devotees tangible evidence of the orisha’s presence.

The everyday world of devotees is one in which dead spirits speak and gods may punish you for not following advice. Although there is such a distinct and marked emphasis on the material within orisha devotion, the orisha do not demand more than what they know devotees are capable of providing. They know whether or not you can afford to make the material sacrifice. The monetary demands made on devotees can be difficult to explain to non-devotees who have been oriented and grounded in a Judeo-Christian society that says ghosts are not real and that there is only one true god. Devotees often find themselves deliberately hiding their religion and any material markers that would indicate their faith to anyone else.

Whether in public or private, devotees’ interactions with these spiritual entities assist them in the formation of an African American *Lucumi* religious subjectivity. As devotees immerse themselves in the world of these spiritual entities, they undergo physical, mental, spiritual, and social transformation as a new identity and, particularly in the case of initiations, a

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<sup>55</sup> The orisha can descend on one of their initiated children at any time and moment, but it can be dangerous for this to happen outside of sacralized space without another *santero* (or knowledgeable *aleyo*) present to help to assist or placate this orisha if need be.

new self emerges. As I observed these devotees in their homes and in community settings, I was able to see just how much is invested in their effort to “live their religion” while still navigating a larger society in which their worldview is not popular, respected, or visible but through their own efforts. But what does a devotee’s “everyday” look like? What are some of the specific ways in which individuals “becomes orisha people?”

## Chapter 4

### Becoming Orisha People

“We don’t practice this religion, we live this way of life.”

– (Sean, June 2011)

After flipping the switch on the electric kettle, Shannon walks over to the *boveda* she keeps in a corner of her kitchen. She lifts up the edge of the white cloth and pulls out two white Sabbath candles from the box of 72 that she keeps neatly organized with the other egun supplies underneath her table (*boveda*). She knocks on the table three times, says “*benediccion egun*,” and then lights the white candles and carefully places them in the holders on both sides of the table. She stands there for a moment as she murmurs her prayer of thanks for her eguns’ help in guiding and lighting her path in this life, and her request for their continued help in bringing her light and helping to guide her through a positive day. When she is finished, she knocks the table three times again and then turns to making her tea.

It is Monday, so she refreshes her table, meaning she removes all the glasses of water, rinses them out and refills them with cold water before removing all the cups of tea, coffee, and rum she keeps on her table to wash them and refill them with fresh liquid for the eguns. This week her eguns indicated a desire for fresh flowers so arranges them and places them in a vase on the floor in front of her table. I ask her if she does this every Monday, to which she replies,

Yep, every Monday morning I just do it and know I’m good for the week. It took me a while to establish this routine and realize when would be the best time for doing my table. I used to do it in the evening, but sometimes I would come home late from work and be so tired that I just

couldn't bring myself to do it and then it would be like 2 or 3 weeks that would go by and my table wouldn't be refreshed except for maybe the tea and coffee. You know I only recently started doing this [being an orisha devotee] so it was really a matter of deciding that this was more important. I also thought that it would be better to do this to start off the week right because I want them to bless me and help me to have a productive week, so why not do it first thing Monday morning? I could give up a little bit of sleep for my egun. They don't tell me to wait until a certain time or day to get my blessings or the other stuff I ask for, right?"

After having breakfast and dressing for work, she gets ready to head out of the door. She stops in front of Elegba, Ogun, and Ochossi at the front door and prays to them to see her safely to where she is going and to see her safely home. In addition to her prayers, she asks for blessings in specific endeavors. When she's done, she salutes them (touching the floor and kissing her fingertips briefly for each orisha) before exiting the door and heading out into world. "As I leave, I also ask my eguns to walk with me. I know that when I head out that they're with me. I also literally have Elegba with me (she is referring to a pocket Elegba that some devotees carry with them so that a physical manifestation of the deity Elegba is traveling with them as they move about in the world). I don't leave home without him (she smiles as she pats her pocketbook)."

The formation of an African American *Lucumi* subjectivity is both an embodied process as well as a cognitive one. "Becoming orisha people" is something that affects all aspects of one's life not only because the devotee comes to **think** differently, but she also comes to **be** bodily different in the world. In this chapter, I will examine subjectivity formation as it takes place on the physical, spiritual, and mental levels. I show that this religious subjectivity is formed in dialogue with metaphysical entities, godparents and senior priests, as well as through relationships with non-devotees in social, economic, and political interactions. The metaphysical

entities, the eguns and the orisha, are simultaneously tangibly materialized but yet still ephemeral spiritual energies that accompany devotees as they move about in the physical world.

I specifically chose to use the term “becoming” rather than converting for three primary reasons: 1) in the discourse of my interlocutors, the verbs “transform” or “become” were used more in describing their adaptation to *Lucumi* orisha worship/devotion, rather than the term “convert;” and 2) “becoming” is much more agentic and indicative of a choice as opposed to convert (Austin-Broos 2003; Seligman 2014), which carries with it connotations of force and violence; and 3) although not all of my interlocutors were converts, some of them had either been born into the religion or had been devotees for over 25 years, but still struggled with their own individual restrictions, particularly when it contradicted with something they wanted to do that was seen as “cool” or more socially acceptable in the larger society, but was taboo for them within their limitations as orisha devotees. Becoming is indicative of religious transformation but also of religious embracing (Peeks 2005), particularly for these young devotees who were born into the religion.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, devotees commented on the fact that “convert” brought to mind Christianity or Islam, where as the notion of “becoming” more adequately connoted a sense of a durational process and struggle that unfolded over a significant period of time.

I also employ the term “becoming” to demonstrate the ownership that these African Americans take as they chart a new identity for themselves as African Americans and orisha devotees. These devotees are crafting new ways of being African American, *Lucumi*, and African. While they “become” and religiously transform their lives, they are also charting a new path for what it means to live an “African” way of life, while being Black in America and yet still holding sacred the Afro-Cuban *Lucumi* religious traditions that were entrusted to them. As

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<sup>56</sup> Peeks (2005) examines young immigrant or first-generation Muslim youths who made conscious decisions to embrace their Muslim identity as a way of combating sociopolitical isolation and religious hostility within American society.

much as these devotees seek to “stay true” to their Cuban *Lucumi* roots and an “authentic” religious devotion, they indelibly leave their mark and chart new ways of being an orisha devotee as they transmit religious knowledge, mediate with spiritual entities, and make community in New York City. The devotees themselves do not readily admit to these religious changes because they believe that it would somehow render their religious devotion less “authentic.” For these devotees, the *Lucumi* tradition is the most “authentic” and the closest in praxi to the ancient orisha devotion of their Yoruba ancestors.

Within the tradition of orisha devotion, initiations are seen as rebirths. Sean reflects that “going through orisha priestly initiate is not something you just do, but a new someone that you become.” The statement highlights how “becoming orisha people” is **processual, and connotes a continual transformation rather than a finite one.**<sup>57</sup> One undergoes a transformation whereby much that one has learned and done previously comes into question. Old habits are discarded, new ones are learned, and new ways of being in the world are cultivated in conjunction with the growth of the bond between devotee and the (im)material entities—the *eguns* and the orisha. From the first ceremony of beads and warriors to the priestly initiation, the language and religious meanings are one of rebirth, of letting go of an old self and embracing a new way of life. For something to be reborn, it must first die and the religiosocial death of individuals is a very concrete reality that manifests itself in all aspects of devotees lives, even if they have been born into the religion.

When my young interlocutors who were born into the religion became young adults, they all describe coming to their own awareness of what it was “to **be** orisha people.” As they went out into the larger society on their own, they were confronted with individuals who

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<sup>57</sup> Elder *santeros* comment that they always feel as if they are continually growing and changing in their quest to learn more about the orisha, the universe, and ancestry.

misunderstood, insulted, ridiculed and ostracized them because of their religious beliefs so often they tried to hide it and “rebel[led] against certain personal restrictions and just want[ed] to be ‘normal teenagers.’” The young people all had periods of time when they felt that they really “became” Yoruba, meaning that they came to a self-acceptance of what it meant to embrace and live a religiously different way within a larger society that did not value or even really understand their religious practice.

This becoming requires devotees to think differently in terms of how they perceive of themselves and the world around them. Devotees come to embody this transformation as the body plays such a significant role in orisha devotion. “Becoming orisha people” is transformative in both body and mind, and therefore the learning is both discursive and embodied. It is a process whereby devotees are “reshaping bodily ways of being along with self-understandings” (Seligman 2014, p. 5) and cultivating different habits and behaviors.

It is very difficult to parse out these three levels on which devotees transform—mental, physical and spiritual—because they are so intertwined in the process of religious subjectivity formation; however, I will attempt to delineate specific processes of transformation on all three levels. Due to the high level of bodily involvement, the body figures prominently within this chapter and the myriad different ways in which it is engaged within orisha tradition will be highlighted.

Orisha devotees come to view the world in terms of how different spiritual energies impact and influence both the physical and spiritual environment around them. This way of approaching life in general enables orisha devotees to interpret life events through the spiritual lens of the eguns and the orisha. For these devotees, there are few coincidences or random acts of God. Illness, pain, and both negative and positive occurrences almost always have a spiritual

meaning or reason. The first question a devotee asks themselves if they feel a pain in their right knee might be, “What is Elegba trying to tell me? Is Elegba trying to tell me something?” As Elegba is associated with the right side, devotees immediately think to deduce whether the problem has anything to do with this orisha. Everyday occurrences take on new meaning and are thought to reflect some kind of disturbance in the force field of energy that surround any individual.

Orisha devotion is one that requires bodily action to maintain balance, harmony, and well-being. African-derived religions in general are religions in which devotees actively bodily engage in effecting change and transformation through religious channels. Bodies dance, sing, drum, receive immaterial metaphysical entities, pray, prostrate, restrict food intake, kill, divine, create, save lives, clean negative energy, construct shrines, sew, cause harm, etc. Bodies are adorned with protective amulets, jewelry, and other objects meant to mark the devotee’s body on the cosmic plane so that she can be recognized by a particular spirit or deity. Because it is such an embodied religious devotion, the body is as important as the soul or the *ori* (head/destiny) for without the body, the soul or *ori* would simply be ephemeral entities with no vehicle for being materially present in the world.

Rebecca Seligman’s (2014) research on spirit possession in Candomblé highlights how analyzing religious transformation and embodied religious practices help us to better understand how subjectivity is formed, and what are “the effects of meaning on the body” (p. 6). Devotees come to move and relate to their bodies in different manners, and it therefore becomes easier for them and others to gauge the embodied process of religious subjectivity formation without it being explicitly stated by the devotee. The body serves as a visible and measurable marker of change and difference (Morgan 2010).

Much recent anthropological work has focused on notions of embodiment and embodied learning but little of it has looked at how this embodiment has occurred religiously and how this contributes to a new subjectivity and mode of interacting with the larger social world (Ivry 2009; Mascia-Less 2011; Van Wolputte 2004). Most of it is also more concerned with political economic structures and their effect on the body, rather than on more intimate understandings of how bodies are shaped by religious transformation. Seligman points out that Candomblé mediums “rehearse ritual behaviors over and over again until these behaviors become second nature-until they become unconscious, embodied knowledge” (p. 23). Within these African diasporic religious traditions, learned embodied knowledge also comes to reflect transformations in worldview, mores, motivations, and perceptions (Bellegarde-Smith 2005; Stewart 2005).

These bodies also engage and interact with other social worlds when they go to work, socialize with friends, attend a family dinner, or seek to contribute to their neighborhood or ethnic community. As Constance Furey (2012) has pointed out, subjectivity and religious bodies are not only formed through interactions with divine forces, in ritual spaces or religious authority and discipline, but also through upfront and close interactions with other individuals in a religious subject’s everyday life and social worlds. Furey cautions religionists to not ignore the importance of intimate relations in the study of the religious subject. “It is my contention that religionists...are well positioned to appreciate that there is no subjectivity without intersubjectivity and no religious subject without socially defined and subjectively meaningful relationships” (p. 10). Through these intimate social engagements in addition to the rituals, ceremonies, and mediations with eguns and the orisha, devotees’ subjectivity is (in)formed.

Over the course of my research, through interviews and conversations, I found that for many devotees, particularly female devotees, the intimate relationships that suffered most were

those with family and friends. For these women, the loss of their female friendships had been particularly heartbreaking and difficult to get over. It is particularly in larger social spaces that devotees learn probe the degree to which they can make their religious “otherness” known. The practice of concealing their religious devotion is as much a part of their *Lucumi* subjectivity formation as is *odubale*-ing or dancing for the orisha. Devotees have learned over the years that in most American public spaces their religion is not welcome. They often learn to be religiously blank and refrain from letting others know the reason for behaviors perceived as “odd,” such as dropping candy on a street corner, never walking over holes, or tapping a seat before sitting. They learn to be creative in their explanations of days off, childrens’ absences during the school week, certain clothing choices, the small bottles of rum often found in the purses when going through security checkpoints, or the metal amulets they are wearing that they may not be able to remove for security checkpoints and emergency medical scans.

Their religious choices affect their lives in very material ways that manifest themselves in “limiting access to social rewards” (Rouse 2004, pg. 9), ruptured social relations, and even economic and legal impediments. It’s not quite the social suicide that Rouse proposes in her work on how Black Muslim women perform an Islamic identity, because: 1) most of these devotees do not outwardly perform their *Lucumi* identity; and 2) the language of suicide although clearly indicating personal choice also makes it seem as if the religious choice were negative and not really more of a way of transforming their lives for the better. There are definitely limits on social rewards in their lives, but for devotees the rewards of the connection with their ancestors and with orisha make up for the losses in other spheres of their lives.

The lives of these devotees are a testament to the fact that it is possible to live as a *Lucumi* Yoruba person in a cosmopolitan urban landscape. However, the difficulties and tensions

that devotees encounter lead many of them to ponder whether or not it is possible to live **successfully**—adhering to your own ethics and mores in a society whose ethics and mores you feel are in opposition to your religiocultural way of life. Roger, a 34-year-old *aleyo* in training for the priesthood with the Balogun describes his inner struggle:

It's like you have to live in a place where you have to constantly remind yourself that the outside world is not necessarily your world and does not guide or dictate how you act and feel in the world. That world is one created by others who follow a very different spiritual path. It's hard because I wonder how I'm gonna raise children so they don't not feel as conflicted and that they resist the temptations of the society out there because that's what they'll see in school, on TV, in the movies, in the mall... Sometimes I even have to remind myself that I'm not crazy for listening and paying attention to the advice of my orisha and the universe. All the time out there I see signs of orisha. I see signs that are messages to me about how the universe works. I'm a priest in training, so I have to be able to see these things spiritually because I have to be in tune to the messages of the orisha, the *eguns* and the spirit guides. Even animals. The other day I saw two blue jays outside my window and they are a warning sign of negative energy. Really they're telling you that someone else is wishing you ill. Later that same day, what did Elegba tell me? That someone was wishing some negative shit on me and that it would effect my productivity and the positive energy surrounding me. Because I had paid attention to that sign I was able to find out what I could do to block this negative energy and continue to work to bring positivity to my life.

Devotees often mention questioning themselves, the orisha, and their *eguns* as they try to reconcile spiritual advice and warnings with the sociocultural realities and relations within the larger society. Many of the sections in this chapter highlight this difficulty and demand a reconsideration of the issues that arise within their narratives.

### **Thinking Differently**

“So, um, how do I become a Yoruba person?” Jaleel, a potential godchild

“You gotta change this first (taps his head),” the Balogun

The first step, the Balogun always says, in becoming a Yoruba person is that you have to change how you think. I came to understand that what he meant by that was change how you perceive the world around you and your place in it. One begins to believe that nothing is inconsequential because everything is connected. If one ignores a small occurrence, which may simply require a small *ebo* (sacrifice/offering), that can lead to the worsening of a situation which may then necessitate a more serious *ebo* or offering in order to ameliorate the problem. All of which is usually more costly in terms of time and money. In the discursive learning process, a devotee is constantly reminded to pay attention to both the spiritual and physical environment that constantly surrounds them. This extra-sensorial way of being is learned over a period of years and actively cultivated through prayer and meditation with the eguns and orisha to increase the awareness of this spiritual world that is perceived to be as important as (if not more so than) the physical. Devotees strive to incorporate this different way of perceiving the world into their other daily life functions such as work, familial responsibilities, or community obligations.

Devotees in this *ile* consider themselves to not only be African American but to be African. In their estimation, “they are more African” than an African American Christian and even more so than any Christian or Muslim individual born on African soil. Their definition of what constitutes “African” is largely based on religious practice. “Not only do we practice an indigenous African religion but we try to live our lives as our African ancestors would have.” By this, the Balogun is specifically referring to the practice of polygamy, childrearing, and social behavior and interaction within the community.

The Balogun likes to discuss how growing up, he was never allowed to interrupt the conversation of elders. The one time he got sharp with his father, he says all he recalls is waking up on the floor up against a wall that was about three feet from where he'd been standing. "That's African. That's that old school way that black people had of being. Didn't take no shit from a young person. You got disrespectful and you got knocked the fuck out." Respect for eldership, within the community is believed to be one of the most important tenets and one in the social behavior that directly ties them to an "African" way of being. When an elder or elderly person makes a request, the younger person is to immediately comply without questioning or "back talk." Children are to know when to speak and when to be able to sit still and simply listen. The same social rule applies to *aleyos* if they are in the company of *santeros*. It would be an embarrassment for the godparent if a godchild interjected in a conversation between three or more elders. Being African means being observant and vigilant at *ocha* events because it is a godparent's responsibility to help the younger generation maintain the integrity and dignity of the religion. The harsh and rigid training for *oriatés* is also considered to be a part of this African identity, because there are rarely any niceties just directives to be followed, tasks to be meticulously completed, and an incredibly extensive body of knowledge to be thoroughly learned.

These devotees are as committed to this "African" way of being as they are to the deities that they worship. The notions of "African" around which they cultivate their subjectivity and construct their identity as African American *Lucumi* devotees come from various places. Some examples are: books such as *Olodumare* or Johnson's *History of the Yoruba*; documentaries about pre-colonial African cultures, family memories of elder African Americans who smiled less and meted out harsh discipline; social life histories passed down orally by the elder Afro-

Cuban *padrinos* and *madrinas*; directives from the orisha; directives from African eguns who appear in *misas* and through their often terse but direct advice and lessons (both historical and religious) leave no doubt about the seriousness of their character and their connection to an African ancestral legacy.

But before any of these transformations can occur devotees constantly comment that one must first learn to have faith in the wisdom of their eguns and the orisha. The trust that goes hand in hand with this faith is also very significant because it is the trust and faith in orisha and eguns that devotees say they rely on to keep them strong when faced with following difficult directives and advice such as not attending an uncle's funeral or terminating a toxic relationship in which one has already invested a lot of time and energy. This trust and faith must be earned and proven, which is why devotees judge their faith by levels of effectiveness<sup>58</sup>—"Does it work?" The Balogun is known to say often that, "if the orisha didn't work, I would have thrown them in the garbage by now." This is one of the reasons why materiality is so important, because devotees seek material confirmation for requested assistance and guidance or ritual works of protection and healing. Devotees are taught to pay attention to signs and dreams that can communicate ruptures and disturbances in their lives. Signs can be anything from losing your keys to injuring yourself. A string of negative occurrences or experiences should be investigated (through divination) with your orisha (throwing *obi* for *aleyos*) or if the situation involves a serious health problem, injury or material loss then with a *santero* who divines with the *dilogun* (cowrie shell divination).

A devotee's awareness of his body changes as he learns about the body's potential to serve as a portal that can potentially absorb positive or negative energy. In order to avoid the

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<sup>58</sup> Unlike other Faith traditions, devotees do not "believe in something for which there is no proof" (Merriam Dictionary 2015).

latter, a devotee learns how to protect the body by firstly learning to avoid places where negative energy reside, e.g., on street corners, in abandoned houses, dark corners in any indoor space, or doorways. By using his head and paying attention to his surroundings, a devotee can avoid these spaces and the negative energy present. But devotees can learn how to sense negative energy by engaging their sixth sense, *ashe*, or by listening to their eguns who may advise the devotee to avoid certain places, events, or people. Five years ago, Carolina and I were in a club for a birthday party of a friend of a fellow devotee. All of a sudden, she got very quiet and asked if we could leave the venue. I was in the middle of a great *caipirinha* (Brazilian drink made with *cachaça*, lime, and sugar) and dancing to one of my favorite songs. In a slightly outraged tone, I asked her, “Really, right now?” She responded yes and that she wanted to leave immediately. I trusted her instincts and we left the club very quickly. The next day I found out that a huge fight had broken out just ten minutes after we’d left and someone had pulled out a gun and fired off a few shots but luckily no one had been hurt. When I spoke to her the next day, she was like “Yeah, I just got a really bad feeling all of a sudden and I kept hearing a voice saying, leave now!” She told me how in her younger days, she used to ignore that voice and end up in clubs or parties where a lot of violent incidents occurred, including a fatal stabbing. “I knew better (she chuckles in a self-deprecating manner)—I grew up in this religion—but I just wanted to be able to hang out with my friends and dance and drink and just have a good time, you know?” Carolina’s statement is reflective of the natural teenage desire to be a part of crowd. Devotees who grew up in this religious tradition pinpointed teenage years as the most difficult because they “just wanted to fit in.” They ignored general taboos within orisha devotion, such as wearing other people’s cloths, walking around barefoot, or shaking hands. Orisha devotees believe that our bodies leave our energy, negative or positive, wherever it goes. People leave their energy in

their clothing after they have worn it even if it has been washed. Devotees are taught to tap seats before sitting in order to dispel any energy that the person sitting there before may have left behind. As the body is an open absorbent vessel, energy can be transferred through bare feet and through the touching of hands.

Hands are a very important point of contact and exchange points for negative or positive energy. As the Yoruba proverb says, *owo eni ni a fi ntun oran ara eni se* (in your hands you carry your own destiny), and therefore one's own luck, so if an individual touches another's hands there is a possibility that luck can also be transferred. The hands are a portal through which energy can be gained and lost and as thus should be guarded and treated with great care. In a culture where handshaking is the norm, it can be very difficult to avoid shaking hands during initial introductory meetings. Devotees have had to learn creative ways to avoid shaking hands, especially if they have recently been advised by the orisha to avoid this type of interaction, which is exactly what happened to Alex one day at his university. He was walking in a hallway with his professor and when they bumped into another professor, Alex's professor made the introduction and the other professor immediately held out his hand. "I panicked because I didn't know what to do so I just ended up lying and saying that I thought I might be coming down with something and I didn't want to pass it on. I felt bad that I had to lie but uh, I wasn't breaking my *ewe* (taboo/restriction). I'd rather have them think I'm weird or whatever than possibly have that dude take my luck." Other devotees have simply not taken the proffered hand and although they knew it was considered extremely rude, they were more afraid of the transference of luck and/or positive and negative energy.

The frustration that devotees feel about the machinations and problems they encounter in their daily interactions in the outside world are often topics of conversation because they need

the outlet of sharing these experiences with other individuals who understand and experience the same difficulties. These conversations are sometimes funny and can yield helpful strategies that other devotees can employ when faced with these obstacles. Devotees know they cannot tell other non-devotees that it's against their religious beliefs to shake hands because it would only invite questions about their faith that usually lead to uncomfortable exchanges. Instead they must anticipate and have ready-prepared creative strategies for finding ways to avoid breaking *ewes* and dealing with extremely awkward situations.

### *Building Blocks, Teaching Tools—Transmission of Religious Knowledge*

Over the years of my fieldwork, I have noted that the Balogun's pedagogical approach to the transmission of religious knowledge was unique in that he used tools such as history and films to provoke thought and critical analysis of foundational principles and the *patakis* (story/myths of the orisha) from the *odus* (the sacred body of oracular knowledge) in the *dilogun*. I began to realize that this unique approach was common amongst those in training within predominantly Cuban *iles* or even amongst other non-*Lucumi* African American *iles*. When I questioned the Balogun about it, he said it was a method he had first experienced with his first godfather, an African American elder. He has continued to use this method because not only does it emphasize the universality of orisha and the timeless sacred knowledge encompassed in the *odus* but also because it reflects the contemporary reality of globalization and transnational interconnectedness.

Inherited methods of transmission are typical in oral religious practice. It is comparable with many traditions within Tibetan Buddhism where “most essential religious knowledge is conveyed not through texts, but in oral transmission from master to disciple” (Cabezón and

Jackson, 1996, p. 14). But what is unique about this pedagogical method is that it reflects the change that this religious practice has undergone in its transmission from Africa to the New World. I contend that this method is a way for these African American devotees to leave a mark on this dynamic religious practice and to transform it to meet the needs of their particular social, political, cultural, and economic situation (Dianteill 2002). This method also reflects the reality that the history of the world connects us all and that the orisha are universal entities or rather forces that know no boundaries. I once overheard an elder priestess explain to an inquisitive young man about the omnipresence of the orisha. “Does the wind know a boundary?” she asked, “Does the ocean not flow throughout this entire planet? Well then, the orisha are everywhere. Just because they are Yoruba deities does not mean that they are only found in Yorubaland or among peoples who may be the descendants of the Yorubas.” Contemporary African American orisha devotees lived religious experience is one of integrating their religious beliefs and praxis into their urban sociocultural realities. This interweaving is important to devotees as they seek to understand the world around them, and more importantly, their place in it.

Historical events are viewed in terms of the orisha and the lessons that one should gain from that event and from that orisha. The orisha provide their own guidance and teaching through the *odus*, the sacred body of oracular knowledge. Historical events are also viewed in terms of the *odus*, and each *odu*'s accompanying *patakis*, which are stories or legends of the orisha similar to the legends that one finds in Greek, Roman or Celtic ancient religious traditions. The *patakis* are templates that run the gamut of natural occurrences and human behavior. In them, one learns about the nature of orisha and the moral lessons that their experiences impart to us. It is through knowing and understanding these *patakis* that priestesses and priests have an access point into interpreting the nature and complexity of an historical event. Often times, they

look for the similarities between the events and the *pataki* to gain a comprehensive understanding of the event—both the physical and spiritual aspects. At other times, they base their analysis simply on the nature of that orisha.

A lively discussion ensued one day when Alex mentioned that he had just watched Kenneth Branagh's production of *Henry V*. This led to an overall discussion about the Hundred Year's War. The Balogun, realizing a teaching opportunity when he saw one, used this opportunity to teach us a bit about the orishas, Ogun and Sango. Ogun is the god of war, but that does not mean that he is the only orisha to engage in war itself. Just like death, war is simply a natural aspect of life and human nature. Within orisha worship, war is not viewed as bad, while peace is seen as good. Both are simply viewed as parts of nature and thus intrinsic, one to the other. It would be more appropriate to think of them in terms of ying and yang. Sango is the god of fire, in addition to being the god of politics and intrigue. The Balogun went on to explain,

See a war that drags out like that, that's Sango. Sango likes to see all that conflict and finds great amusement in watching humans go through the drama of war and all the infighting and the politicking and the backstabbing. That just gives him a thrill! Whereas Ogun sees war as a means to an end and wants to see the end come as swiftly as possible. You may have a whole lot of people that die during that war but it won't drag out forever. Think about WWI and WWII—two of the bloodiest wars in modern history but they didn't drag out for ten, twenty years. That's Ogun. I love my father!

If as Hayden White said, "A historical narrative is thus necessarily a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative," (1973, p. 281) then what would a narrative, or interpretation, from a different religious/spiritual interpretation reveal. Because the historical

interpretations of orisha devotees focus on both the material and spiritual aspects, they elucidate how the energies of these deities are being manifested in the real world and what consequences that has for the individuals involved. Although some of the Balogun's historical interpretations do not fit with the "official" historical narratives, one cannot discount that each historian is influenced and motivated by his or her own sociopolitical conditions and certain ideologies that may dictate what is included, what is left out, and how it is interpreted. In the Balogun's case his familiarity with the *pataki* that bears resemblance to the historical event combined with his over 40 years of divinatory experience and keen observance of the human nature may point to key missing elements in the accepted historical narrative and intimate to him that other factors would perhaps more adequately explain or interpret these historical events.

So as a novice devotee and student, one is not only required to know about world history but also to acquire the ability to ask the critical questions such as which orishas are present in this event, and what could be the possible motivations. This deductive analysis helps one to hone in on which particular aspect of the orisha is present, and to speculate about the possible lessons to learn regarding human nature, orisha's nature, and the ever-present connection that makes it relevant to contemporary life.

### **Polygamy and Family Structure**

As mentioned previously, one of the religiocultural features that distinguish certain African American *Lucumi* devotees is the practice of polygamy. Learning to think differently about family structure and marriage is seen as a key factor in learning to become more "African" as devotees follow this religious lifeway. I can recall the first conversation I had with the Balogun about polygamy. We were having a conversation about jewelry and perfumes and he mentioned

that “one of his wives” had been a connoisseur of gemstones. He saw my confused expression and asked me, “What you didn’t know that I am a polygamous man? That’s what Yoruba men were. Polygamous.” He then began to explain to me how he thought it would serve us (all Black people) as a community to reexamine our social structures.

According to the Balogun one of the first things his first godfather discussed with him about becoming a Yoruba man was to “get his emotional and social life in order.” By his social life, he meant his ideas about family and marriage. His first godfather was a polygamous man who would attend events at the Yoruba Temple, and ceremonies and rituals in the Cuban *Lucumi* community, accompanied by his three wives. The Balogun decided that this seemed to be a more realistic family structure because polygamy was about assuming responsibility as a man within the community. It was about ensuring for the care of all the women in the community, rather than about any abundant male enjoyment or pleasure. The Balogun vocally shares this explanation with members of the house, and in discussions with elders, younger *santeros*, and *aleyos*, both male and female alike who broach the topic with him. However, the reality of how this social structure operated for both the female and male devotees differed from the Balogun’s admittedly male perspective, even within his own household.

There are only two other men that I have met over the years had polygamous family situations. One is a priest of Elegba, Amadou, who is also an elder in the community and the other is a now deceased younger priest of Sango, whose second wife I met and talked with briefly at one of the Balogun’s *cumpleaños*. From these men, I saw different ways and perspectives on polygamy. With the Elegba priest, I had met two of his wives at community events (I believe there were four in total). The youngest of his wives, Karla, a 30-something female lawyer, was a tall, slender black woman with a caramel complexion and a full thick afro

who had grown up in New York. She had been completely unfamiliar with orisha devotion before meeting Amadou and so Amadou had asked the Balogun to become her godfather. The Balogun had accepted and Karla had made arrangements to come over and help us with the preparations for his *cumpleaños* two years ago. We talked as we worked on refreshing the *boveda*. She was a corporate lawyer who lived in Bay Ridge. She had met Amadou through a mutual friend and she had embarked upon a romantic relationship before deciding to “become Yoruba,” as she had put it. I asked her how she had felt when Amadou had let her know that he was polygamous. She answered that at first she was a bit surprised and although it was not something that she had ever given any thought to, once he had explained to her that it was an open and honest arrangement she had been amenable because she had come to care for him. Her decision to become Yoruba was largely based on her relationship with this priest. I quickly realized that she had had very little orientation with the religious labor as I had to instruct her step-by-step how to perform small tasks and the questions she peppered me with confirmed that conclusion. I asked her if she attended rituals and ceremonies at his home to which she replied, “no.” In fact, after meeting his wife once she had never seen her or been in the same place with her again. I witnessed this firsthand when during the height of the *cumpleaños*, she received a phone call and immediately began to gather her things to leave. We were all surprised because unless a family member is dying or unless you are extremely ill, you never leave your godfather’s house before the *cumpleaños* is over, meaning that everyone has eaten, the kitchen has been thoroughly cleaned, and most of the guests have left, which is usually not until at earliest 2am. When I asked her if everything was okay she replied simply that she had to go. I told her that typically one doesn’t leave before the *cumpleaños* is over and she just repeated that she had to go and asked me if I could help her get the Balogun’s attention. Shortly, after

speaking with him she left. Later he told me that she had to leave because she'd received a call from Amadou telling her that he and his first wife would be arriving shortly and that she should leave before their arrival. This made the Balogun question: a) what kind of polygamous household did Amadou have?; and b) whether or not he wanted a goddaughter that was going to be unable to fulfill her duties because of her status as a fourth wife to a fellow priest.<sup>59</sup> In the godparent and godchild relationship, there should be no interference by the godchild's spouse or partner. For the Balogun, this was an unprecedented incident because in his experience, and that of the other polygamous men he knew, a man did not hide one wife from the other. Even though according to the protocol of this community, as she was there in the capacity of a godchild at her godfather's *cumpleaños*, she was supposed to stay no matter what, the Balogun realized the extreme awkwardness of her position and gave his acquiescence for her swift and immediate departure.

The other wives with whom I spoke were involved in what they termed more "traditional" polygamous relationships. They attended events along with their co-wives and actively participated in the rearing of each other's children. Although the women sometimes had problems amongst themselves, they were very adept at working them out often times without the intervention of the husband (although in some cases he would be called to intervene). One of the Balogun's long-time goddaughters, Ana, had been involved in a polygamous relationship for almost fifteen years before the death of her husband. When we spoke, she talked about why she had decided to enter into this kind of a relationship.

Well, I won't lie when I met him was immediately attracted to him. He was very up front initially and at first I was very hesitant because I thought well how much would I get to see him, wouldn't

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<sup>59</sup> The Balogun had not yet begun the process of giving her beads and warriors so the relationship was far from formalized, leaving him with the option of changing his mind based on this experience.

his wife have a problem with this? What about the children, all of it, you know, but I was still curious. So we began seeing each other and I would see him about twice a week and then after three months or so I was invited to his house to meet his family. I was so nervous, but the wife was gracious and the children treated me with respect. He didn't necessarily show affection to either one of us but I somehow felt apart of it all. It was weird but cool. After that, sometimes when we went out he'd bring his son. He slowly explained to me how it all worked and that basically his first wife was the *Iyaile*, the head wife, and ultimately would have to weigh in on his decision to take me on as a wife and that it would be my responsibility to coordinate nights he would spend with me with her or any other kind of important household and family decisions. If I wanted to I would be able to participate in helping to raise the kids. The one thing he did tell me that was hard for me was that he wouldn't be having any children with me. He had promised his first wife that he would not have children with any of the other co-wives. After six months, his wife and I met to discuss everything. I thought that it would be awkward but she was so calm and poised. She laughed at how nervous I was. You know, I was afraid she was going to be a real b- to me, you know. But it was fine. We even became friends and even now she calls me and we talk and my stepson comes to stay with me upstate in my country house. So anyway, back to the story, then I was invited for rituals and ceremonies at the house. Eventually, after a year, we did a formal ceremony in front of his ancestral shrine and his family, and we were married. I realized that it was an arrangement that suited my lifestyle. I was an artist so I travelled a lot and really didn't have time for a "full-time" family but yet I had one and a man that I loved dearly. I had time to pursue my own interests while having familial responsibilities that didn't consume all of my time. It also worked for his other wives because we all shared the burden so that no one woman was overwhelmed with all the responsibilities. The children knew who we were and knew that at any time they would be able to reach one of us. It was really a wonderful thing...

In the Balogun's case the matter of childrearing had not been a shared responsibility and even though he publicly proclaimed his polygamous lifestyle, his only daughter, Carolina, had not understood that she was part of a polygamous household until she turned 15 and had a confrontation with one of the Balogun's new wives and her children. Although she had met the other wives over the years, she had never known or understood the level of intimacy between these women and her father. She now claims this is why she would never have a polygamous relationship.

Dude, I didn't grow up with it. It's one thing if I'd have been informed and have had some kind of inkling about the relationship between these women and my father. The only one I ever saw often was the last wife and she treated my mother with such disrespect and I felt like my father allowed it so to me that's what it was to be polygamous. You let the new pussy disrespect the old. Nah ah, that shit wasn't goin' to happen to me.

When I spoke to the Balogun about it, he agreed that he should have approached the familial arrangements of his polygamous family better because he wanted to see his daughter married to a "real Yoruba man" (meaning a polygamous one), and he was aware that it would never happen because he hadn't set as good of an example as he should have. He did say though this was why he spoke with the young men in the religion about polygamy and about how to live this tradition in a manner that would be beneficial for the community. He hoped that they could learn as much from his mistakes as from his successes. "I was a novice in this. I fucked up, just as much as I did things right."

The Balogun has great concerns for the African American orisha community, and the African American community in general, because the majority of the women within both of these communities are unmarried, single mothers, or recently divorced. Many of the women who come to see him in his capacity as a priest, do so in regards to keeping a man or getting one. It is

the Balogun's personal theory that if they were willing to share a man then they would all at least be involved in a committed, honest, and secure relationship.

Sean's wife, Akina, is a young half Jamaican/half African American woman who works at JP Morgan in the financial analytics department. She and I spoke one day about her decision to marry Sean and to be open to participating in a polygamous relationship.

I knew that Sean was a polygamous man when I met him, even though over the course of our relationship he's never been with anyone else. But it is a strong possibility in the future. We are in agreement though that I will have the final say on the women who join our household and that there are very strict requirements for these women. I would prefer that he not have children with the others only because then it limits the amount of time that he gets to spend with his children and children need a father present in the house. Also I've spoken with his father and it's really a lot of responsibility. The other thing is that I grew up in a household where my father's cheating drove my mother to depression, to bouts and fits of crying and arguing and all that humiliation. I am of the mind that men cheat anyhow so at least this way I know that I don't have to worry about being lied to, deceived or humiliated. He can't just go out and just grab whomever he wants. It's much more complicated than that. He has to check with Elegba and the ancestors first about the woman and then I have to vet her so he's not in for a smooth ride with this (she laughs as she shakes her head). Not at all!

Akina's decision to pursue a polygamous family structure stems from her desire to live as a Yoruba woman but also from her personal experience with the emotional and mental damage that infidelity can cause in a marriage. From the rest of our conversation, I gathered that she harbored strong fears about how she would deal with issues such as jealousy and raising children to understand that their family structure was no less valid for being non-normative in American society. She often lamented the fact that there wasn't some kind of "polygamous women's

*egbe*<sup>60</sup> because she wanted to be able to speak freely with other women to learn strategies for navigating future issues and problems. When I mentioned that she could speak with the few other women that we'd both met in the *ile* who were polygamous, she hesitated before finally responded that she knew she could learn certain things from them but none of them were first wives, as she was, and therefore she didn't believe that they could provide comprehensive insight into her situation.

Devotees readily admit that at times it has been difficult. The male devotees discuss the difficulty of having to figure out how to deal with two or three different personalities, and balancing treating them all equally so as to avoid jealousy. This is of course not always possible and managing their jealousy is one of the hardest adjustments that all the female devotees cited. Moreover, overcoming ingrained societal norms about marriage and family took both time and deep spiritual meditation. Everyone involved stressed that respect and honesty were the fundamental principles that would ensure a successful polygamous family. However, the extent of the degree of honesty and openness comes into question when all parties involved in a polygamous family situation, particularly children, are unaware of this fact. I found this especially strange given the fact that the Balogun emphasized legacy and continuity of Yoruba religious and accompanying sociocultural values within his biological and spiritual family. Given the completely different sociocultural environment, devotees must adapt this social tradition to suit contemporary times and therefore it appears that women have much more say about the specifics of the arrangement than Yoruba wives may have had in the past. The limiting of the husband's ability to have children outside the first marriage stands out notably as an example of

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<sup>60</sup> *Egbe* is the Yoruba word that best translates to association. Within the orisha community in NYC, *egbes* are usually associations in which *santeros* of the same orisha are members. They meet regularly and organize community events focused around their orisha. For example, there is the Oshun *Egbe*, the Yemaya *Egbe*, and the Obatala *Egbe*. The Yemaya *Egbe* is responsible for the annual Yemaya festival that takes place on Rockaway Beach the first or second Sunday in September.

this. It is a brave choice on the part of the women who are not first wives, and therefore not legal or legitimate in the eyes of the law, because outside of the community and their own households, they are not seen as respectable married women. Most of them admit that only some family members and friends, mostly female, are aware of their family situation and that those individuals, although they respect it, do not at all understand these women's decision.

### **Bodily (Re)Orientation**

Devotees must learn a new way of relating to and disciplining their bodies on many different levels within orisha devotion. Devotees learn how to restrict the body's food intake because of certain *ewes* they find out about through divination. As we have seen in the previous chapter, they learn how to move their bodies in specific dance moves that simultaneously implore and honor the orisha. They learn how to salute *santeros* and the orisha by *odubale*-ing, laying prostrate on a floor (and this can be any floor), in order to show respect and ask for blessings. While this was the norm amongst ethnic Yorubas in Nigeria,<sup>61</sup> it was a learned behavior among African American devotees. This manner of showing respect to the elders was foreign and had to be mentally reconciled with Western notions of respect for elders. A different mental and physical approach is required in that you now have to put your ego aside and acquire comfortableness with intentionally lowering yourself and being vulnerable to another individual.

Devotees' bodies, especially those in priestly training, are religiously (re)made through discipline. This way of viewing the body finds parallels in the making of Buddhist religious bodies among monks (Bernstein 2013). In many religious traditions, the body is viewed as a portal that can either be "open" or "closed" (Bernstein's 2013, p. 140). While the body should be

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<sup>61</sup> This way of greeting your elders is still very a part of Nigerian Yoruba culture. I have observed ethnic Yoruba friends over the years saluting their aunts, uncles and any other elders at family gatherings. I also have noted it amongst ethnic Yoruba students here at Harvard when greeting ethnic Yoruba professors.

open to receive orisha, eguns and the spiritual messages from these entities, it should be closed to negative energy and spiritual forces. This is one of the reasons devotees wear their *ilekes* (orisha beads) and other physical adornment to prevent negative energy from accumulating in the physical body or to prevent negative spirits from attaching themselves to an individual. White clothing is also worn during most ritual ceremonies and rituals to attract bright and positive energy. Devotees cover their heads in white to attract positive thoughts, actions, and energy, while keeping negative thoughts, actions, and energy away. In addition to being the color of Obatala, the father of all the orisha and the god of wisdom, it is also a color that reflects and does not absorb, like the color black for instance.

In *Lucumi* orisha tradition the body is also discussed in terms of “clean” and “not clean,” states which arise from sexual activity. The term “clean” refers to a body free of extemporaneous energy, whether positive or negative. *Santeros* make references to the fact that ritual specialists should have “clean” hands, meaning their energy should be positive and therefore more able to effectively perform ritual ceremonies and tasks. When a devotee is “not clean,”<sup>62</sup> meaning s/he has either engaged in sexual activity within the past 24 hours, a devotee cannot touch the orisha.

A few senior *santeros* have explained to me that an individual’s body after sex still carries the energy of the partner, and sexual energy in and of itself is a hot energy. One should not approach the orisha with a “hot” energy for it may incite them, the orisha are best kept calm and “cool.”<sup>63</sup> Also the orisha are deities and basic simple respect demands that devotees approach them with their own cool energy especially if one is about to work with them in order to effect positive transformation or to propitiate them.

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<sup>62</sup> I note here that devotees do not use the word “dirty” except in jest when someone shows up for a religious ceremony and is limited in their capacity to assist, devotees will often joke, e.g., “you dirty son of a bitch, you’re just trying to get out of work!”

<sup>63</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of “hotness” and “coolness” among the orisha, see Olupona (2011).

Menstruating women are kept as far away from the orisha as possible until their cycle has run its course. Women use the term “*chekua*,” instead of the terminology of “clean” and “not clean” so as not to indicate that menstruation is somehow a dirty rather than natural occurrence. The orisha are life forces and should not be kept in the same room as egun shrines (though space does not always permit this separation, especially in urban settings), or be touched or handled by menstruating women.<sup>64</sup> During menstruation a woman’s body is, in *ocha* speak, “passing *Iku* (death),” in the form of an unfertilized dead egg. Menstruating women were not even allowed to come downstairs while the orisha were being fed (receiving the blood of sacrificed animals), and were barred from going into the kitchen lest they touch some ritual object currently being used during ceremonies at the Balogun’s house. Female devotees do not even wear their *ilekes* during their cycles in order not to leave the energy of death on those beads of life and protection. While there are women who balk at this restriction, because they believe it’s reflective of a chauvinistic attitude, the majority of the female devotees I met didn’t feel as if it was a chauvinistic restriction. Rather they felt that it made sense not to bring the energy of death to the shrine of a life force, where devotees go to propitiate deities and seek blessings. Menstruation is a natural fact of life and the restriction is not about controlling women’s bodies but rather about safeguarding the sacred.

It’s about energy, baby. Energy can pass person to person, through touch, through objects, you name it. So if the energy of death is passing through you, why would you want to touch life force? Why would you want to pass on that energy of death? I don’t understand those women who try to make this into some kind of feminist issue. It’s basic simple nature.

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<sup>64</sup> Of course there are exceptions to this rule particularly for priestesses who may for whatever reason have to touch their orisha during their cycles. Most though will call another *santero* to come and assist them so as not to directly touch the orisha.

An elderly priestess of Oya explained this to me after I'd declined the invitation to salute the *ocha* of a priestess of Yemaya and had been gently rebuked when I'd stated it was because my godfather had told me to never touch or even salute the orisha when I was *chekua*. Some *santeras* question the reasons behind why they are not even able to touch their female orishas when they are menstruating. But elder *santeros* caution younger devotees to be overly cautious about perceiving the orisha as human beings and not supernatural forces unbound by our physical limitations.

### **Spiritual (Re)orientation**

Shannon's statement in the opening ethnographic vignette about "deciding that this was more important," is indicative of the shifting of priorities and rearranging of customs and habits that devotees experience as they work on "becoming orisha people." Many talk about adopting a new "outlook" on life, where personal occurrences and current events are viewed through a spiritual lens. In his work on religious pluralism, *Strangers in This Land* (2010), E. Allen Richardson stated religion is not only about "acts of ritual and prayer but the way the world is perceived and dealt with." (p. 10). For their part, devotees view the world in terms of how the different energies of the orisha impact and influence both the physical and spiritual environment around them. This way of approaching life in general enables orisha devotees to interpret events in drastically different ways than say either Christians or Muslims. Daily interaction with orisha and eguns push devotees to learn not only about themselves, their destiny, and their place in the world, but also how these energies manifest and impact the material world in which they live. A reconceptualization of the world and everyday interaction with it on a spiritual and physical level requires time and practice.

Wendy is a lively and extremely vivacious 41-year-old recently initiated priestess that I met through a friend of a friend and who had also attended Ohio State University for her masters. She was originally from New Jersey, where she had found a community of Cuban and African American *Lucumi* devotees who had initiated her into the religion. She recalled how long it took her to develop her own routine—becoming accustomed to having a table and to regularly communicating with her eguns and then her orisha once she made *ocha*.

I came from a Christian background so I found it hard at first to just sit down and stare at a glass of water on a table with a lit white candle. I thought that communicating with the eguns was catching the spirit, the way they did in church. I sat for hours and hours before I thought I saw something in the glass. Whenever I asked my godmother, she said just keep looking, eventually you will begin to see eguns. Ask them who they are and how they have come to help you. At first, I was scared but soon I started hearing voices that I knew weren't mine and I knew I wasn't going crazy, partly because I had been told about the different ways that the egun might come to me, also because the things they were saying to me made sense and were about the things I was doing at that time.

Like what for instance? I asked.

Well, I was thinking of starting this side business with this woman I knew from work, to make jewelry and bags, I would design and she would make them. Our first meeting, she showed up late and didn't have any of her jewelry samples with her. The second meeting, she canceled less than five minutes before. I was really becoming unsure and had prayed while sitting at my table one night about it. Sure enough, a day or two later I bumped into her in the ladies room at work and she apologized again and tried to discuss setting up another meeting. I heard a voice in my head saying "Bullshit." I was surprised because I don't really curse that much and then the voice was like, "Don't do business with this lady. It will be a waste of time." I was so happy that my egun had responded that I wasn't even overly upset about not starting this side project which

would have brought in much needed extra cash. After this experience, I think it became easier for my egun to communicate with me or maybe just for me to hear them. My dreams became more intricate and I would get hints and clues about things and people. You know, things not to do... or things would happen in my dreams and then happen a day or two later. That was the weirdest because I would dream about seeing someone in a certain place and then it would happen. Now I realize that they were showing me that they were for real... It took years of sitting at my table, praying to my ancestors and learning how to open myself to them. It's funny because when I was young I used to think that I heard or saw things in my room, but it scared me so I never really knew that I could ask them who they were and what they wanted, to me they were maybe ghosts and ghosts were bad scary things (she scrunches up her face and wiggles her fingers in a mockingly menacing way). I think most children are born with the ability to see the spirits but in our society we are taught that to see or communicate with dead people is wrong. You can go to a graveside and say a prayer or visit your deceased relative, but you can't have a *misa* for them or ask them to invoke themselves, "no no that's just devil worship," as my aunt likes to say. It's sad that we're taught to suppress this spiritual side of ourselves. It makes it so much harder when you're older to take down your barriers and let your eguns in to help and guide you. Even if you have a natural ability for it, like I learned I did, it's still really really hard.

A lot of devotees in their mid-20s and older that I spoke with expressed the same sentiment about how hard it was to take down the spiritual barriers that had been inadvertently erected by their Christian or simply Western upbringing. While it was okay to "catch the spirit" in Church on Sunday, it was not seen as acceptable to deliberately seek to contact and communicate with eguns in spiritual ritual ceremonies.

By choosing to live in a multicultural cosmopolitan environment like NYC, devotees must learn to navigate between two different realities—one religious and the other the larger society in which they study, work, and socialize. Many devotees seek to keep these two realities

separate in that many of their colleagues, non-orisha devotee friends, and even family are not aware of their religious devotion.

Their existence is truly reflective of the complexity of New World African diasporic identity. In his work on orisha communities in the diaspora, Olabiyi Yai (2001) commented that "...It is reflective of the existence, permanence and indeed cultivation of the phenomenon of double or multiple religious and cultural loyalties" (p. 246), is particularly apt for these African American *Lucumi* devotees because many are forced to inhabit two different cultural realities and demonstrate two different cultural loyalties amongst their African American family, and within the larger African American community. They also strive to be loyal to their understanding of being "African," and practicing an "African religion," while simultaneously being religiously loyal to the Afro-Cuban tradition and context in which this religion survived, thrived, and has (re)produced itself for almost 300 years. While the devotees' idealized desire is for a Pan-African collectivity whereby religion would be secondary to racial solidarity, their reality is one of disunity, religious hostility, and increasing marginalization even within their own New York City orisha community.

This alternative religious path life leaves many devotees, particularly the younger generation, feeling isolated from both the African American community and the larger American society because of their religious practice. In my interviews and within larger group discussions, Christian religious intolerance within both the larger society and especially amongst the African American community is often seen as the cause.

Whether people want to be honest about it or not, we live in a Christian society, built on Christian ethics and what not. In PC talk, there's a separation of church and state but when only up until some years ago, you swore to tell the truth on a Bible in legal court...Presidents and officials are sworn in on a Bible...man, come on, who's fooling who here.

For these African American devotees, Christianity and Christians are perceived as religiously intolerant and religiously hostile. Their personal interactions with Christians, and other religious practitioners, have also contributed to shaping their religious subjectivities by causing devotees to embody suspicion, reluctance, and fear about disclosing their religious faith.

### **Inter-Personal Relationships and Becoming Orisha People**

#### *Religious Intolerance*

While the bodies of devotees become the property of orisha once they are made and become objectified by the eguns who use them as vessels through which to manifest themselves, that body still has to live in the contemporary Western, predominantly Christian cosmopolitan urban world that is New York City. This external social reality often comes into conflict with the internal religious reality of devotees. Their religious observances, taboos, and rituals come into conflict with the social, political and economic observances and rituals of the larger American population.<sup>65</sup> A stark example of how this conflict can have economically and materially damaging effects is a situation involving Sean. As a child of the deity Elegba, god of communications and crossroads, Sean has specific taboos that he must observe including not wearing red, one of the deity's principal colors, and not acting as chauffeur, transporting people from one place to another unless he is specifically going to the same destination, just to name a few. At various points in his teenage and adult life, his observation of these restrictions has led to tense situations in both his professional and private life.

In an interview, he recounted an experience he had working on a job that had a strong worker's union. The union had the tradition of wearing red shirts on Thursday to show union

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<sup>65</sup> I must thank my colleague Jack Hamilton for pointing out the ritualistic aspects of particular observances in American society.

solidarity. Sean instead wore either a maroon or orange shirt on these days. For the first few weeks, nothing was said but after a while he was approached by one of the union officers about not wearing a red shirt. Sean explained that for personal reasons he did not wear red, and wore maroon or orange instead to show his support and solidarity with the union. Although the union officer seemed to accept his explanation and shared it with the other union members in the garage, about a month later the wheel on Sean's new motorcycle was punctured and the custom-leather seat slashed while parked in the private employee garage. A fellow employee later told him that some guys in the union had done it because he would not wear the red shirt on Thursdays. He left this job shortly thereafter, without ever getting any restitution even though everyone knew a union member had committed the crime. The union's ritual of wearing red on Thursdays although not religious was a requirement of membership, which contradicted Sean's own personal religious requirement to follow the dictates of his orisha. In this instance, for Sean there was no way to honor the observances of both his union and his religion. Like other devotees in similar situations, Sean chose his religion over his economic and material affiliation.

During the interview, I asked Sean why he simply had not informed them that he didn't wear red for religious reasons. Sean replied that he had not felt comfortable telling the union officer that his religious beliefs forbade him from wearing the color red, because he felt that the officer—a White Irish-American Catholic from an overwhelmingly White neighborhood in Long Island—would have reacted negatively to his African religious practice. The negative reactions he has received throughout his life from schoolmates, colleagues, and even girlfriends have made him wary of revealing this part of his life to any non-devotee.

Devotees posit that the underlying cause for these sometimes emotionally, financially, politically or socially devastating experiences is the lack of tolerance for religious diversity

within American society. Considering how the news over the past few years has borne witness to the increasing level of religious intolerance in America—the 2010 Sikh temple shooting incident in Wisconsin, the attempt to prevent a Texas Santeria priest from ritually sacrificing animals in his home, and the recent attempts to block the construction of mosques in Murfreesboro, Tenn. and in New York City, near ground zero, which was referred to as “one of the most powerful and dramatic firestorms in the history of American religious life” (Carroll 2012, p. 305)—it is not hard to understand devotees’ position. A 2012 Pew Report on religious intolerance states that religious hostilities in the United States increased on both governmental and social levels: “In the year ending in mid-2010, there was an increase in the number of incidents in the U.S. at the state and local level in which members of some religious groups faced restrictions on their ability to practice their faith...The U.S. also experienced an increase in social hostilities involving religion during this same period. A key factor behind the increase was a spike in religion-related terrorist attacks in the U.S. The increase also reflects a rise in the number of reported religion-related workplace discrimination complaints” (Pew Research Center 2012).

Within the larger American society, the tolerance for religious difference is decreasing instead of increasing despite the fact that religious **diversity** in the United States is on the rise (Pew Research 2008). One, however, does not find the same kind of diversity within the Black community. Although there is no specific data on how this level of religious hostility manifests within the Black community, the experiences of many devotees have attested to a strong, steady, and continued religious hostility towards African diasporic religions. These statistics are actualized among the devotees within their own communities and even within their own families.

### *Religious Dissonance and Triple Consciousness*

“But why do we have to meet in the church?” This was the question that Mercy, a middle-aged priestess with who had about four years of *ocha* at this time, posed to the minister with whom she was trying to organize a community event. The priestess wanted to organize a meeting in her local community (predominantly Black) about the state of the community—drugs, high school truancy, and gentrification. She had approached a few local leaders, business owners, a pastor, and a local schoolteacher to propose this idea. They were all very supportive until she suggested that they meet in the common space room in a nearby building. The pastor, along with the other leaders, wanted the meeting to be held in the church. She explained that as she wasn’t Christian and didn’t want to assume that everyone attending the meeting would be as well, she thought it more prudent to hold the meeting in a neutral space. Her insistence that the meeting take place in a neutral space proved to be the end of this short-lived alliance. In the end, she went ahead with a meeting in the common space room but only one other leader came and attendance was very sparse as the pastor had let it be known that he was offended by her decline of the offer to meet in the church. For this young priestess this was a clear example of her African American community’s inability to embrace religious plurality or religious neutrality even for the betterment of their larger community.

You know, I expect this kinda stuff from White people but from a New York City African American community, I just don’t get it. I mean I thought we’d all embraced and come to terms with our African heritage. People taking heritage tours to Africa and celebrating Kwanzaa.

Whatever, I guess...is it really so hard for us to put religious differences aside and work together? Disappointment and a feeling of rejection are sometimes emotions experienced by devotees in their interactions with African American Christians. Mercy’s statement reflects a genuine confusion amongst devotees as to why it is that African Americans will embrace African clothing, names, “holidays,” art, or food, but not indigenous African religious traditions.

Devotees perceive the pervasiveness of Christianity among African Americans and the demonization of African-derived religions in popular media to be the root causes of this problem.

Recent religious surveys show that 83% of African Americans identify as Christians (Pew 2009). In the “Other” category, there is no specific identification of how many people identified themselves as Orisha devotees versus Pagans or Baha’i. In articles and books written on African American religion, Christianity is definitively identified as the faith of Black Americans to the exclusion of other religions. There are small acknowledgements that other religious faiths, Islam, Orisha devotion, or Buddhism are also faiths that African Americans practice, but by and large Christianity is the dominant faith. For devotees who do not adhere to Christianity, it is very difficult to carve out a space in the African American religious landscape much less the larger American religious imagination.

African Americans have long had a complicated history with Africa, both as a material reality and as a symbol (Long 1986; Palmié 2008). As a symbol, it has served as an organizing principle around which African Americans have sought to reclaim a “golden past” in order to bolster a beleaguered past and reclaim a sense of self that didn’t begin and end with chattel slavery. As a material reality, however, it has been a place from where many African Americans sought to distance themselves, especially when it came to matters of African indigenous religious faith and tradition particularly because of the long history of European denigration of African peoples and their cultures.<sup>66</sup>

From the manner in which academic studies of African American religion has largely characterized it as Christian, one would get the impression that African religious practices only

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<sup>66</sup> Tracey Hucks (2012) does an excellent job of recounting major works from the mid-1560s on that heavily contributed to the wholesale equation of black with “uncivilized,” “barbarous” and “godless.” See also Stewart (2005) for an in-depth discussion of anti-Africanness, and Hood (1994) for a discussion of the negative portrayals of blackness in Christian tradition.

survived in the Caribbean and Latin America; however, the United States did have, and in some places still have, traditions of conjure, hoodoo, and Vodun (Chireau 2003; Hazzard-Donald 2013; Hurston 1990). Slaves were not *tabula rasa* (Frazier 1966; Smallwood 2007) when they arrived in the United States as is clearly demonstrated in the work of Harry Middleton Hyatt and his astounding collection, *Hoodoo-Conjuration-Witchcraft-Rootwork*, anthropologists Lorenzo Dow Turner and Melville Herskovits, or the foundational work on slave religion by Albert Raboteau (1978), among many others. Although not all of these spiritual practices could be characterized as “organized religions” in the sense of having a structure of deities, lesser spirits, priests and the like, they were still strong spiritual and religious practices that aided enslaved African Americans to find survival and coping strategies to navigate slavery, and intra-racial social and economic problems and situations (Chestnutt 2002; Chireau 2003). Contemporary popular discussions of African American religion tends to elide this part of African American religious history in order to proudly participate in a European aestheticized “politics of respectability” (Higginbotham 1993), whereby people of African descent are not associated with their “heathenish,” “primitive” African past.

This demonization of Africa, but particularly African religion, has colored African American knowledge, perception, understanding and ability to relate to African diasporic religious practices. The history of anti-Black racism (Gordon 1995; Price 2009) in Western society has created a situation in which many people of African descent fear identifying and openly acknowledging these religious traditions for fear of being considered “backwards” or “uncivilized.” Based on encounters during the course of my fieldwork research and the personal experiences of my interlocutors, I have found that the misconceptions about animal sacrifice, possession, and ancestral worship largely prevent African American Christians from breaching

the religious divide to gain more light about the religious devotion of their fellow African Americans. The “inter-diasporan blinders” (p. 20) of which Sheila Walker (2001) speaks have made ruptured family ties and friendships daily realities for these African American devotees.

*“You Cannot Worship the Devil in My House”*

Angela, a thirty-something year old devotee, recounted how her grandmother shouted those words at her one night when she came home to find that the small ancestral altar she had erected in the basement had been smashed to pieces and then dumped in a garbage bag. “I cried as I went through the garbage bag and saw all the smashed glasses and the smashed frame where my grandfather’s picture had been.” Her grandmother had removed the picture and to this day Angela says she has no idea what her grandmother did with it. The next day her grandmother asked her to leave even though she knew Angela didn’t have alternative housing. She ended up sleeping on her godfather’s couch for a week before she moved in with a friend. Her tragically sad story is not so uncommon among African American Yoruba devotees. I have heard stories about things being thrown away and individuals being thrown out more than I can recount here. The central theme in all of these incidents is the notion that the devotee is somehow “worshipping the devil.” As a result many of them learned to never discuss their religious beliefs with other African Americans even if they considered them close friends for fear of ostracization or uncomfortable encounters.

One can say that devotees are continuing the practice of occluding their religious way of life just as slaves did in Cuba to evade detection and reprisal. The difference is that in a supposedly religiously plural society it should not be necessary. Although no longer enslaved and forced to pretend to practice Christianity, devotees still fear social and legal reprisals and

therefore do not feel socially and/or physically safe to openly declare or share their religious devotion. In fact, this has become so inscribed in their interactions with the outside world that most devotees when put in a situation where sharing their religion would alleviate or avoid a problematic outcome chose not to for fear of others' reaction.

### Triple Consciousness

The multiple realities which these devotees live calls to mind Du Bois's double-conscious except that when one takes into consideration the fact they are non-Christian African Americans, one can see that in fact their lives reflect a "triple consciousness."<sup>67</sup> They are always hyperaware of their religious otherness and are conscious of how African-American Christians see them as a "Black Religious Other." Unlike Fanon's (1967) triple consciousness, this is not about the space that exists between the Black and White body, as the Black body seeks acceptance from the White but is rejected and therefore rendered as a non-entity and is acutely aware of this disembodiment.<sup>68</sup> The African American orisha devotee is made to feel like an "other" by a Black body that resembles her but does not (or will not) recognize her. If double consciousness is about being aware of how a White other views you and how this then makes you hyperaware of your blackness and the wretchedness attached to it by White society, then triple consciousness here in my formulation is about being simultaneously aware of the racial marking of your Black body and also the spiritual marking of your African-derived spirituality not only by the White other but by a Black brother or sister. It's almost as if they exist in a zone of "not being" African

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<sup>67</sup> In the introduction to *Afro-Latin@ Reader* (2010), Roman and Flores talk about "triple consciousness" (pp. 14-15) in regards to being Latin@, a Negro, and an American. Their intention is to demonstrate the complexity of the question of the color line in contemporary American society, and expand the conversation about being Black in America, to include Afro-Latinos.

<sup>68</sup> Fanon's notion of "zone of nonbeing" (1967, p. 113). I must thank Jack Taylor (2007) for bringing this aspect to my attention.

American, but yet they are not accepted as being “African” by African-born devotees so they exist in this liminal space. These devotees, however, have chosen to use this betwixt and between status as a catalyst to create their subjectivity and religious identity within this space. Instead of rendering this space as a negative and one of non-being, they have created their religious being at this religiocultural crossroads. Moreover, they are particularly able to do this because their subjectivity does not come into being through a dialectical process but rather a dialogical one in which the other voices are those of spirits and deities. They do not look to the White “other” to validate them although they are very much aware of the control this White other still has over the larger society, **but** not over their religious way of life.<sup>69</sup> They must carve out and create their own Black Yoruba subjectivity where the Black is African American and the Yoruba *Lucumi*. But like any other conscious and deliberate choice, it is not without its social, political, and economic consequences.

### Fragile Friendships

In the course of a conversation one day during an Elegba middle day (the day after an initiation takes place and the *iyawo* is presented to the community in an outfit specific to the *iyawo*'s orisha) *ocha* event, Wendy and I ended up talking about being Yoruba and how it affected so many different aspects of a devotee's life. We went outside and to sit at a quite unoccupied table in the backyard of the Bedford-Stuyvesant brownstone where the *ocha* had taken place. She shared with me how the most surprising and hurtful reactions had come from people in her New Jersey hometown that she had thought were friends, as well as from new people she had met in Columbus, Ohio and with whom she had thought she was forming real friendships.

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<sup>69</sup> This might be why they want to keep it out of public view or from under the auspices of institutionalized urban civil society (this will be discussed briefly in the conclusion).

The craziest thing anyone ever said to me was that “I threatened their relationship with Jesus.”

Really? I asked her.

Can you believe that shit? I thought me and this chick were mad cool. We’d met up for tea or lunch once a week the first month I was here and then she’d invited me with her and husband and his friend to go to the Pumpkin festival in the neighboring town. We had plans to attend an upcoming OSU football game. We’d even started to talk about spring break plans.

So what happened? I asked.

Well, at the festival we started talking about religion because we had been talking about the origin of Halloween. I’m into that stuff plus I have this egun who’s a Celtic witch so I’ve done loads of research, anyway, she was like, “Why do you know so much about that stuff?” and I was like because it’s a nature worshipping religion, just like mine and she was like, “What do you mean like yours?” and I told her that I was Yoruba and explained a little bit about it and she seemed interested and asked questions and never once even gave a hint that she was weirded out by it or anything. Right? I mean we all even made tentative movie plans for later that week when they dropped me home that night. Then when I called a few days later to see about the movie, she was really weird and distant on the phone and when I asked if anything was wrong, she said something about a sick relative or something so I was like no worries, we’ll talk later then. Days went by, I called back to see if everything was okay but got no response, then the day after I called I received an email telling me how she couldn’t be friends with me because I wasn’t Christian and she thought my non-belief would threaten her relationship with Jesus. She would pray for my soul and all this other crap. I was like what the hell? This chick is cray cray. I was so confused. How could my religious beliefs threaten your relationship with Jesus? That’d be like me saying that being friends with her would threaten my relationship with my eguns. She has nothing to do with that relationship, just like I have nothing to do with her and Jesus. I can’t even be like she’s the only one, especially in Ohio, that said something like that to me. You know

what, it just made me even less likely to talk to other African American Christians about my religion or invite them to my home.

While I had experienced a similar coolness with a number of African American Christians in my department of African American and African Studies, the most hurtful experience I had in Columbus was with a Turkish Muslim woman whom I'd adored. I decided to share my own experience with Wendy. I had met my friend in the library in the course of going for the same Fanon book and we had bonded instantly. We began meeting in the library daily, cooking at each other's home at least twice a week, watching a movies at my place almost every Sunday afternoon, and including each other in social activities within our various groups of friends. When I graduated and was moving back to New York City, we cried because we knew it would be awhile before we saw each other again. It turned out to be even longer than that. At first we stayed in contact via email and weekly phone calls and then one week she didn't call and when I called I couldn't reach her. I tried emailing her but still received no response. Eventually I found out from a mutual friend (who was also Muslim) that not having me around had given her time to think about the fact that I was a bad influence on her because some of the activities in which she'd participated in at my house that were spiritual on my part (celebrations for my dead ancestors—a party for my mother and another for my grandfather) were in actuality “antithetical to the teachings of the Qu’uran,” and my religion was “iconoclastic.” She had also mentioned that I drank alcohol and so had everyone else present at my parties (I made her a special non-alcoholic drink). In sum, she felt that “being my friend had made her a bad Muslim.” I was extremely hurt and upset about losing such a good friend in this way but, as I shared with Wendy, “obviously she wasn't really my friend and I'm glad to have known her but better that I found out now that our friendship caused her so much angst than later down the line when I invited her for my initiation.”

By this point, another woman had joined Wendy and me in the backyard and chimed in about her own personal experience with a friend that she'd had for almost 12 years that she'd lost ultimately because of her religious devotion.

It's painful and it's hard. I really do understand what you ladies went through. For me, it was a very good friend from college that I had always been very open and honest with. When I began going to orisha events, I told her about it and how it felt like what I had been searching for spiritually all my life. She was so encouraging. She even came to see my godmother for a reading and came back and did the *ebo* (sacrifice) and everything. She even went with my godbrother to buy her chickens **and everything**. As I became more and more immersed in the religion, I had less and less time to see her but by then she'd started a new job so she didn't have much time either. It never would have occurred to me that she wasn't supportive until Elegba told me during my weekly *obi* session. I thought maybe I'd misunderstood so I had the situation read (divined) by my godmother and sure enough, the orisha were telling me that she wasn't my friend and that she'd been telling our other college friends that I had joined a cult. I honestly didn't want to believe it and I didn't call her for a while but then you know how orisha are, if you pray and have faith, they will eventually show you. I went to an alumni event shortly after and one of our mutual friends, after a few drinks, took me aside and asked me if I was okay and did I need help. I was confused and she told me how our friend had told her that I'd joined a cult and was getting brainwashed. The friend went on to say that they were all really concerned and would help me any way they could. I was just so shocked that I just said, ok, thanks, walked away and never spoke to any of them again. To this day, my friend has no idea why I stopped talking to her. It's easily been five years now. Every now and then I get a message from her through Facebook but I just ignore it. After that I'm so careful with the kinds of relationships I have with people outside of the religion. I always feel that it's possible to become friends, but it's only to a certain level because they'll never know about this important aspect of my life. I've become good at coming

up with excuses about why I have to cancel plans at the last minute if my godmother calls me and she needs my help with something or I'm very careful about not committing myself to weekend trips or just going to a party at one of their friend's houses because I just can't jump up and go anywhere. I have to check first. Then if we go away, I can't share a room with anyone if I have to bring my orisha because they don't know about it and might be uncomfortable. It gets complicated sometimes...

These women's stories of destroyed friendships were not unique. Among the 23 African American women I interviewed, at least two-thirds of them had stories about broken friendships or inchoate friendships that were never really given a chance once the other individuals learned about their religious devotion. These painful experiences have resulted in a cautionary attitude on the part of these devotees and a limiting of the potential in many of their intimate relationships. Take for instance the story of a woman who lost a dear friend because of spiritual information that she had about her friend's newborn but that she knew she couldn't share with her. Nina, an almost 50-year-old devotee had a young female friend whom she had met on her previous job and they had managed to maintain a relationship, meeting for drinks after work or attending concerts and Broadway shows over the course of a few years. Nina was very happy for her young friend when she discovered that she was expecting. After the baby was born, Nina kept trying to make plans to go visit her friend and meet her newborn but either she had car problems or a family emergency would arise or once she lost her phone. Nina began to suspect that something was amiss. "As an orisha person, you work to develop your eguns and your spiritual antenna so when you start seeing things like this it usually means something is amiss." When she attended a *misa*, one of her godsibling's eguns told her that the baby had some *osobo* (negative energy) with him that was extremely strong and that the egun believed it came from the child's grandmother. She tried to get more information from the egun but that's all the egun would

share. She decided to check the problem out (throw obi) with Elegba because she wanted to know what it had to do with her.

When I checked with Elegba, it turned out that the grandmother had cursed the child because she disliked her daughter-in-law so much and the *osobo* was so strong with the child that it could possibly pass to me if I were to be around the child. My first thought was maybe I could help them but when I asked Elegba he said no. I knew my friend was extremely Christian. She never missed a Sunday at church and had even sung in the choir until a year or so ago. She wouldn't understand what I told her and I knew she definitely wouldn't like and really, she wouldn't be willing to do the *ebo* that would clean up that kind of *osobo*. I knew then that our friendship was over because I could only make excuses for so long before she would become suspicious or upset with me. I sent her gift through the mail and I still text her every now and then but our relationship will never be the same.

Sacrificing intimate relationships and friendships have become a part of what it means for these female devotees to become orisha people. Although all of these women were saddened and even devastated over the loss of these relationships, many of them felt that it had been orisha and eguns who had ultimately taken these individuals out of their lives and that they were better off for it in the long term. They expressed the sentiment that it was better to have a superficial relationship with an individual they knew was not judging them than to have a close friendship in which the individual felt negative about something that had become the most important thing in their lives—their religion and the relationships they cultivated with their orisha and eguns.

One woman in her late thirties who had been a devotee for over 12 years went so far as to decide not to cultivate anything more than a superficial acquaintance with individuals who practiced one of the Abrahamic religions, unless they were family members and even with some of those she had limited interactions because of her religious choice. “My friends are Yoruba,

Wiccan, or Vodun. I even have a friend that's Baha'i. I personally wouldn't practice these other religions, but it doesn't bother me in the least that they do. Everyone has to find their path to God. Mine just happens to be a different one!"

The emotional scars that devotees bear become internalized and shape their social interactions with others in the larger society. The constant vigilance against religious discrimination becomes an embodied practice as well. Along with inventive explanations, it becomes a part of their daily manner of being in the world. This kind of restriction on social interactions is stressful and wearing on devotees, and in some cases these experiences have left devotees with certain feelings of hostility towards monotheism, and Christianity in particular. Many of them believe that it is the proselytizing nature of these religions and their claims to worship a singular deity that can only be accessed through the truth inherent in the specific doctrines of these religions that make it difficult to imagine a world in which a truly pluralistically religious society can exist. The nature of monotheism itself does not lend itself to religious pluralism and devotees fear that they will continue to suffer from this stress and marginalization within American society as long as the religious imagination in our society does not expand to include other ontologies and religions.

## **The Making of the Religious Body**

### *Body as Objectified Vessel*

Conjoining spirit and matter, "incarnation" (whether understood as "the word become flesh," "transubstantiation," or, in a broader sense, the "icon" or "spirit possession") describes the process through which the "beyond" to which religion refers (call it the transcendental, spiritual, or invisible) is rendered tangible and becomes present in the world"

- (Meyer and Houtman, 2012, p. 7).

Perhaps the largest (and one of the most sacred) objects used in the mediatory process in orisha devotion **is** the body itself. The body can become possessed by eguns if one is a medium or by one's orisha once an individual has been initiated. Once initiated to one's tutelary orisha, "your body no longer belongs to you." As discussed earlier egun possession can occur spontaneously, but mediums and non-medium devotees are taught to control the body in various ways so as not to allow spontaneous possession outside of a structured spiritual ceremonial environment, such as a *misa*. In allowing themselves to serve as portals for the eguns and the orisha, these *santeros* and mediums are making great personal sacrifice and are performing a public service for the community.<sup>70</sup>

The orisha become tangible by possessing the bodies of their priestesses and priests. Through the embodied practice of dance, initiated devotees communicate with their orisha that they are receptive and open to their possession. In every slap of the drum, a note, a rhythm is communicated to the orisha and devotees pray that they will respond. Sometimes in a flash that orisha will inhabit a devotee's body and that devotee's spirit will no longer be present in this dimension for the period of possession, which can last hours. Once present, the orisha dance, eat, demand their ritual clothes, and most importantly for devotees, offer advice, clean *osobo*, and bring light to the lives of those present who are lucky enough to be addressed.

### *Bodies of Authority or Authorizing Bodies*

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<sup>70</sup> In his work, *Working the Spirit*, Joseph Murphy (1994) highlights this profound aspect of "diasporan spirituality, "service to the spirit is service to the community; and service to the community is service to the spirit" (p. 7). Seligman (2014) also discusses how this foundational principle is embraced and celebrated within the religious transformation of possession priests within Candomblé.

In this hierarchically structured religious tradition, *santeros*, especially senior ones with over 20 years of initiation, are seen as authority figures to be respected and deferred to by those junior to them in almost all instances. *Santeros* are sacred embodiments of their orisha and as such are treated with a reverence approaching that shown to the orisha. At public community ceremonies, they are seated first in the front of the room. When they arrive devotees line up to salute them and receive their blessings. Younger devotees are always cautioned not to “piss off an elder” because the consequences may be that you anger the *santero*’s orisha and could lose that orisha’s blessings or worse incur their wrath.

When food is served, a special table is erected for the most senior *santeros* present and once they are seated, no one can leave the table unless given express permission from the most senior *santero* at the table. Once their plates are placed on the table, they are not to be lifted or removed until the meal is over. *Santeros* are supposed to eat only from sturdy unchipped dishware, use metal utensils and drink from glasses or ceramic cups. Serving the *santeros* table is considered a privilege and those who are selected approach their duty with solemnity and a bit of trepidation because one false move could mean upsetting one of the elders. For a young *santero* or an *aleyo* to be invited to sit at the table is considered one of the highest honors an elder can bestow on a novice devotee, because at the table one is privy to an in-depth, highly esoteric conversation about the orisha, the *odus*, or life in general with views and input from multiple varying and experienced perspectives. This singularly unique event does not occur on a frequent basis, because many elders no longer frequently attend community events.

Because they serve the community in their capacity as masters of ceremony, possession priests, diviners, healers, cooks, etc., this honorable treatment is but one way in which to show gratitude for their service. Unfortunately, in the current climate this respect for eldership is

waning as younger devotees chafe under the rules and regulations of this respectful tradition. I have heard some comment that “Age is arbitrary” or “Age is nothing but a number.” At a recent community meeting regarding the current state of the orisha community in the eastern United States, younger *santeros* vociferously argued with and maligned the elder *santeros* present because of a perceived lack of hands on involvement in their (the younger *santeros*) religious learning. My interlocutors find this both strange and disturbing, because eldership is one of **the** foundational principles of Yoruba society and culture (Lawal et al., 2004). Even if an individual is one day older than you, you refer to them respectfully as your elder. If this foundational principal that has survived all these centuries, is eroded, then devotees wonder what else can be so easily ignored or discarded.

Many elders admit that they suspect that the root cause of this erosion lies with the *santeros* who are shirking their responsibilities as godparents. The godparent-godchild relationship is also undergirded by the foundational principle of respect for eldership. In public community spaces, godchildren are expected to do as told and not to question and/or contradict orders given by their godparent or any other elder *santero*. The community ideal is an obedient godchild that is ever at the ready to assist her godparent, and any other elder during community events, rituals or ceremonies. This does not mean though that the godchild cannot ask questions or must accept mistreatment. Within the community, *aleyos* (though on the bottom rung of the religiosocial totem pole) are still be “taken care of” and given guidance as they advance on this religious path. That is also a part of the duty of *santeros* and a part of the bond forged when *aleyos* first initiate into the tradition with their godparent. The responsibility of taking care of the *aleyo* and ensuring that the godchild is not taken advantage of (or harmed) within the community rests with the godparent. In the course of my fieldwork, I have observed instances in which

*santeros* abused their power and position within the community to either exploit or insult an *aleyo*. I have even personally been on the receiving end of such abusive treatment.

It was the *cumpleaños* of one of the Balogun's elder goddaughters. As her godsister, I was assisting with the food preparation and service. I was in the kitchen waiting for a plate of food to put on the *boveda* when a middle-aged woman entered and demanded to know when the food would be ready. She saw that I was standing holding a plate and just reached over to take it from me. Even though I noticed that she was a priestess by the *ede* (beaded bracelet for the *santero*'s tutelary orisha that a *santero* receives during the initiation ceremony) she was wearing, I slowly pulled the plate out her reach and said calmly, "No this plate is for egun. I was told to make sure they get fed first." She looked at me with a shocked expression on her face and said, "I see, we goin' have to train **this** one!" I felt my head get hot, but I remembered that it was not appropriate to lose my temper with a priestess so I quickly collected the food for the eguns and exited the kitchen. After placing the food on the table, I approached my godfather and quietly told him what had transpired in the kitchen. His immediate response was, "Who is she?" I pointed her out to him and left the matter in his hands. Later that evening, I observed him speaking quietly but sternly with her off to the side. After that, I never had another problem with that priestess.

Unlike some young novice devotees, I had recourse to an elder godparent who stepped in and warned the younger priestesses about the consequences of being disrespectful to an *aleyo*, especially one that was his godchild. Unfortunately, among the larger African American orisha community, *aleyo* has come to mean slave or peon. The breakdown in these social structures within the larger community is particularly worrying to these orisha devotees as it threatens the future survival of the *Lucumi* tradition among African American devotees.

## **Body Possessed**

Mediums and *santeros* have described the reality of possession in many different ways. One described it as a sense of free falling then you're just somewhere else. According to *santeros* and experienced *espiritistas*, during possession your spirit leaves your body and is watched over by your eguns, while another egun or orisha possesses your body and uses it as a vessel to communicate with those present.

Devotees talk about feeling as if "you're falling away from yourself" and how frightening that experience Inherent in allowing your body to become possessed is the trust that you must have in your eguns and/or orisha. Some eguns though are very strong and can possess devotees at will and so rapidly that there is very little warning and lapse time in their taking control of a devotee's the body. This is why devotees are taught to work with their eguns to develop relationships whereby the eguns will not simply manifest themselves spontaneously and without your permission. The relationship that one cultivates with their eguns through the use of a *boveda*, or other sensational forms such as lighting candles in significant spaces, wearing a particular item, or displaying an object for that spirit in your home, aids a devotee in recognizing and knowing that spirit and having that spirit recognize and know the devotee in return. The spirit is also developed so when it does manifest itself, it can communicate effectively and contribute to the amelioration of the life of the devotee or others present.

There is a cognitive disruption that occurs that mediums must simply accept in time. I have seen some devotees wrestle with the loss of awareness and loss of memory that accompanies possession. One priestess talked about her male tutelary deity as being this separate entity with whom she did not identify and how she felt extremely uncomfortable knowing the

deity had the ability to possess her body. I recall noting that there was almost a distasteful note to her tone. Whereas other *santeros* just accept it as being part of their duty, and although the possession may be rough on their bodies, they sometimes seek to be possessed during ritual drumming ceremonies. Devotees describe feeling “out of it” and “disconnected from their surroundings” when their orisha leave after possession. They often ask those present “What happened?” or “Did my orisha have a message for me?”

Paul Stoller’s (1995) theorization of possession mirrors devotees’ description as he emphasizes the embodied experience of possession. Most of the literature in the anthropology of possession tends to make assumptions either about the psychological, theatrical, functionalist, or biological aspect of spirit possession (Boddy 1989; Gell 1980; Gibbal 1988; Kehoe and Giletti 1981; Lambek 1981). Much of it sees spirit possession as a means of protest or as a means of asserting your voice in a society that otherwise ignores, constrains, or devalues you (Beneduce and Taliani, 2006; Boddy 1989). These studies miss, as Stoller points out, the place and significance of embodiment in spirit possession. For Stoller these are very textual analyses of spirit possession that indicate and privilege the Western academic gaze. Stoller reminds us that “[f]or in its textualization the body is robbed of its movements, odors, tastes, sounds-its sensibilities, all of which are potent conveyors of meaning and memory” (p. 30). Spirit possession is an embodied experience where the senses are heightened and the sensorial experience of possession and the space in which it happens is most significant. Studies that focus on the sociocultural aspects of possession either miss out on or elide the fact that the individual is no longer present and the entity that possesses the individual is the one in control and the one participating at that moment in the ritual or ceremony. Also the theories don’t hold true in all places where spirit possession is practiced and has been a part of the religiocultural

traditions for centuries. When orisha or eguns truly possess a *santero* or an *espiritista*, you are no longer dealing with that individual but with a powerful spiritual entity who may or may not have a sociocultural understanding of the society. Regardless, these entities manifest to assist those present with improving either their individual lives or ameliorating a situation within the community.

Ultimately, what matters to devotees and to our purposes here is how the information communicated from the eguns and the orisha through bodily possession have strong impact and guide and shape devotees' lives. For some people, this objectification is difficult to accept especially in the aftermath when devotees are told about what happened during their possession. Orishas have been known to eat fire, put their fingers in light sockets, snatch purses, and climb tall trees. One orisha chased a devotee with a machete lambasting them for a nefarious deed. Orisha also lambast their priests for not understanding and not fully embracing the concept that, "once you make *ocha*, your body no longer belongs to you." There are many stories told within the community by elders to emphasize this point, but the most poignant story I have heard is the one about a rather hefty priestess of Oshun.

The priestess was a very hefty Puerto Rican woman who had almost 20 years of *ocha* when she decided to go on a diet. She was in the process of losing a substantial amount of weight when she was in attendance at a *bembe*. Oshun came down on another priestess and approached her and demanded to know, "Who told you that you needed to lose weight?" The woman was apparently shocked and embarrassed as this was occurring in front of many other attendees. She stuttered as she answered, "*Mi madre*, I'm doing it for my health." To which Oshun replied, "Did I tell you something was wrong with your health? Did I tell you, you were fat? Do you think this

is your body to do with as you please? This is my body and when you need to lose weight, I'll let you know.”

Initiated *santeros* must adjust to the fact that the body over which they once believed they had sole ownership, once consecrated, belongs to the tutelary deity. As a sacred object that body cannot be tattooed or marked in any manner not consistent with the orisha tradition. Even so much as drawing the lines on your face with your finger as people are sometimes wont to do when demonstrating the scarification that is traditional to many ethnic Yoruba is taboo. Both orisha and eguns through divination let individuals know their bodily limitations. Sometimes that even means where that body can or should be present.

The deity herself possessed one of her priestesses to relay a message about the care and maintenance of the vessel in which part of her (the deity's) *ashe* was housed. Oshun claimed ownership of the priestess' body and therefore only she would dictate and judge its size. The priestess' desire to be thinner was secondary to the mandates of her tutelary orisha. The priestess could have, of course, ignored the dictates of Oshun but doing so would have engendered very negative consequences. As it was explained to me, part of this woman's luck and her blessings from her orisha came to her **because** of her stout size. Orisha's concept of beauty and body size is not influenced by the whims of our sociocultural trends, but rather by what is best for that individual, especially when that individual “belongs” to them.

The mediums I met characterized themselves as those who were born with this “gift.” Though some were not thrilled about “passing egun (being possessed),” they nevertheless realized that this gift had been given to them by the orisha and was one that was meant to serve the community. This is one of the responsibilities of which the Balogun speaks when he uses the

term “noblesse oblige”<sup>71</sup> to describe the role of *santeros* within the community. It is the duty of the *santero* to allow the orisha to manifest and communicate warnings, advice or *ebos*—information that will positively transform their lives of others within the community.

My research has shown that possession is more about creating and cultivating relationships with the spirit guides and deities who dwell in other realms. A devotee learns to become accustomed to dialoguing with an entity or force that is outside of herself but that can also “pass” inside of her. It is a relational and dialogical process because devotees and spiritual entities discover each other simultaneously. As a devotee develops her *eguns*, she develops her spiritual insight and *ashe*, which will then assist her in her ability to work with and optimally utilize the *ashe* of the orisha when it is placed in her head. The *eguns* prepare a devotee for the power of the life force that will become an actual physical part of the devotee. The word “passing” is used because the *egun* and the full force of the orisha can’t live inside of a devotee, these entities come through the devotee and then they leave to return to their own dimension or to linger on the human plane to perform the work with which they were tasked. In the process of developing the *eguns*, a devotee’s life becomes intimately intertwined with that of the spirits, particularly if those spirits have been designated as main guides whose duty it is to guide the devotee through the pitfalls of life in order to ensure that she achieves the destiny that was chosen before her spirit came to manifest in the human realm.

### **Hands as Tools of the Orisha**

Through spiritual consecration the body is spiritually marked for identification by the orisha and even other *santeros* who feel the *ashe* of other initiated priestesses/priests. The body and its

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<sup>71</sup> French term meaning “obligation of nobility.” The term describes the unstated responsibility that privileged individuals have towards those who are less privileged.

different parts then become the tools of the orisha. The orisha will work through an initiated devotee in many different ways. Initiated priests are also creators in that they now can make earthly manifestations of the orisha. They become god-producers because the *ashe* that has been placed in them now provides a channel for the orisha to work through them in producing the orisha themselves. One of the most unique, and perhaps most misunderstood, aspects of orisha worship is the construction of the material in orisha worship—orishas make humans and humans produce orisha. The cyclical mediatory relationship is one that concretizes the saying, “We make the gods we worship.”<sup>72</sup> I specifically use the word produce because it is not that priests are making the life force Elegba, that exists independent of all humans, however, because initiated priests have some part of the life force within them (*ashe*), the hands become tools through which the orisha are produced. The *ashe* is channeled through the hands of the *santero* so that he may consecrate the brain coral or conch shell or rock that is to become the orisha Elegba once imbued with life force.

The hands of the *santero* destined to divine are tools in a different manner. These tools are used to peer into the future to heal and to repair that which is broken and ruptured. Although it is the *ashe* in the head of the diviner that aids the diviner to see and ferret out the problems and blessings, it is the hands that do the work of divining. The hands are the tools that must be calmed and kept spiritually clean by coating them with *efun* (crushed white egg shells) before the shells are cast. Even in the exchange of *owo* (money), payment for the divination and the exchange of the objects that are used to assist in the divinatory process, the diviner’s hands are never to be touched because of the energy exchange that could occur. Similarly, in many North American Native American cultures, shamans use their hands to feel and “see” the illness in a

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<sup>72</sup> *Santeros* understand themselves to be producing these deities, but in the discourse devotees use the term “make an orisha” to describe the process through which a deified icon is produced.

patient's body. Prior to these healing sessions, they spiritually clean their hands with heat and/or oil and use them as little as possible for secular activities (Lyon 2004).

### **Bodies that "Work:" Spiritual and Physical Labor in *Lucumi* Orisha Devotion**

"This is a hands on religion! Here you get your hands dirty"

– (the Balogun, Dec 2009)

We were in the basement of the Balogun's house cleaning up after having fed (given blood sacrifice to) the warriors, and Elegba had just told Sean that he had to take one of the sacrificed chickens, pluck it completely, remove certain parts, roast it and then present it to Elegba. His godsister commented, "Eew, good luck with that. I don't know if I can do that. You gotta stick your hand up the chicken's butt and pull out all the insides and guck and shit. Uh, uh." Shaking her head and chuckling to herself, "I don't know if I can do that" she repeated. "What do you think this is?!" inquired the Balogun, "This is a hands on religion! **Here** you get your hands dirty. Ain't no primadonnas here. You better get your head right!" This was not the first time I had heard the Balogun say this to someone. He said often and repeatedly, "*Ocha* is some hard ass work! Being a priest isn't about glory, it's work, work and then some more work." Many times he would ask those of us present who were not initiated priestesses or priests, "You sure you want to do this?"

The African American *Lucumi* body is a body that engages continuously in ritual labor. The orisha and eguns are demanding entities that require devotees to labor in order to achieve their desires and in order to grow and fulfill their life's destiny. They require physical proof of your willingness to expend effort and energy to receive their blessings. Blessings are not

guaranteed to anyone. Devotees use the term “work”<sup>73</sup> to describe this ritual labor. The term itself does a tremendous amount of labor within the common language of the orisha devotees.<sup>74</sup>

“Work” has multiple meanings that encompass the different ways in which devotees *hacen esfuerzo* (make great effort) to establish and maintain their relationships with the deities and the eguns. Concrete examples of how devotees use this term include: 1) “I have to do this work to do tonight,” i.e., I may have to do an *ebo* (sacrifice) for either an orisha or an egun involving me providing these entities something which they have requested in a particular ritual or manner so that the deity or eguns can effect some kind of positive change or perform a task, whether that is protecting me (both spiritually or physically), healing me, or helping me to achieve some other material or spiritual object(ive); 2) “I used to work *ocha* all the time,” i.e., I went to ceremonies and either killed animals, cleaned animals, cooked, sang, divined, etc. during the ceremony, meaning I expended physical energy in service of the deities; 3) “Someone was working me”—i.e., Someone was using witchcraft to negatively effect my life; or 4) “That *ebo* worked right?” – i.e., Was that sacrifice you did effective? Did you experience concrete positive results. What they all have in common is that they all convey effectiveness in achieving certain specific spiritual ends.

Unfortunately, this kind of spiritual (and physical) labor is not valued within the larger American society, and devotees can find themselves at odds or in compromising positions if one conflicts with the other. Instead of a fluidity or porousness between their paid labor and their

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<sup>73</sup> Murphy (1994) is one of the few scholars to discuss this term and its role within African diasporic religion; however, in his study he is vague about what exactly the term “spirit” refers to and thick descriptions of work tend to be limited to the dancing and singing that take place in most African-diasporic spiritual ceremonies or rituals. He makes mention of the fact that “work” is *ebo* for *Lucumi* devotees and that even small gestures such as touching the floor in front of the *ocha* is *ebo*, but he does not offer more detailed analysis and explanation of the other forms of “work” within *Lucumi* devotion.

<sup>74</sup> It is unclear if this is a result of the direct translation from Spanish for the work, “*trabajo*” or if the concept of effectiveness is universal enough that English speakers adapted it without question. I cannot recall someone using a different term to express this idea of spiritual and/or ritual effectiveness or spiritual labor. This is true for all devotees, particularly for priests, and especially for “working priests” like the Balogun.,

spiritual labor, there is a sharp division that is reflective of the division that they feel exists between their public and religious life. For “working priests” like the Balogun, there is no public recognition of this work religiously or legally, because it is very difficult for a *Lucumi* priest to obtain official clergy registration. Thus he is unable to list priest as his profession on his taxes and receive applicable tax breaks and write offs, even although according to him, “I do more for my congregation than your average priest or minister.” His labor goes unrecognized and unvalued within his society, which often makes him very angry because he doesn’t feel that he is getting to enjoy the full benefits guaranteed to him in the American constitution despite generations of his family having worked, bled, and died in the creation and defense of those enshrined rights.

### *Bodies in Training*

Because Roger is a future priest in training, he must divide his time between economic work and spiritual work. A typical day for him begins at 5:30am when he wakes up to travel an hour to arrive at his job in Yonkers by 7am. He works until about 4pm then usually he gets back on the train and heads to Brooklyn to the Balogun’s house where more often than not, his assistance will be required for a ritual or ceremony the Balogun is conducting. He will either help his godfather to gather the materials, be another presence at a reading, or hold an animal that is being sacrificed to one entity or another. If there is no spiritual labor to be done then he will sit and talk with his godfather about anything from recent dreams, to botany, ancient history or the human anatomy. This will be the time in which he learns how to stretch the “gray matter” as the Balogun refers to the high level of critical thinking that must be applied to everything in the universe as one trains to be a priest. As a technician for ConEd, Roger has to know the ins and

outs of electrical wiring and maintenance. As a priest in training, Roger's knowledge base and responsibilities are vast and all encompassing. On any given day, for example, he has to know: what herbs are used for what orisha and in what capacity, as well as where they are stored in his godfather's supply room; what color fabrics the orisha use and what type will be necessary for what ritual, ceremony or offering; if there is enough of a supply of the *achés* for the orisha on hand in case a sacrifice is necessary; the location of the closest live animal market and what their current prices are; the location of the empty little plastic take-out hot pepper containers; how much aloe goes into the potion to alleviate pain; etc.

I gotta know mad shit! Fuck, my job is easy compared to *ocha* man. That's what people don't get. You think you're getting an education up there at Harvard, but that shit is all in books, yo. I gotta remember all this sh— (he catches himself), I mean stuff, I don't wanna offend the orisha. (In response to a question I posed about whether or not he writes things down or takes notes) Yeah, I write down some stuff but most of it is in my head because when we're working there's no time to be like, 'Wait, hold on, let me just pull out my notebook and check that' (he laughs) Can you imagine that shit?!! Our godfather would kill me. I remember this other priestess who has mad years but doesn't work hardly at all (meaning she doesn't work *ocha*) but she comes over now more often. One day I couldn't find something quick enough and Godfather was starting to yell at me, you know how he gets, and she was like [to Roger] why don't you have an Excel list with all the different categories of things and where they at. I couldn't help myself, I just started laughing. I was like, 'No offense but can you see him waiting for me to pull out and check through the paper or better yet pull out my phone or tablet and look it up?' He would blow it then. For real (he chuckled and shook his head). Nah, you gotta do this old school. That's how he was trained and that's how he's training me. Real African like.

Roger also has to learn how to train his body to be able to withstand hours of exhausting physical and spiritual labor. Priests describe sacrificing animals as both physically and spiritually

draining because sometimes there are so many that have to be done and as you feed the orisha, they pull on all life force surrounding them. Part of Roger's training is to learn how to hold specific animals so that they don't get loose while he is assisting a priest during a sacrificial ritual.

I get home at night sometimes around midnight if I'm lucky and I'm so exhausted. If we've been doing a lot of sacrifices, my body aches from holding chicken after chicken and forget about it if we've been doing fighting cocks, roosters, or guinea hens. I still have a scar from where this guinea hen turned its head all the way around and bit me. I thought I was holding it securely but I learned the hard way that you have to make sure you hold the neck too. I don't even want to have to think about when I start doing *ochas* and I have to help sacrifice a *hutia*!<sup>75</sup>

Devotees describe how frightening it is the first time they have to hold animals like a *hutia*, guinea hen, or a ram goat. Unlike chickens or pigeons that can easily be held by their wings or feet, these animals require stricter attention and skill to safely hold them in preparation for the sacrifice. I have heard many oral tales about how a room full of 30 people emptied in seconds when a *hutia* got loose from someone who was lax in their holding of the animal. Grown men drew straws to see who would go into the room to find and recapture the animal.

The work of a priest can be physically dangerous and taxing in addition to requiring hours and hours of study. "As a full-time working priest," the Balogun told me, "you have to be a physician, a herbalist, a chemist, a historian, a psychiatrist, an anthropologist (here he laughed as he pointed at me), an artist, and a student, all at once. In this, I got 5 PhDs." So what does the Balogun mean by this? In his role as a diviner, he has to be an astute observer of human behavior and be able to read the shells (the *dilogun*) accurately so as to determine the principle problem

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<sup>75</sup> *Hutia* is a large rodent native to the Caribbean and found in abundance in Cuba. It is one of the animals fed to the orisha during an *ocha* initiation ceremony. Due to its large teeth and claws, feeding these animals to the orisha is extremely difficult and requires strict attention and a level of skill in grabbing and then holding the animal during the sacrifice.

and then how best to heal it. In addition, he then has to perform the *ebo* himself. Sometimes a cleansing herbal bath is prescribed as the remedy to cleanse the physical body and an individual's aura of negative energies. Using too much of certain herbs can cause harm, so a priest has to know the exact proportions of any herbs he uses. Other times a potion is required, where certain oils or liquids must be mixed in order to effect a particular chemical reaction that also has meaning and significance in the spiritual world. Sometimes the problem is the person themselves—their behaviors, thoughts, or intentions. In this instance, the priest must be psychiatrist and pinpoint exactly what are the emotional or mental roots of the problem. He must then find a way to impart the importance of changing a destructive behavioral pattern or outlook. His language, his tone, and his outward physical features must all be carefully composed so as not to offend the individual who must receive, understand, and accept this advice.

The complexity of the work a priest must do is hard to grasp without this face-to-face interaction and observation. For this reason, the training is a very long (sometimes lasting 10 years) and intense process. Those in training are expected to spend the majority of their free time either with their godparent or developing their *eguns*, studying history, reading about anatomy, or a myriad of other subjects that will ultimately help them to improve their skill and ability to help others in the future. This is a long-term commitment that must not be undertaken lightly or on a whim. Once a priest begins to invest his time and energy in training a future priest or priestess, his *orisha* and *eguns* also begin to play a role in that individual's learning process. To suddenly halt this training for trivial reasons would be interpreted as a grave insult to the priest and to his *orisha* and *eguns*. An individual must be aware and willing to take on such a task or charge if he or she is to embrace the role of a *santero*. Countless *santeros* have reiterated that when you enter training “your life will cease to be your own,” and this usually begins with the

very first decision to “become” an orisha devotee.

### **The Adorned Body**

In orisha devotion, what is put on the body is almost as important as the body itself. The body should be clothed in certain colors at prescribed times and places. As we have already seen, color is an important aspect of orisha devotion as specific colors correspond to specific orisha and the energies that these colors generate can be both harmful and beneficial. Certain acts of adornment are very individual and could serve to identify and mark the devotee’s body for a particular eguns or orisha. Other times, adornment is generally prescribed and the structure of dress applies widely to the community of devotees. This structure of dress is maintained and monitored by the elders who pass it down to their godchildren and to the younger generations of devotees.

### **The White Cloth of Purity**

During ritual ceremonies and events, devotees wear white to attract light and positive energy and to refract negative energy. I did not know this when I first began attending orisha events. As one will recall, I showed up to the Balogun’s house with a black cloth covering my head and wearing a black and orange patterned skirt and matching top. The first thing the Balogun’s eldest goddaughter said to me when she saw me was, “You don’t wear black to an *ocha* function, and you definitely never wear black on your head. Nobody told you that?” At this point, it was too late to return home and change so I had to wear it, but I recall feeling very awkward and out of place because the majority of the other attendees were all wearing white. Later when I inquired why there had been some individuals present in suits or in beautifully colored cloth outfits made

from *aso oke*,<sup>76</sup> I was informed that these were elder *santeros* and once you reached a certain age of *ocha*, you could wear whatever you want, but that most people, especially the women, wore African-inspired outfits in the specific color(s) of their tutelary orisha.

While attending religious events in general, but especially during *iyawo* initiation periods, devotees must wear all white and be covered from head to toe. When I received instructions about proper dress for a female at an *ocha* function, it included wearing a long (preferably ankle-length) skirt, full white underwear (no bikini underwear, and under no circumstances, a thong), white stockings, a slip, at least three layers on the top half of my body, and shoes that completely covered my feet. Women (especially *aleyos*) are advised, and also learn from observation, to purchase large voluminous skirts for their distinct functionality. Wearing a voluminous skirt allows a woman to be able to sit down, place a *palangano* (metal basin) between her legs, and work without exposing any body parts.

The dress for a female *iyawo* is even more complicated and layered. In addition to stockings, camisoles, slips, long-sleeved white shirts, she must also wear bloomers, and a white shawl at all times in public. Male dress is much less regulated. Men simply must wear all white with preferably a long-sleeved white shirt, however, I have noticed numerous male *iyawos* at different *ocha* functions wearing short-sleeved shirts. I have never seen a female *iyawo* wearing a short-sleeved shirt.

In her work on Holdeman Mennonite women in California, Linda Arthur finds that religious clothing and dressing is a tool for social control among women within that religious community. “Her external body is more visibly restricted, however, because dress is considered symbolic of religiosity” (1999, p. 10). Arthur and her colleagues who conducted similar work

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<sup>76</sup> In Nigeria, *aso oke* refers specifically to a particular hand-woven cloth that is made into elaborate outfits that are worn by both women and men for very special occasions such as weddings, funerals, chieftaincy ceremonies, etc. In *Lucumi* tradition, the clothes worn by a devotee during the initiation ceremony are referred to as *asho* clothing.

among various American religious communities concluded that social isolation was a key element in the reproduction of social control over women's bodies through religious dress. While social isolation is not a characteristic of this community of African American *Lucumi* devotees, one could surmise that particularly in the instances of *iyawo* dressage during the initiation periods, clothing and dressing do become tools for the social control of female sexuality.

The high level of restrictive clothing—stockings, bloomers, and a slip—bring to mind Victorian-era female aesthetics that emphasized the restriction and suppression of female sexuality. Many of the young women often complain about having to wear all of these layers, especially during *iyawo* periods. The length of the skirt and its volume do pose risks as they can trip you as you walk up and down stairs and can catch fire if you are working around and with candles on the floor. Often times, women have to tie the bottom of the skirts together between their legs, creating a kind of pantaloons in order to increase mobility. This is one of the primary areas in which the women in the house come into conflict with the Balogun due to his strict adherence to this code of dress for women at *ocha* functions. During the summer, it becomes so hot that many of the women in the house do not wear stockings to *ocha* functions. Instead they simply purchase skirts with thicker lining and wear white cotton thigh-length biker shorts so they do not even need to wear the slip. I am quite positive that the Balogun has noticed this change but up until now, he has not reprimanded anyone about this fact.

It is unclear whether this mode of restrictive dress was instituted to protect enslaved young African female *iyawos* from the uninvited advances of their masters or if this religious adornment is as Bryan Turner posits “about the control of female sexuality by men exercising patriarchal power” (1984, p. 114). Perhaps this was a way to assert a “politics of respectability” (Higginbotham 1993) by mimicking the upper-class white women in colonial Cuban society, in

an attempt to represent what the slaves perceived to be wealth and prosperity.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, the benefits of mimicking this dress is that it concurrently suppressed and protected the female body, so while it does reflect a European aesthetic, it also closed off and protected the body of the newly initiated female *iyawo*.

For the female devotees with whom I spoke, there were mixed feelings about the continued use of this mode of dress. While most of them understood the desire to adhere to inherited traditions and to show respect for these traditions by following them, many felt that this was one tradition which had already clearly changed with the times, contexts and environments—from Africa to the New World—so why could it not change again to suit this new environment and contexts of orisha devotion here in the twenty-first-century United States.

### *Lavish Royal Adornment*

*Santeros* are also adorned in different outfits, *asho* clothes, at various points during the initiation ceremony. On what's referred to as the "middle day" of their initiation process, they are lavishly adorned and the newly made (initiated) *santero* is then presented to the community at a feast. The *iyawo* is dressed in a middle day outfit fit for a queen or king. Made from satin with elaborate stitching and piping, the outfit represents and highlights the fundamental elements of the orisha. As one *asho* outfit seamstress said, the clothes "can narrate a story" or be "a spiritual armor for the new initiate" (Omimelli 2013). The clothes are decorated with symbols sacred to the deity that mark the devotee as a specific orisha's child both in the physical and spiritual world. But this kind of lavish dress was influenced by 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century royal, religious, and military adornment (Brown 2003). In their attempt to as, Long puts it create "a new form of human consciousness and thus a new historical community" (1986, p. 166) enslaved Afro-Cuban

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<sup>77</sup> The use of Pompeia also appears to support this claim.

devotees looked to the European upper class as models of wealth and prosperity befitting a king or queen. But as Arthur and numerous scholars of fashion and culture remind us that “dress is a visible manifestation of cultural values is well known as dress code research tends to show” (1999, p. 3).<sup>78</sup> The larger sociopolitical and economic contexts of the times are reflected within the aesthetics that often dictate and influence adornment. In conversations about the European aesthetic represented in both the white clothes of the *iyawos* (particularly the women) and the lavish middle day clothes, some of these African American devotees express a certain level of discomfort with the notion that the pantaloons usually worn by the warriors are reminiscent of the pantaloons that European men from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century wore.

I agree with both David Brown (1993) and Mary Clark that the use of predominantly 18<sup>th</sup> century and 19<sup>th</sup> century European aesthetic representation in clothing and in the creation of elaborately lavish thrones signifies “a creative and practical process of adaptation” (Clark 1999, p. 109). Afro-Cuban *Lucumis* used this particular manner of adornment to “‘revise’ and ‘reform’ [their] oppressed bodies” (Brown 2003; Hebdige 1979), or Matory posits as a way to participate within society and aspire to a “claim of equality within the republican system” (2007, p. 417). Moreover, the practicality of the decision to adopt this manner of dress for *iyawos* is understandable given the limited conditions under which these enslaved devotees lived. However, devotees have a strong desire to reconfigure and represent different aesthetic values that better reflect and correspond with their contemporary sociopolitical context. One *aleyó* who is in preparation for her initiation shared her mixed feelings with me about the outfit that she was in the middle of contracting,

It’s not that I want to ‘go back to Africa’ (uses hands to visually represent quotation marks) but

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<sup>78</sup> See also (Davis 1989; Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 1992; Synnott 1993; Turner 1984) for more extensive analysis of the intersection of fashion and culture.

we're no longer in 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Cuba and we are no longer slaves. Who we are as black people in America is so different now. True, we are still discriminated against and oppressed within this society. Let's not play games, but, but we have achieved a different level of agency and what's that word (pauses) autonomy, so why do we have to still represent values from like two centuries ago? [I asked her "Well, what kinds of aesthetic representation would you prefer?"] (Laughs) I don't know. I mean I wanna say use elaborate African cloths but most of that isn't even made in Africa any more.

Another male devotee felt that it was time to either find or create a hybrid fashion that represented the current reality of black people in the New World,

Really we've been removed from Africa for so long that our notions of what's beautiful and representative of prosperity and whatever are more European. We wear suits, heck they [Africans] wear suits as well but when it comes time for a special event they pull out their dope fancy African outfits. We just wear nicer suits. Perhaps it's time to find a way to combine these two different styles of dress, just as we've combined our Western way of life with this African religious practice. Yeah, we don't live there and you can't go back but we're not slaves anymore so we can now choose how we want to go forward.

The question then becomes how to do this in a cooperative manner that will be accepted by the larger community. These kinds of changes, as the history of the regulation and institutionalization of *Regla de Ocha* has shown us (Brown 2003), must first be sanctioned by orisha and then incorporated into the larger community. As these devotees are part of the *Lucumi* community, there would have to be agreement on the part of the entire *Lucumi* community, and this kind of change may be perceived as an affront to Cuban religious authority because this manner of adornment originated in Cuba (Curry 2001). It could be perceived along ethnic and

national lines as another way of Black Americans seeking to “de-Hispanicize”<sup>79</sup> their religious devotion, rather than an attempt to more accurately reflect the sociocultural and geopolitical realities of contemporary African American *Lucumi* orisha tradition devotees here in the United States. In addition, these African American elders are fiercely protective of maintaining and instituting this mode of dress because they view it to be a visual marker of adherence to *Lucumi* tradition, and many of them recall wearing it as an armor during the late 60s and 70s when people would call them names in the street or try to physically remove their shawls. It was a badge of honor that signified “a break with a Christian slave mentality” and an adaptation of new religious way of life.

#### Ewes (*Restrictions*) in Dress and Clothing

While all devotees can universally wear white, wearing most other colors may or may not prove to be restrictive for individual devotees. As we saw above with Sean, due to the nature of their orisha, devotees are advised to never wear particular colors. Devotees who are children of the warriors, Elegba, Ogun, and Ochossi, are generally restricted from wearing red due to the hotness of these orisha and the heat generated by the color red itself. Children of Obatala are advised that it is most beneficial to wear all white, all the time because white is the sacred color of the orisha of wisdom. This can be problematic at times due to the lack of availability of white clothes year round because annual fashion trends tend to popularize a few colors to the near exclusion of others. I have observed how difficult this can be especially for younger devotees in their early to late teens who, like any typical teenager, wish to be perceived as “cool” and “trendy.” An incident with Carolina’s almost thirteen-year-old daughter, Imani, who is a child of

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<sup>79</sup> Marjorie Quiñones, the first African American to be initiated on American soil, is known for rejecting this Europeanized dress during initiation and instituting African style *asho* clothes for initiation ceremonies (Hucks 2012).

Obatala, highlights a more disturbing consequence of this restriction. As the only teenager in the *ile*, Imani often comes to us when she encounters conflicts having to do with her religious devotion. Last year she told us about a problem she had on her birthday when a friend gifted her with a black hat. Of course, the friend immediately insisted on Imani trying on the hat but as a child of Obatala, Imani knew that she was not allowed to wear black on her head.

Oh my God! At first I was like, what am I going to do and then I realized I could say that I didn't want to mess up my hair. So I said that then but I really wanted to just tell her that I can't wear black on my head but she's so not going to understand that and then like she's going to ask me all these questions and then I don't know...but wait, so this was a few months ago right but lately she's been asking me why I don't wear the hat she gave me and now I don't know what to do because I don't want to hurt her feelings but you know I can't wear that hat. You guys have to help me. Tell me what to do!

Imani's reluctance to tell her friend about her religious practice, despite being advised by both Carolina and me to do so, is just another example of the fear of religious rejection and intolerance that plague even the younger generation of devotees who supposedly live in a more religiously plural society. Something as simple as the color of a hat has the potential to change, or perhaps even ruin, a friendship. Carolina later commented to me that had it been her, perhaps she would have worn the hat just once to appease the friend rather than explain about her religion. She knew from experience that being honest (although the preferable ideal) could possibly cause the loss of a friendship that was otherwise fine. Ultimately, Imani decided to lie to her friend and tell her that she wore the hat when she was at her father's house in New Jersey on the weekends. Even though Carolina desires a society in which her daughter would not have to lie about her religious restrictions, she is realistic about the fact that presently that society doesn't exist and she understands that group ostracization and isolation would be a difficult thing for

Imani to face at her young age. Imani has no peer group of fellow devotees to fall back on as potential friends or acquaintances, and rather than risk isolation and the loss of a friendship, she preferred to lie and settle for maintaining the status quo. These defensive reactions (and their justification) are a result of a lifetime of hurtful interactions. Devotees find themselves in situations where they must compromise their ideals of what honesty and friendship should be in order to maintain relationships and some kind of in-group status (Peeks 2005).

Fortunately, not all clothing restrictions come with such serious consequences. Sean's wife, Akina, and I had a conversation one day about what happened after she'd been advised in her first reading to stop wearing the color black. It wasn't an *ewe* that had to do with a particular orisha, but one that had to do with her emotional and mental state and the energy generated or attracted by the color black. Because she was prone to negative thinking, wearing the color black only increased this negative energy. She was advised to wearing lighter and brighter colors to assist with increasing positive energy and clarity of thought in her life in general. She noted almost immediately the difference in her outlook, how she responded to problems and even how people responded to her once she started wearing lighter-colored clothing. After this, Akina noted that she began thinking more deeply about the energy that colors generate and the influence that it could have on an individual and her environment.

### Talismans

The use of talismans for protection against illness or in battle can be found in most ancient religious and contemporary religious practices (Bond 2014; Handloff 1982; Morrow 2001; Olupona 2011; Tambiah 1984). Devotees, under the direction of the ancestors and the orisha, use talismans for garnering their protection, both spiritually and physically, from the harm of

negative wishes, thoughts, or actions. Since the first step of becoming orisha people is connecting with your ancestors, the novice devotee will probably first begin to adorn themselves with objects dictated by their eguns. One female devotee described how when she began to cultivate a relationship with her eguns, one told her to purchase a moonstone necklace to help her better balance her female energies and appease the female spirits that walked with her who used this stone in spiritual work. Then her Celtic ancestors wanted her to wear a Celtic cross both to honor them and for protection, and slowly other eguns began to make their presence known and demanding earrings, necklaces, and other types of jewelry. Sometimes devotees must wear belts made of ribbons and bells that are consecrated to a particular orisha or egun guide. This can at times be very inconvenient as one devotee pointed out to me. He was at the gym and wearing one of his belts when it started to poke out from his waistband unbeknownst to him and people around him began staring as there were nine different colored ribbons just hanging from his waist. At first, he didn't notice it but when he did he became a little embarrassed and immediately tucked it back in. He could read the curiosity on the face of onlookers but he had no desire to indulge that curiosity. Another female devotee describes how she was able to see the bulge of her egun belt beneath a form fitting skirt but no matter how it drove her crazy, she knew that she could not go out without it. "It's to protect my reproductive system from negative and jealous thoughts or feelings. If I'm going out dressed to the nines, you know I'm gonna catch some shade. I used to be self-conscious about even going to the bathroom, because I could hear all the bells jingling and I know that the women in the adjacent stalls could hear them as well. But what choice do I have?"

Jewelry is often a big demand for both eguns and orishas. Devotees believe that their eguns, or the orisha, invest some of their spiritual energy into the object thereby providing

protection and blessings. In some instances, the jewelry is reminiscent of what particular eguns used to wear during their lifetimes and they have devotees wear it to bring luck or to carry their energy with them as they move about every day. These sacred pieces of jewelry are not to be touched and handled by anyone other than the devotee. It can be considered offensive to the egun or orisha to whom the object is consecrated. A particular experience with an elder priestess taught me this lesson personally.

Initiated priestesses of Oya often wear many copper bracelets and bangles on their arms, and if these are put on during the initiation ceremony they become sacralized objects not to be touched and handled by others. One day, a senior priestess of Oya stopped by in her car to drop something off for the Balogun, and I was sent out to retrieve the item. Her bejeweled arm filled with bracelets from her wrist halfway up her forearm was in the car window and the bracelets were so beautiful that I simply reached out to touch them as I told her how gorgeous they were. She gracefully removed her hand from the car window, and ergo my touch, without any fuss but I didn't realize that Sean had followed me out to the car and seen what I had done. Later after she had pulled off, he said to me that I shouldn't have touched her bracelets because they were probably for orisha and therefore sacred. He cautioned me that I should always be "very, very cautious" about touching any *santero* in general because **they** are sacred; and particularly their jewelry because it would not always be possible to know if what they were wearing was a consecrated item or not. On that day, I garnered an acute awareness of not only my body and actions, but also the bodies of others. While the orisha would probably not be upset with me for this innocent, thoughtless transgression, who knows if I would be that lucky again in the future.

## **Conclusion**

The body occupies such a significant place in orisha devotion because devotees (re)make their bodies in many different capacities as they “become orisha people.” The struggle of navigating between two worlds, one religious and the other supposedly secular, has emotional, material, social and physical consequences for devotees. Many though find solace and support in their orisha, their eguns and within their small communities of worship, the *ile*.

So many different aspects of becoming and being Yoruba people strongly impact varying sociopolitical and economic spheres of devotees’ lives, both positively and negatively. Devotees have learned to use concealment, evasiveness, and outright lying as defense mechanisms against thoughtless and/or offensive negative reactions. This defensive behavior is learned and cultivated as a result of numerous painful encounters with family, friends, coworkers, acquaintances or strangers on the street. As the religious body moves and acts within society, it is in turn acted upon by social world in which it lives (Seligman 2014). While “social rewards” are not high on the priority list of these devotees, they still exist and function within the larger social society and they expect and have the right to enjoy religious equality and respect just as any other American citizen.

Although the younger devotees question the need to adhere to dress strictures and European-styled adornment of religious bodies and spaces, they do recognize that such a transformation will take time and would require broad community participation. Currently, as it stands this mode of dress is a symbolic marker that visually locates devotees within the *Lucumi* orisha community. As this is one of the few outward markers, elders appear to be reluctant about changing any aspect of it, especially as the distance between the larger non-*Lucumi* African American and Latino *Lucumi* community grows. This will probably be one of the major issues upon which the community will be split along generational lines. However, as the elders pass

away or due to illness and limited mobility attributed to age appear less at community functions, there will be a smaller number of voices to advocate for the maintenance of this religious dress and within the next 10-15 years, it may possibly be radically altered to suit a more modern African American aesthetic and functionality.

This chapter raises questions about religious freedom for these orisha devotees and the possible future for the inclusion of their religious practice in African American religious imagination as well as in the larger American religious imagination. Currently, these devotees are skeptical about any inclusion in the American religious landscape occurring in the near future and are simply continuing to live their way of life as best they can and carve out for themselves what space they can within the city.

## Chapter 5

### Reconfiguring Space and Place in African American *Lucumi* Devotion

From the outside, the Balogun's house looks like any other brick-faced brownstone in this part of northern Brooklyn. Once you get past the wrought iron gate and the double French doors, the similarities end. Upon entering the French doors, one passes under a string of *kimbombo* (okra) and between the two flags that flank the door. One is the flag of the year and the other is a protective flag for the Balogun's *ile* that has hung there for as long as I have been coming to his house. Also nailed to the doorframe on the left is a pair of scissors hanging from a ribbon whose purpose is to cut any negativity that comes through the door. A small table with yellow flowers to invite sweetness and produce a feeling of happiness in those that pass through these doors is nestled to the right. Immediately next to it, one encounters a brightly painted red, black, and green bookshelf with a carved wooden statue sitting in a barely recognizable clay potter perched on top. His chest puffs out and a long braid extends towards his back where another smaller face is visible. Esu Laroye observes all who enter the door. Beneath him on the first shelf resides Esu Aiye, a large conch shell filled with cement formed into a beautiful face boasting prominent cheekbones and cowrie shell eyes, nose, and mouth. On the bottom shelf sits Ogun Arere in a black iron cauldron draped in chains that have long since been blackened by a mixture of palm oil, rum, and chicken's blood with horseshoes, knives, and railroad spikes sticking out between the chain links. These are the "warriors," the deities that you will see upon entering the home of an orisha devotee. Their presence at the front door protects the home from negative energy and spirits. As you walk down the hall to the living room entrance, you will pass a black cloth doll dressed in a yellow gingham dress with a matching head tie holding a fan while sitting in a

lovely wicker chair. You can feel her eyes on you as you approach the double doors that lead directly into the living room. Opening the living room door, you must take care that you do not close the door on the bunch of green bananas hanging from a wire hanger on the door hinge. These are an offering to invite and appease Sango when he enters to bless your home.

Doorways are liminal space between the “dangerous” outside streets teeming with energies and spirits both negative and positive, and the inner home-*ile*-temple where devotees work to maintain a balanced harmonious environment of positive spirits and energies. Ritual items placed above, next to or in doorways are there to block negative energy from entering the house, whether it’s simply the energy in the air or is energy deliberately sent to the devotee’s house to cause harm, disruption, and chaos. Sometimes individual’s (intentionally and unintentionally) arrive with negative thoughts and feelings, the yellow flowers by the front door is both a spiritual and visual reminder to allow sweetness to flow into your consciousness. Yellow is Oshun’s color and the spiritual energy of both the color and deity serve to uplift an individual’s spirit and bring brightness and lightness where darkness might be present. Personal space and sacred spaces are to be protected from these disharmonious and damaging influences so the doorway is the first place where devotees transform and create force fields to block and clean away negative energies, influences, and spirits.

Space in the orisha devotee ontological view is configured by an awareness of the flow of energy in and around sacred geographical locales. The energy of the orisha exist in everything from the air we breathe and the winds that blow to the rivers, lakes and streams where we get our water supplies (Cabrera 1968; Idowu 1994; Mason and Edwards 1985; Olupona 2011). Ogun’s energy fuels the atoms that make matter **and** the cars and planes that transport us from place to place. Thus sacredness surrounds us and can be found in almost any space and place (Brown

1999). This is distinctly in opposition to traditional discussions of sacred space where scholars attest to a distinct boundary between the sacred and the profane (Durkheim 1965; Eliade 1959). In the ontological worldview of devotees, this distinction is blurry at best. Devotees navigate the city aware of the “power of place, and its interconnectedness” in Yoruba cosmology (Theodoratus and LaPena 1994, p. 22). Urban living requires an improvisational approach to space and place as some of the places considered most sacred in the Yoruba cosmology such as wild overgrown wooded areas (*el monte*) and mountains are not typical features of urban landscapes. Devotees must find creative ways to re-imagine sacred spaces like groves, mountains, and ancestral shrines meant to be located at specific types of trees that were geographically possible for their ancient Yoruba ancestors, and more easily available and accessible on a tropical island like Cuba, and inscribe these urban places with sacred meaning, mapping their cosmological understanding of place and space onto the landscape of the five boroughs and its surrounding areas (Day 2014; Nelson 2006).

Just as the dynamism of orisha devotion is evident in its transport to the New World and adaptation to new rituals, liquors, foods, and sites of worship, these African American devotees have had to exhibit that same dynamism in (re)configuring their bodies and their lives. Striving to make both physical and spiritual space for themselves within a religious tradition that, though once indigenous to their ancestors, was not one in which they had been raised or had even previously known existed, devotees charted unfamiliar territory spiritually speaking. Although they had an advantage in that they knew their city, by becoming orisha people they dramatically changed how going forward, they would interact with that city. Using Robert Orsi’s theory, that the exigencies of urban living require religious actors to create new forms of religious being and orientation to space and place that are “inherited, found, and improvised idioms,” (1999, p. 48).

I examine how these devotees charted, and continue to chart, a distinctly African American Lucumi tradition by integrating and fusing their African American sociopolitical sensibilities with an inherited and learned Afro-Cuban religious lifeway. This journey would dramatically affect: how they cultivated their domestic space, which sometimes (un)consciously mimicked the ways that Afro-Cubans made and demarcated religious space in domestic settings; how they transformed certain public sites of sacred worship; and how they passed this knowledge on to the younger generation of African American devotees.

### **Sacred Geographical Sites**

Most scholarship on sacred space and religion tend to focus on the traditional “sacred cities” and the role they play in ordering the religious and sociopolitical lives of their devotees (Smith 1987; Olupona 2011; Wheatley 1971), the relationship with cosmology and architectural structure of the city (Broda et al., 1987; Carrasco 1991; Kedar and Werblowsky, 1998), or the city as a site of pilgrimage and contestation (Carmichael et. al 1994). These pioneering works analyzed the ways in which, what they term the “ancient religions,” have created, perceived, and repurposed (through the ages in some instances) geographical and architecturally constructed sacred spaces and landscapes dating back to ancient times. It is only more recently that scholars have been turning towards examining the religious lives of urban dwellers and the sacred spaces that they create and (re)configure within challenging and diverse contexts.

Two of the most notable books on the dynamism and significance of urban religion and the ways in which new religious agents have been transforming urban landscapes are Robert Orsi’s book, *Gods of the City, and Religion in Urban America’s* and Lowell Livezey’s, *Public Religion and Urban Transformation: Faith in the City*. Orsi’s book opened up a new avenue of

research on the connection between sacred space and religious agents because as he argued, previous studies had “largely ignored the religious lives of people in the turbulent, chaotic industrial city, where cosmology, ritual, architecture, and demarcations of space are not so carefully and intentionally synchronized, if at all” (1999, p. 42). The collective work, *Public Religion* highlights urban Chicago as home to a multiplicity of sometimes incongruent and competing religious practices, views, moral codes, and ethnicities. It posits that displacement, economic change, and increased immigration have produced new religious realities that the city must accommodate spatially and politically. New religious cultural symbols, languages, and ideas of community and civic involvement meld with and/or contest older already established religious communities and structures to form a vibrant religious urban landscape that reflects the new American religious pluralism.

Urban religion is not a singular concept (Orsi 1999) and the diversity of recent work aptly demonstrates its complexity and breadth. While they are too numerous to mention them all, some of the most outstanding studies like John McGreevy’s *Parish Boundaries* have examined the ways in which spatially and racially demarcated communities were structured by and around the construction of Catholic churches within major cities in the North, such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. The collected essays in Kay A. Read and Isabel L. Wollaston’s *Suffer the Little Children: Urban Violence and Sacred Space* examines the way in which religiously motivated violence has restructured, divided, and irrevocably transformed urban space and its dwellers, especially the younger population. One of the smaller number of works dealing with non-immigrant communities is Omar McRoberts’ *Streets of Glory* in which he analyzes how the churches in poor Black neighborhoods in Boston actually do little to service the community in

which they are located and whose agendas have been found, in numerous instances, to be at odds with and/or trump those of the community.

The majority of the recent works focus on varying different themes related to Islamic religious practice and space. Two of the key themes have been: reconceptualizing sacred space and its political meaning in Muslim societies (Haque Khondker 2009; Hauser-Schäublin 2004; Kasdorf 2009); and carving out and cultivating religious space among Muslim immigrant populations in the United States and Europe (Day 2014; Nasser 2003; Rogozen-Soltar 2012; Williams 2011).

As the city with the largest immigrant population, it is no surprise that many of the recent works on religion in New York City focus predominantly on how immigrants make sacred space and place within the city (Guest 2003; Sanjek 1998; Smith and Bender 2004; Slyomovics 1994; Waghorne 2004). Those works that do not focus on immigrants, focus on transformative aspects of well-established religious communities (Goldschmidt 2006; Kugelmass 1999; Orsi 1995) whose approaches to impoverishment, racial tensions, and aging are all refracted through their religious understandings of themselves as either agents of god, or god's chosen children, and their religious right to occupy and transform their piece of New York to accommodate their religious needs. Out of all these edited volumes and monographs, there is only one chapter in Tony Carnes and Anna Karpathakis' edited volume *New York Glory*, that focuses on the African American orisha community in New York City, but while it does provide useful historical information and a general resume of orisha devotion as it has unfolded within the city, it doesn't provide an intimate phenomenological account of how devotees perceive, use, and make sacred space within the contemporary urban context. What these studies on urban religiosity all have in common is that they complicate and expand notions of normative religious behavior and relation

to space and place by examining how urban residents cultivate and demarcate religious space in places with competing notions of faith, morals, and belonging.

But these devotees do not have recourse to an officially (and socially) sanctioned place of worship, so they must rely on their own initiative, ingenuity, and agency to create sacred spaces in both legal and, often times, illegal ways. But as “[c]ity folk” they “do not live in their environments; they live through them” (Orsi 1999, p. 44). Devotees reconfigure the urban physical landscape as well as their domestic spaces through their actions, rituals, and presence. A two-mile stretch of Rockaway Beach, for the entire day, every second Sunday in September, is transformed from a leisurely place to frolic in the late summer ocean water to a sacred space where Yemaya, goddess of the ocean, reigns and orisha devotees flock to salute her and leave her offerings both in front of her altar and in her waters. An abandoned overgrown lot becomes a sacred wild grove where medicines can be found or negativity discarded. All over the urban landscape, devotees spiritually mark and stake out space.

### **Urban Religious Terrain**

Within Yoruba devotion, Ile-Ife is as Jacob Olupona states, “the core of Yoruba life and existence” and is considered “the spiritual, cultural, and historical center of the Yoruba world,” (2011, p. 4) and for many Nigerian-born Yoruba peoples and other devotees in the New World this is true. For some of these African American devotees, however, while the place itself may still hold some sacred meaning, it is one that has no concrete material reality in their everyday life. The distance and experience of diaspora has created a more fractious spiritual relation to Ile-Ife. As a site of pilgrimage and religious allegiance, Ile-Ife had a more concrete hold on devotees until recent travels and current events changed the ways in which these devotees think of Ile-Ife,

the Ooni, and orisha devotion in Africa. A prominent elder priestess travelled to Yorubaland in the early '90s to be initiated into the Ogboni society, and recalls that not only was orisha tradition not as prominent as she had hoped, even in remote areas, but that there were numerous attempts to swindle her out of her money on more than a few occasions. More recently devotees have learned that the Ooni has allowed a construction of a chapel on the palace grounds and that one of his wives is an Evangelical Christian and that the Ooni himself has not put a definitive stop to the sometimes violent campaign by Evangelical Christians against orisha tradition in Ile-Ife. This information has caused many of these African American devotees who still respected his sacred position as Kabiyesi and Oba, to no longer feel a religious allegiance to the Ooni and the sacred city, Ile-Ife.

The Balogun even expressed that he felt betrayed on a deep level, and even though he no longer has a burning desire to visit Africa, he had thought that maybe one day he would try and undertake a trip to Ile-Ife simply to see “ the birthplace of the gods and the place where the principal deities, or orisa, first came to the world and became associated with all that came to exist” (Olupona 2011, p. 7). His personal skepticism about anyone going to Africa to receive any religious initiation or paraphernalia has grown to the point where he questions the sanity of anyone willing to travel to Nigeria for these purposes.

Sacred space is not tied to a city per se but rather to the spaces they make sacred within the city in which they reside. I argue that with their bodies, their deities and through ritual action, devotees construct and improvise sacred space in the “concrete jungle” that is cosmopolitan New York. Although New York City has its own “sacredness” it is rather a sacredness born of cultural and economic geopolitic factors. “In New York City, power, fame, money, and sex are, in this sense, also time-tested popular religions” (Carnes 2001, p. 5). Making it more so a site of

pilgrimage for artists and capitalists, seeking fortune and fame, rather than the religious seeker of a “revelation of sacrality” (Long 2004, p. 92). New York has always been a destination site, because of the immeasurable possibilities that exist for one carve out a space where one could make one’s own New York. As an urban enclave and the epitome of success, “the city of dreams” is one of the most diverse and globalized cities in the world. Although not the most populous city in the world, immigrants from almost every nation in the world call it home. While not a “sacred center” in the sense that Teotihuacan, Mecca or Benares are, it is a faith-full city in that the majority of the world’s religious faiths can be found within the boundaries of the five boroughs; and it “is alive with the competing and divergent dreams projected onto it and found within it by outsiders. It is crisscrossed by discrepant narratives and fissured by incommensurable visions of what is possible and good in cities” (Orsi 1999, p. 12).

In her chapter, “Staying Grounded in a High-Rise building: Ecological Dissonance and Ritual Accommodation in Haitian Vodou,” Karen McCarthy Brown argues that Haitians have a hard time serving the spirits in New York City because of the lack of easy access to the earth “‘Ginen’ to refer both to the continent of Africa that lies across the Atlantic and to the home of the spirits and the ancestors that is found in the water beneath the earth on which they stand” (1999, p. 82). African American orisha devotees know this is the home of their ancestors and the presence of their eguns are with them no matter where they go and no matter upon which floor the libation is poured. By calling the ancestors, whether through the technology of the *boveda* or with a simple glass and the floor and three knocks on the ground or a pounding on the ground with a sturdy staff embellished with bells and consecrated with rum and cigar smoke, they transform a living room floor in a high-rise or a cement floor in the basement of a brownstone into a sacred space where the ancestors can manifest, assist devotees with their spiritual and

material problems, and take part in the offerings of liquor, flowers, cigars, etc. Africa is transposed through the shrines dedicated to the eguns and through the orisha themselves. “I got Africa right here. I worship Black gods. African gods,” the Balogun commented to me one day when I asked him why he no longer felt any need or desire to travel to Africa and see the birthplace of the orisha and his Yoruba ancestors. He reminded me that the orisha are born from the orishas of the spiritual parent so conducting a spiritual genealogy means that eventually the orisha can be traced back to Africa and just as importantly back to an individual born on African soil who carried a piece of orisha and Africa inside of their physical bodies. Thus, there is a piece of Africa in each and every deity in his throne room in Brooklyn, New York.

These devotees are not recreating a piece of home in New York but rather ontologically (re)mapping and (re)conceiving of familiar geographical and domestic landscapes through cosmologically-oriented lens in order to accommodate a new religious lifeway and its accompanying spiritual entities. Distinct from the Afro-Cuban immigrants of whom David Brown speaks in his ground-breaking chapter, “Altared Spaces: Afro-Cuban Religions and the Urban Landscape in Cuba and the United States,” these African Americans were either predominantly from New York City or from other northern urban enclaves. It wasn’t so much their space and place that changed, but their perceptions and relation to them. As they were spiritually and ritually “altared,” so too were their understandings of what is sacred in and around New York City, and even within their own homes.

The majority of the African American devotees among whom I conducted my research are native New Yorkers, so the city was not a destination but a “homeland,” however at one point the Shango Temple (1959), established by Christopher Oliana and Osejeman Adefunmi, and the Yoruba Temple (1960), established by Osejeman Adefunmi with the support of

Christopher O'Leary and five other individuals, transformed, "the streets of Harlem...into an active site of pilgrimage, ceremony, and ritual, a sacred public space where African Americans poured out their expressions of honor and celebration, of anger and protest, and of disappointment and grief" (Hucks 2012, p. 111).<sup>80</sup> These sacred community spaces, however, were short-lived and did not produce long-lasting sacred institutions where, and around which, devotees could gather, conduct ritual ceremonies, and cultivate fellowship.<sup>81</sup> The African American elders began to create these sacred spaces and community within their own physical homes and the georeligious configuration of the *ile* became the space around which smaller religious communities would converge.

Devotees began to conceive of their city in terms of the energy present in different places and spaces that are nexus' for encountering the orisha and/or the eguns. Geographical locations have their own powerful energies and qualities sacred to different deities. A cemetery is no longer simply the resting place of the decomposing bodies of loved ones but the home of deceased spirits and the domain of the goddess Oya, and as such must be acknowledged with a respectful gesture every time one is passed. Devotees use their right hands to lightly tap their heads three times as they utter "*Benediccion Ile Iyansa* (Blessings from the home of *Iyansa* (a praise name for Oya))." This is simultaneously a show of respect as well as a petition for Oya and the eguns to bless you as you traverse this physical plane. The large outcrop in Central Park called Umpire's Rock serves as *la montaña* (the mountain) especially when covered with snow during the winter months.

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<sup>80</sup> For further reading on how Adefunmi and his supporters, through the creation of a sacred religious place, cultivated and carved out a religious space in Harlem and effected transformation of black religious bodies, ideas and representation, see Hucks 2012, pp. 88-120.

<sup>81</sup> See McGreevy 1996 for an in-depth discussion on how neighborhoods and ethnic enclaves were created and consolidated around the establishment of Catholic churches.

Orisha devotion is still a marginalized religious way of life in American society, and devotees must share sacred geographical sites with other religious and secular individuals who do not view these sites as sacred and will often not understand or misinterpret the ways in which devotees interact with these spaces. Just as the Wintu Native Americans, orisha devotees view sacred geographical sites “not [as] discrete elements or cultural shards” but as “combined and bonded into cultural domains and sacred realms which provide essential meaning to life” (Theodoratus and LaPena 1994, p. 22). The river is Oshun’s domain, just as in the New World, the ocean is Yemaya’s and therefore the sacred energies of these deities are to be found in those spaces and places. Their waters are treated respectfully as they are both life-giving but life-taking as well (Badejo 1995; Drewal and Drewal, 1983; Drewal et al., 2008; Drewal et al., 1989; Murphy and Sanford 2001; Ogungbile, forthcoming). Orisha worship recognizes the duality in energy, and therefore in space. Sacred space and place can be simultaneously positive and enriching, but also harmful and dangerous (Olupona 2011).

When conducting *ebos* for the orisha, devotees go to these sacred places to pull upon and tap into the energy of these deities, to make offerings, to sing and dance for these orishas, to clean themselves or sometimes simply to pray. This can at times be extremely complicated “in the context of complex and colliding social and cultural dynamics” (Day 2014, pg. 31) within a city where its denizens do not share the same notions as to what is sacred and what is not. In addition, the ever-changing physical and demographic landscape of New York City has no sympathy or consideration for the religious needs of devotees. Sacred spaces and places can disappear overnight, and devotees can at any given moment find themselves having to retool the cosmological map of familiar sites and pathways to accommodate rapid urban transformation.

## A City Re-Mapped

Life in the industrial and post-industrial city demanded (and demands) constant resourcefulness, flexibility, creativity, and existential inventiveness

-(Orsi 1999. p. 45.)

The urban terrain of New York City with its ever-changing physical appearance and labyrinth of underground mobility can in and of itself be a challenge to devotees at varying times in their lives. Devotees remap this urban landscape with a spiritual cartography that elevates the importance of some spaces and places over others in accordance with their spiritual needs at any given moment. The city is fluid in its aesthetic physical appearance as are the maps of sacred places and spaces that devotees mentally (and sometimes physically) carry with them every day. Depending on the spiritual energies surrounding devotees at any given time, it may not be safe to walk down certain city blocks due to scaffolding, construction, or large holes in the ground. It can even be unsafe to enter down into poorly lit subway entrances.

### Crossroads

“Stand up off the corner. You’re standing too close to the street. You could get hit by a car just like that. You know there are a few *odus* that talk about not standing or lingering on street corners.” A lifetime of standing right on the edge of the sloped walkway, ready to dash across the street at any given opening proved a very difficult habit to break. Whenever we went out, the Balogun was constantly reminding me to stand back farther up on the leveled part of the sidewalk. He would remind me of one of Ogun’s *odus*, in which he is hungry and out on the prowl and anything will sate his appetite. The crossroads are a meeting place of Ogun’s vehicles—the car, bus, truck or bike—and humans, possible prey when Ogun is on a rampage. Any individual standing in the street can easily become a victim. Crossroads are the territory of

the unpredictable orisha Elegba and all sorts of transactions happen at the crossroads.<sup>82</sup> Not all of these transactions are positive and you never know with whom (or what) Elegba may be bargaining so it's better to enter and exit the crossroad as quickly as possible. Two opposing forces or entities meet and they can safely pass each other or they can collide. The danger of the latter occurring is always present so crossroads are to be entered and crossed through with care. As with all sacred spaces, the scales that balance the negative or positive energy can tip either way at any time.

A long-time client and now friend of the Balogun, Missy, relayed the tragic story of a dear friend of hers who had failed to heed the warning given to her just a mere two days before her ill-fated death.

My friend, Gloria, came to see the Balogun for a reading simply out curiosity really. She didn't necessarily have any serious problems or anything. During the reading, she was told to not stand on street corners or to be careful when riding her bike, she rode her bike everywhere, anyway she was told not to not stop out in the intersection and wait for a quick pause in the traffic to cut through. He very specifically told her to wait behind the crosswalk lines until the traffic light changed because this *odu* was very hot (extremely dangerous) and a car could come out of nowhere and "BAM!" run her over just like that. You know he always asks if people understand and if what he said was clear. She said yes and off she went on her bike. I received a phone call in the late afternoon two days later from her sister telling me that she had been hit by a bus while stopped out in the intersection. Reports said she was out in front of the crosswalk lines and she had just turned to look left when the bus hit her. She was killed instantly. Orisha don't lie. When they tell you something, you can take it to the bank. I still remember that incident to this day, and we're talking almost 40 years ago. I always stand way back up on the sidewalk. Way back.

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<sup>82</sup> Popular culture films even attest to this with movies such as *Crossroads* (1986) where the main character meets Legba at a place called the Crossroad and bargains for his friend's soul. The movie is based on the tale that blues musician Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil for fame.

The landscape and geography of the city are interpreted differently by devotees. Street corners are not just places where you cross the street but a crossroad that is at once a place to leave candy for Elegba to receive luck or a dangerous place where your life can hang in the balance. The crossroads are a portal that can just as easily absorb negativity as it can impart or bring forth negativity; and, moreover it is a place where one can leave *osobo*, particularly once it's been transferred to a material object. After cleaning themselves with pennies, flowers, candy, or any other specifically mandated object, devotees will often drop these items either in the middle of an intersection or the street corner. Once the *osobo* is dropped, devotees quickly proceed forward and never look back. They avoid that particular intersection or crossroad for a period of 24 hours.

New York City is coincidentally an ideal place and yet an extremely challenging place to perform this ritual action. Devotees have shared stories of individuals who observed them dropping small black bags with their *ebo* in the intersection, and who called after telling them that they dropped something. One described how an older lady yelled the statement and attracted the attention of others forcing the devotee to flee down a nearby subway entrance even though he had no intention of taking the subway to his destination. Although we chuckled about the incident, it was still a telling example of the anxiety-producing moments that devotees must handle at a moment's notice when conducting even the most minute of ritual actions in a metropolis.

### *Urban Streets as Obstacle Courses*

#### ***Things Falling from the Sky***

“I swear walking down the streets in the city is like walking through an obstacle course.” Wendy and I were sitting in a bar waiting for her friend, a young priestess to join us, and she was telling

me about having to walk three blocks out of her way every day now on her way to work just to avoid scaffolding. “Avoid things falling from the sky” is part of an *odu* that warns devotees to be watchful for things that could fall on their heads from above, the interpretation becomes contemporary and reflective of the reality of the urban landscape in that one is cautioned to avoid walking under scaffolding, or too close to construction sites with large elevated cranes.<sup>83</sup>

Avoiding scaffolding has become increasingly hard in New York City over the past decade due to the constant construction of new buildings and renovation of older ones to accommodate a still burgeoning population all over the city. Devotees must remember mental visual maps of the streets that they usually traverse and whether or not one side of the street is currently under construction. Devotees often find when making quick decisions to walk up a street in the course of going to a specific destination that both sides of the street are under construction and there is not enough space to walk right along the edge of the sidewalk without having to walk in the street. These are the times when devotees make decisions to either risk breaking the *ewe* or find an alternative route that may take them longer but will ensure they do not run the risk of having something from the scaffolding fall on their heads. Depending on time constraints, many of these devotees, myself included, have taken the risk and ran or walked very quickly under the scaffolding, because sometimes the entire block is under scaffolding and there is simply no way to avoid walking under it. Navigating city streets while respecting *ewes* is a difficult task that require devotees to stay extra alert as they move about the city.

### **Descending into Dark Places**

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<sup>83</sup> I recall that this *odu* came up in 2008 and in 2012, both years that cranes collapsed at new building sites under construction on both the East and the West side respectively. In the 2008 incident, 8 people were killed and a nearby building suffered heavy damage.

Another *ewe* that made traveling around the city quite difficult, or at least much more challenging<sup>84</sup> than usual is the one that warns devotees about entering or descending into dark holes, particularly because it applies to subway train station entrances. If the entrance is dark and not well lit then a devotee currently living with this *ewe* is prohibited from entering. Debra, a young priestess, who at the time had about three years of *ocha*, told me about the machinations that she used to have to go through in order to get to work because her local subway station in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn had horrible lighting in the entrance for quite a few months. She had to wake up earlier to either walk an extra 10 blocks or take the bus in order to arrive at a subway station that had a well-lit entrance. She took this warning very seriously because she knew that her godmother, a senior priestess of Obatala, had failed to heed this warning and had been robbed and shoved down a flight of concrete stairs at the Warren Street subway entrance on the G line fourteen years earlier. Her godmother seriously injured her leg and her arm, and had to use a crutch for at least two months following the injury. “She’s lucky she didn’t hit her head. She was in her 50s, she could have sustained a very serious injury. When she heard the *oriaté* read that letter (*odu*), she looked at me and said, ‘Remember what happened to me?’ Believe me, I don’t need those kinds of problems so as much as it’s frustrating and annoying, I do what I’m told! Ok?!”

### **Death and the Marketplace**

With the shift in demographics in New York City over the past fifteen years, campaigns to increase the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables that low-income urban dwellers consume combined with the farm-to-table trend in the food world, the number of markets selling fruit, vegetable and locally-made products has exploded all over New York City (Office of the State

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<sup>84</sup> A little less so now with the inordinate amounts of gentrification occurring in all parts of the city.

Comptroller 2012). Whereas in the past, outdoor markets in New York were confined mostly to remote parks and lots, now they can be found outside of libraries, on midtown streets, and in major high-traffic parks. This proves to be a challenge for many daughters of Yemaya, and any other devotee for whom this ewe may be imposed upon through divination, who are warned to avoid marketplaces, especially outdoor open air markets, because in one of Yemaya's major *odus*, she is decapitated in the marketplace by her jealous husband. The story goes that Yemaya was in the marketplace with Oya, deity of the wind and owner of the marketplace, when Ogun caught her in the marketplace and chopped off her head in a jealous rage. Ogun was suspicious that she was cheating on him with either Orunmila or Shango, depending on the version. Fortunately, the *odu* does not apply to all of Yemaya's daughters, but it usually applies to the daughters who have one of the roads (aspects of orisha) in which Yemaya is Ogun's wife.

Shannon received this warning and has learned the hard way to regularly check the web for outdoor markets in whatever part of the city she's headed to as she traverses the city.

I'm starting to feel like I live in the country. I can't tell you how many times I've turned a corner and almost walked straight into a fresh fruit and vegetable market just outside or in the middle of the damn street one day in midtown. Really, I'm glad that there's now more access to fresh produce, but it's killing me.

For Shannon, the possibility of losing her life, incurring the wrath of Yemaya or Ogun, attracting *osobo*, or sustaining serious injury spiritually and physically if she enters an outdoor marketplace is a reality with which she must contend daily. Summer street fairs and festivals are no longer a cultural excursion that she can enjoy.

African Street Festival, BAM African Cultural Festival, Atlantic Antic, Sixth Avenue Food Festival, San Genero's Feast—these were some of my favorite things to do over the summer. I used to plan my summer budget around these festivals, because you know it's possible to find

some beautiful African Art in the African Street Festival or Atlantic Antic because they're such a huge draw for Black vendors, especially those with unique hand-made cloths or jewelry... Now I go but I stand on the outside and my sister will look for things and take a picture and send it to me. I have to shop by Iphone!! (She laughs). I don't know what I would have done had I found out about this *ewe* before Iphones.

Shannon's ability to easily maneuver about the city becomes a more complicated process, and her ability to enjoy certain leisure activities is curtailed in order to safeguard her well-being and her life.

### **Developing Landscapes**

“Bed-Stuy used to be filled with *maniguas* and now you're lucky if you even find one in Brooklyn.” Roger made this statement on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012 as we were driving around trying to find a *manigua* (overgrown empty or abandoned lot). Devotees must get creative when looking to (re)create or (re)imagine certain sacred spaces. *Maniguas* become *el monte* (the bush) when looking for certain herbs sacred to Ogun, like *matuerzo* (a weed that used to grow abundantly in abandoned lots all around the city, but is becoming harder to find outside of a *botanica*) or looking for a place to leave *ebos*. *El monte* is simultaneously seen as the home for the warrior orishas and a place of danger, but one so encompassing that it can absorb any and all energies. Much in the same way that the orishas with whom it is associated, Elegba, Ogun, and Ochossi, will handle a devotee's most serious problems, will take almost any kind of liquor and do not require extra fuss and fanciful adornment because they are completely at home and thrive in the ruggedness of the wild forest (Brown 1999; Cabrera 1968). Therefore, *maniguas*, *el montes* of the city, become very common and frequent sites for *ebo* disposal. That cold January night in 2012, we had a communal house *ebo* to dispose of in a *manigua*. We were a three-car caravan

driving around Brooklyn, searching almost desperately for a *manigua*. We drove around for almost an hour and a half before we found a *manigua* that had a sufficient amount of overgrowth and looked abandoned enough for us to leave 13 separate black bags each containing chicken carcasses, coconuts, and boiled yams. As we drove home, Carolina suggested that we all take note on our cell phones of any other *maniguas* that we might come across and share the list. This way we would all have it on our phones and each be responsible for communicating with the rest of the house (or those of us with smart phones) whenever one of us encountered another *manigua*, or whenever one of us discovered that a *manigua* on the list no longer existed, which happened to the *manigua* that we used that night within the next six months. When we returned to use it again for another *ebo*, we found it under development. The comprehensive list of *maniguas* has now been shared via email and text, and a printed copy is kept in the Balogun's house for those members of the house who do not have smart phones. It has proven so useful that the list has become extended to include cemetery locations and still accessible commuter rail tracks and railroad crossings.

### **The Neighborhood Changes**

Sean vividly recalled the day that the Balogun moved into his current home, because it was also the day when two of the leaders of one of the biggest African American gangs, the Decepticons, in New York City were literally arrested up against the front gate of their new home.

At the time, I was just flabbergasted to see guys I'd known growing up in the neighborhood getting arrested on my front stoop. And I made sure to stay my black ass inside in case one of them saw me and was like 'Hi, Sean' or even gave me a nod. Yo, my father would have killed me!...But in some way, it could be that that was Ogun blessing our house or acknowledging that this was his new temple.

We had been discussing the rapid transformation and gentrification of this section of Brooklyn and Sean discussed how years later he realized that the level of gang activity in the neighborhood sharply declined with many of the main leaders being arrested and given long jail sentences within the first two years of Ogun's temple being established within the neighborhood. "Nobody would believe it, if you just told them but I know that Ogun's presence made a huge difference in this neighborhood." Sean's demonstrates the way in which devotees perceive the *ashe* of the orisha to work not only within their sacred spaces and places, but on the larger surrounding environment. The police, as agents of law and order, fall under Ogun's purview. To actively see Ogun working (through the police) to clean up the neighborhood confirmed devotees' beliefs in the power of orisha to lay claim to territory, and to subsequently defend and guard it as well.

### **Spiritual Marketplace**

#### *Where Have All the Cuban Botanicas Gone?*

With the out-migration of many Cubans from the New York City metropolitan area within the last 10-15 years (Duany 1999; McHugh et al., 1997; Pew Hispanic Center 2006), there has been a serious decline in the number of businesses that serve the religious needs of orisha devotees. Elder *santeros* complain about the difficulty in obtaining the desserts and sweets (*arimu*) that are traditionally given to the orisha on *cumpleaños*, because the Cuban bakeries that used to exist in Upper Manhattan and the Bronx are no longer there. The challenges we have faced over past eight years trying to buy some of these sweets in other Hispanic bakeries have attested to the specificity and uniqueness of the Cuban recipe for making these sweets.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> On more than a few occasions when we returned with sweets purchased at Puerto Rican or Dominican bakeries, the elders had refused to use them. One stated that it simply did not have the same appearance as what she was used to purchasing. One flat out refused to use them because they had not been purchased in a Cuban bakery.

Moreover, in addition to bakery items, it has become increasingly difficult to obtain certain religious items as the number of trusted religious stores, *botanicas*, that carried them have severely decreased in number in both Upper Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. Just within the ten years, that I have been conducting this research, two of the three primary *botanicas* that most of the *ile* frequented have closed down. The one remaining *botanica* no longer has a *santera* working (and advising) behind the counter and the availability of some of the basic fundamental herbs is sporadic at best. In addition, as they are aware of the scarcity of *botanicas* that specifically serve orisha devotees, so as a result, the prices have increased significantly while the quantities (and quality) of certain herbs, oils, and other items sold in bulk have decreased just as significantly.

The *botanicas* that these devotees used were very specifically structured to serve the Cuban Lucumi community and the particular needs of working *santeros* who routinely initiated godchildren, and conducted a high volume of rituals and ceremonies. These *botanicas* were owned by Cubans, most of them priests themselves, so they were very aware of the necessary items that any *santero* would need. The Cuban-owned *botanicas* were very distinct from the Dominican and Puerto Rican-owned *botanicas* in that these other *botanicas* tend(ed) to serve *Espiritismo* practitioners and individuals using the *botanica* as an alternative healthcare system because of an inability to secure normative healthcare (Garrison 1977; Gomez-Beloz and Chavez, 2001; Jones et al., 2001; Reiff et al., 2003; Romberg 2009; Viladrich 2006). The variety of ready potions and oils to attract love, good luck or keep away negative spirits, jealous thoughts or bad luck are viewed very skeptically by these devotees. In all the years of my field research, I have not known anyone who has purchased one of these potions or oils. On one occasion, one of these pre-packaged concoctions was recommended to me by a Puerto Rican

*espiritista* whom I had met at a *bembe*. When I mentioned the recommendation to the Balogun, he dismissed it and said that he would teach me how to make something myself that would be much more effective. “You want to know that there’s really *ashe* in it!” The Balogun emphasized the fact that the origin of these pre-packaged goods was unknown and therefore in his eyes suspect. The extent of the effectiveness of spiritual baths and other concoctions is also largely based upon the *ashe* of the individual preparing it.

*Botanicas* are a lifeline within orisha devotion because of the high demand for items to perform sacrifices, offerings, and to maintain the orisha. The Balogun comments that “for as long as [he] has been in this religion,” the Congo Real was always the primary *botanica* for orisha devotees. The owner was an extremely knowledgeable Afro-Cuban priest that stocked everything from *soperas* (soup tureens) and cauldrons big enough to fit a small person to marbles and tops for Elegba. He recalls that if someone requested an item, such as a certain plant or seed that only grew in the Caribbean, the owner would have it there within a matter of days. With the out-migration of Cuban Lucumi devotees from the New York City area, the availability of these resources within the city limits have reached a dismal level.

#### “What Do You Mean I Can’t Buy a Live Chicken?”

Carolina had a dumb-founded look on her face as she asked this question to the young Hispanic man in the live poultry market where we were attempting to purchase a few chickens for a ceremony that afternoon. “What do you mean it’s illegal? I was in here just two weeks ago and you sold me five chickens and a rooster. I don’t understand what the problem is.” The shop attendant had just explained to us (Carolina, Alex, and myself) that a new law in NYC prohibited

the sale of live animals to non-licensed buyers.<sup>86</sup> He insisted that his boss would get in trouble and that the business could be fined for selling to us. Carolina asked to speak to his boss. The attendant disappeared into a nearby office and we could hear his boss asking him who wanted the chickens as he exited the office. He was an older Hasidic Jewish male and when the attendant pointed at us, he shook his head and said, “No!” I saw Carolina’s eyes get wide and she almost yelled, “What? Are you serious? Why did you need to come look at us?” The owner simply repeated “No” and went back in his office. I could see that Carolina was about to start an argument so I grabbed her and said to her “Let’s just go. We’ll find somewhere else. It’s not worth an argument.” Carolina was extremely pissed and yelled as we were leaving, “This is bullshit!!!”

Alex immediately phoned the Balogun to tell him of this delay and setback and to see if anyone else knew of a market we could try that would not deny us. As we drove to the next spot, we discussed if we had been denied because while Carolina and Alex were often mistaken for Latinos, I was identifiably black and that may have influenced his decision. We decided to test the theory at the next market, so I remained in the car; however, the same experience was repeated at two more places before we found a market run by Chinese vendors at least an hour and a half later that finally was willing to sell us the necessary birds. As we drove back to the *ile*, Carolina very vehemently voiced her anger.

I don’t believe this shit! We’re not the only ones who use live animals. Jews use them too and so do Muslims. But I **bet** you that the first owner would sell to Jews but not to us because we’re Black. I bet you they don’t have these problems. This is some bullshit????!

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<sup>86</sup> I have attempted over a six-month period through searching on the web, calling, and actually going to the Department of Health to verify if this was indeed an actual city ordinance, and have been unsuccessful at getting an answer to this question. I have been told that it is possible that it is a city ordinance, but no one from the agency will confirm it.

At this point, the ceremony that was supposed to have started at 2:30pm and not last more than an hour was now pushed back by at least two and a half hours. Some of the devotees that were supposed to assist and/or take part in the ritual had to leave because they had to pick up young children and had not made alternative arrangements as no one had anticipated that it would be so challenging to acquire live chickens, an activity that was usually very quick and straightforward. This meant that now we had to conduct the ceremony with fewer hands, which translated into a longer time frame to finish. In Carolina and Alex's opinion (and that of a few other devotees with whom we shared this tale when we got back), this new sudden law felt like a direct attack on their religious devotion as they couldn't imagine another community that would be so immediately impacted. Certain poultry markets are always frequented by orisha devotees of all races and although devotees do not announce their intentions, they are visible markers of their religious devotion—religious beads and the all white clothing or the white head scarf or hat. At least two of the poultry markets that we visited that day were not unfamiliar with the community, but were still unwilling to sell us the chickens. Something so simple as the inability to purchase live animals can cause a ceremony to be cancelled, delayed, and even spiritually altered because some ceremonies are designated to take place before dark or even at an appointed hour.

The conversation that ensued the next time this happened touched upon the other way in which devotees are negatively impacted by the New York City legal system. When theorizing about the possible process and potential meanings of becoming licensed buyers for live chickens, the discussion turned to the question of whether or not Jewish or Muslim clergy were given exemption to this law as they too purchase live animals for religious purposes. The Balogun and another senior priest commented that if the city wouldn't recognize them as members of the

clergy before this, they certainly wouldn't do so now just to allow them to purchase live animals. Many priests and priestesses have been denied clergy status with New York city and state because it was claimed that "they couldn't meet the requirements for registration" which include certificates of ordination or ministry licenses and a "church's Article of Incorporation" and/or a list of the church's trustees, approximate size of the congregation, and how often the congregation meets. These standards for religious recognition are based on Christian religious organization and do not in any way reflect or leave room for a non-monotheistic religious organizational structure. Because of these difficulties, priests cannot legally conduct marriage ceremonies nor receive partial tax exemptions on their property even though all of their homes are immediately converted into shrines once they are initiated and they do serve in the same capacities as ministers and pastors within their community of orisha devotees.

### **Contested Sacred Spaces**

*"It's Not Littering, it's Ebo."*

Devotees do leave offerings in certain locales that would cause an individual unfamiliar with the religious devotion to question the extent to which they held these places sacred and how that then translates into a care for the environment. For instance, devotees sometimes leave bottles of champagne, beer, or honey liquor at the riverside for Oshun, the goddess of emotions and sweet waters. Sometimes they pour these liquids into the river and then drop the bottles in as well. While to some this would be perceived as littering, to the devotees it is giving Oshun all that she requests. Oshun herself will sometimes request that the bottle is dropped unopened into the river or that after she has been given the liquid, the bottle is to follow. In this instance, what is more important, the law of the municipality or the directives of the goddess Oshun?

This issue surrounding “littering” has long been a problem for devotees of orisha as this has been one way for authorities, or those who oppose orisha worship, to sanction them or negatively portray their religious actions. In July 2008, Alain Hernandez was charged with 10 counts of animal cruelty after a homeowner saw him and another individual dumping garbage bags on the beach in the Monmouth area of New Jersey. The homeowner wrote down the license plate and Hernandez was “apprehended” according to Vince Amato, the Chief Humane Law Enforcement Officer for the Monmouth County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The report in the local papers characterized the animals as having been “slaughtered” instead of “sacrificed,” even though the reporter took the time to find out more general information about the religion. The article concluded by discussing the fact that animal carcasses washed up on the beach all the time, and Chief Amato thought “thought that Santeria could be behind the incidents” (Tirella 2008). For city officials, unfamiliar with the religious practice, animal sacrifice and the disposal of sacrificed carcasses are perceived as animal cruelty and the illegal dumping of garbage. Devotees in the New Jersey area commented that after that incident, they became much more cautious about leaving *ebos* at the oceanfront, particularly near that area. Wendy’s godfather, Ernesto, an Afro-Cuban senior priest of Elegba, expressed both his anxiety and irritation with the whole situation in his heavily accented English, peppered with Spanish, “Now we have to walk up to how many miles just so we can throw out the *ebo*? You know how *pesado* (heavy) those *ebos* can be. All those bags de *este tamaño* (size) [He uses his hands to demonstrate the size]! We use those beaches because they are the first ones you come to that are right there on the ocean. *Lo sabes? E este Hernandez, quien lo que sea,* (And this Hernandez, whoever he is) why didn’t he fight this? Huh? Pichardo already won the case for

us.<sup>87</sup> Ah, you know this is not fair?” Shaking his finger forcefully in front of his face, he finished with, “*Esto es la discriminación. La discriminación!*”

Devotees feel that they are unfairly singled out when it comes to animal sacrifice, especially those that must be disposed of in public places such as the beach. Many devotees were puzzled that Hernandez simply pleaded guilty to the charges and paid a fine. In their view, it is admitting that what is a religious observation and a religiously sanctioned action is indeed unlawful and illegal and should be viewed and treated as such by the larger mostly Christian American population. Hernandez’ decision not to defend his religious practice was seen as a setback in devotees’ struggle to gain more respect within the wider American society, and to be recognized as a legitimate religious community with its own particular religious beliefs and practices.

Rivers, oceans, cemeteries, and crossroads are extremely sacred places to orisha devotees. Leaving sacrificed animal carcasses, and other *ebos* are significant aspects of the function of these sacred places (Nodal and Ramos, 2005). The orisha or the egun dictate specific locations where ebos are to be “taken out” (disposed of) because these sacred spaces are also portals where the negativity that has been cleaned off is to be swallowed and disposed of by the energy of that particular entity in a place where that entity’s energy is strongly concentrated. Yemaya is the ocean and if she requests that you dispose of an *ebo* in the ocean, it is because she “is taking the *ebo*,” meaning she will help to resolve your problems by absorbing the negativity removed from your physical and spiritual self so it no longer resides with you.

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<sup>87</sup> In the case *Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. and Ernesto Pichardo v. Hialeah*, 508 U.S. 520 (1993), Ernesto Pichardo took a legal suit brought against him by the city of Hialeah, FL for animal sacrifice all the way to the Supreme Court. The final holding read: “The states cannot restrict religiously-mandated ritual slaughter of animals, regardless of the purpose of the slaughter.”

The sharing of these sacred spaces within a religiously plural city such as New York City becomes very complicated and in some instances difficult as devotees do not have enough political capital to protect themselves from being charged with criminal acts such as littering or the illegal disposal of animal remains. Devotees also have not organized enough political capital to have their voices heard within the environmental conservation circles within the city. Although devotees are deeply affected by the continuing pollution of the rivers that border Manhattan on the east and west side as well as the continuing pollution of the harbors that wash back up on city beaches, there is no collective effort to make their voices heard within Earth Day activities or other anti-urban pollution campaigns. Besides a few junior priests lamenting about the filth they encounter when “taken to the river” to perform one of the necessary preliminary *ebos* that occur immediately before priestly initiation, I have only ever heard one serious discussion about the state of the environment in larger group discussions among devotees. However, this conversation did not include a discussion about a course of action to combat ongoing environmental destruction.

### *Yemaya's Festival*

From the boardwalk above the beach, all one can see is a sea of individuals clothed in white dotted with colorful beads. Devotees flock to the beach to display their devotion to the goddess Yemaya by celebrating her with drumming, singing, dancing, and feasting. The majority African American Yemaya Egbe (association) constructs an elaborate throne replete with fruits and sweets for the goddess and her effigy, a sacred statue carved from wood. Although devotees are on the beach, adherence to strictures of dress and behavior is still regulated by the mores of orisha adornment, women are not wearing bathing suits, and most men are not wearing shorts.

Devotees show respect for the mother deity by covering themselves with white and maintaining proper ritual dress despite the heat and the lure of the cool ocean water. By “mirroring one another” in wearing white, cleansing themselves in the ocean, and chanting, they are creating what David Morgan called “a unified social body, a shared somatic regime that endows them with a corporate identity” (2010, p. 14). This collectivity is further enhanced or cemented with the sharing of food between family, friends, and sometimes strangers that takes place under the numerous tents lined up all along the beach. As the mother, Yemaya gathers all her children, which makes this the most communal event in the community of orisha devotees in the Northeast. Yemaya literally translates to “the mother of fishes” and as such we are all her children and no one would dare deny another festival attendee food as it would desecrate the spirit of sharing and nurturing that is one of the fundamental characteristics of Yemaya. These acts create a sacred fellowship that transforms an average beachfront into the worship grounds of Yemaya.



Figure 5. Yemaya’s Festival, 2009.

The festival is at once a “cosmic renewal and restoration” (Ogunbile, forthcoming) for the community in that the devotees reenact the “deity’s mythology and history, celebrating the significant role the deity has played in the welfare of its devotees” (Olupona 2011, p. 86). At an appointed hour, drumming and chanting begin to induce the goddess to descend on one of her priestesses, chosen annually from among the Egbe members. Once Yemaya is present, she will dance, offer community prognostications for the upcoming year, bless and/or spiritually clean individual devotees that are near her, salute her elders, allow devotees to salute her, and will leave only after she has lifted her sacred statue onto her head and transported it down to the sea’s edge to bathe it in her waters, renewing its sacred power for another year, before returning it to its place of honor on her shrine (Sinha 2014).

Some years ago, there was a brief scare because there was a delay in securing the usual permit for the festival. Residents near that section of the Rockaway Beach had lodged complaints with the local council about the littering and the offerings put into the ocean for Yemaya that at times washed back up on the beach with the returning tide. Once given to Yemaya (placed in the ocean), a devotee is not supposed to pick up these offerings and simply dispose of them in the trash. Devotees had to call upon local Black officials to advocate for them and promised to do their best to get people to clean up any trash that resulted from the feasting that went on during the festival. In order to ensure that the stipulations with which they were granted a permit were observed, on the annual flyer usually handed out or sent out via email, they requested that devotees only bring biodegradable offerings, i.e., not placing fruits in baskets or plastic bags but rather that the fruits be placed directly into the ocean. I recall as we descended the stairs from the boardwalk down to the beach itself, a member of the Egbe asked that we please make sure to take all of trash and deposit it in the garbage can before we left that day. The Egbe did let the city

officials know, however that the offerings were part of a religious ceremony and would not be removed.



Figure 6. Yemaya Festival, 2009.

Sharing space with other communities within the city forces devotees to make concessions in their religious praxi to accommodate wider secular concerns. Many speculated that the complaint had been religiously motivated, as the majority of the black occupants of that Far Rockaway neighborhood were Christian. Devotees took swift and deliberate action, using what little political capital they had to maneuver the municipal system in order to maintain good

relationships with the primary permitting agencies of NYC to ensure the continuance at what had become a major event in the spiritual calendar of the New York Metropolitan area orisha devotees. Similar to the struggles faced by Hindu festivals in Germany (Baumann 2001), and mosque-building in Switzerland (Strabac 2008), orisha devotees must deal with hostility from local communities and political institutions who prescriptively attempt to use complaints about noise or littering as means to prohibit the sharing of public space with non-normative religious agents. Incidents like this serve to remind devotees that their religious way of life still occupies a liminal space in the American religious imagination. As such, they still must confront the reality of contestations over who has legitimate religious claims to public space and whose sacredness matters or is allowed to be visible and represented in a space that should be legally accessible to any religious faith.

### **Domestic Spaces**

#### *“My House is Not a Museum”*

As already mentioned above, devotees hold the orisha and the eguns to a high standard of spiritual effectiveness. One young Latina devotee, Melody, who was briefly affiliated with the Balogun’s house for a period of about two years, made her feelings perfectly clear when she made the above statement in regards to her orisha not just being “for show.” Devotees go to great lengths to make space in their homes for the deities, their accoutrements, and the ever-growing shrines and offerings that eguns and other spirits demand because devotees know that these entities provide positive energy, blessings, and protection. “The orichas and the spirits demand space, daily attention, and a household budget that recognizes their needs” (Brown 1999, p. 180).

Devotees are willing to give up space in what are already sometimes small New York City apartments, because they see and experience the returns for their sacrifice.

For *aleyos*, this spatial demand is somewhat easier to meet as the warriors can be placed immediately by the front door, and egun shrines can be set up in kitchens, bathrooms, living rooms or even sometimes in bedrooms. The warriors also do not require the same type of strict cosmologically dictated spatial demarcation. As “more material” entities (Brown 1999, p. 180), they deal with the more concretely material aspects of our daily lives. Ogun and Ochossi, in particular, preside over realms that are principally land-related, such as the forests, the mountains, and the hunt. The warriors have the ability to move between realms and dimensions, earth and sky, among the living and the dead, in ways that the other orishas and the eguns cannot. An elder priest of Obatala surmised that this is why everyone receives these orishas in their first initiation into this way of life.

The majority of the *santeros* whose homes I visited all had separate rooms for their orisha that they referred to as throne rooms. The few that didn't have separate rooms for their orisha, used decorative screens to partition off a space for their *boveda* in a corner of usually the living room, as far away from their orisha as possible. Many devotees say that the ideal situation would be to have a room for the orisha and another one for the eguns. As time goes on, and as devotees develop their relationship with these entities, they demand and subsequently acquire a lot of “stuff.” This stuff occupies space and devotees find that the space they allocated for the orisha or the eguns soon begins to spread, requiring devotees to cede living room space, foyer space, and closet space to the needs of these entities.

### *Altared Out of House and Home*

When we first moved in, I really thought that this was a big apartment with so much space and we would easily have enough space for our orisha and be able to put our egun tables in the basement where there's plenty of room to work. We had looked long and hard for a place where we were close, but not too close, to a cemetery, we weren't on a corner, and we weren't close to a hospital. We scored on getting this place, right. Lots of room, right? Not so much anymore! You can barely get in the front door without hitting something.

Akina, Sean's wife, was referring to the fact that immediately to the right upon entering the door was a very large pumpkin on a golden platter, next to which were two glasses of different sizes surrounded by a plate of sweets, two *garabatos* (hooked staff) covered in red ribbon, a black ceramic dog, and an incense holder. On one occasion, Akina had come through the door with lots of grocery bags and one of them had hit the top of one of the glasses of water and it had spilled all over the front entrance and the rug they keep there. The water had vinegar and lemon juice in it so even though she had dried and Febreezed the rug, the scent of vinegar and lemon lingered for months.

And forget about even being able to actually get to my orisha to give them rum and *epo*. There are so many *ebos* in front of our Elegbas that I literally just throw his candy into the closet and pray I don't hit him. There's more rum on the door than there is on Elegba because I still haven't mastered the art of spraying over longer distances. And don't get me started about the bookshelf that's now a permanent shrine for our Asian eguns. I had to rearrange all the books on the shelf because of course they wanted to go on the top where all the expensive books were so I had to shift those books and now I have two stacks of books on the floor just gathering dust.



Figure 7: Elegba's Offerings in Sean and Akina's home.

Carolina and I had come over to Akina and Sean's apartment to assist them with a particularly complicated *ebo* for their eguns. As we were attempting to get through the door, Carolina commented, "Yo, do you guys have even **more** stuff by your front door? How do you get in here?" She chuckled as she squeezed through the door in order to avoid knocking over a glass that was literally less than an inch away from the doorway entrance. Laughingly she asked them, "Y'all sure you have enough shrines?" As we sat in the living room, I looked around and noticed that there were glasses of water in every corner with the exception of one corner where there was a small table for their modem. Some of the shrines also had vases filled with flowers or fans, cigars, small cakes, bowls of candy, shot glasses filled with either clear or dark liquid. When I went to the bathroom I almost tripped over another shrine that took up almost half of the small foyer that connected the bedroom and the bathroom. In the kitchen, I could see that a new altar with a large fishbowl-like glass with amethysts and quartz crystals in the bottom had been erected on a small table placed in front of the other bedroom door that led to the kitchen.

In addition to more than 10 different altars for their orisha and egun, Akina and Sean also keep a small space in the corner of their dining room for supplies they regularly use for the egun and the orisha. They have three bins full of different kinds of fabrics—broadcloth, satin, and lace—in a stunning array of different colors. One small plastic drawer contains ribbon of at least

20 different colors in at least four different sizes. Two drawers in their cabinet is dedicated to their spiritual needs and in addition to the *epo* (palm oil), *hutia y pescado* (dried *hutia* and fish), *efun* (crushed egg shells) and *maiz tostado* (toasted corn) that are standard must have supplies for the orisha, the drawers also contained different sized nails, twine, knives, various sized strainers, razors, chalk, bunches of brown paper bags with elastic around them, and plumber's tape in black, white, red, yellow and green.

Akina continued to describe the displacement of certain household items to accommodate spiritual materials.

I had two sets of plates we received as wedding gifts that I had to put back in the box they came in because we had to make room for these supplies... We use them much more frequently than we use the plates so it just made more sense... But you know, I try not to complain because they help us out so much and it's not like it doesn't have a purpose, you know. These are the things they need to work and it takes up a lot of space but what choice do you have. Are you going to tell them that they can't have a glass of water in your living room on the floor because you're too *stush* (West Indian patois slang for stuck-up) to give up some space in your living room. I guess people do that but I don't need those kind of problems. I need all the help I can get.

The placement and position of shrines for the eguns and the orisha and the necessary supplies for their maintenance and for the performing of *ebos* dictate how space is structured within devotees' homes. Even though technically, Sean and Akina's names are the only ones that appear on the lease, there is an additional conglomerate of intangible beings that also reside in the apartment (Brown 1999). Orishas and eguns don't pay rent (at least not directly) but yet they have the power to command and order the space in which devotees must live. Devotees accommodate them and cede space in their homes in exchange for the spiritual and material assistance that these entities provide. Their homes are "not museums," and icons, glasses of

water, and the incredible multitude of other religious items are not just “for show,” but are necessary materials that help to effect positive progress in devotees’ lives.

### The Balogun’s House

The Balogun is fortunate in that he owns a home that not so surprisingly corresponds with what Lydia Gonzalez Huguet demarcates as the classic spaces usually found in Cuban *iles*: *cuarto sagrado* (sacred room/*ocha* room), *sala* (living room), and *patio/solar* (Gonzalez Huguet 1968). He has an *ocha* room, a separate room from his living quarters where he reads, divines and often times conducts rituals, and an outdoor back patio where elaborate thrones that seeks to recreate the wilderness of *el monte* (the bush) are erected under the back porch. When I inquired if he had known that this specific way of demarcating space was typically Cuban, he laughed and said not exactly, he knew that his godfather had maintained separate spaces within his home for different ritual purposes and he knew that in Cuba, his godfather did not have as large of a house as he had here. In fact, he was simply following the instructions the orisha gave him to maintain ritual spaces separately from his private personal living space. The one thing he had been adamant about when searching for a home was that it have a backyard where he could put up a throne made of foliage for Ogun to celebrate his *cumpleaños*. But if as devotees believe, the ancestors of your spiritual *ocha* lineage also become a part of your larger *egun* group, then perhaps they had influenced the way in which he had created and demarcated ritual space on his property. Much of learning about orisha and learning how to work the *ocha* is done through observance and mimicry. One could surmise that the Balogun had unconsciously learned about ordering and structuring ritual space within an *ile* from his Afro-Cuban godfather who was endeavoring to recreate and reconfigure his understanding of religious space in an *ile* in a new urban

environment, and from the ancestral santeros who had come before them both. These inherited forms being passed down along the “chain of religious memory” (Hervieu-Leger 2000).

Although it has been at least ten years since the Balogun set up his orisha throne outside, I recall that last year when we—me, Sean, Roger, Alex and Carolina—had scoured parks, *maniguas*, and public gardens (where I was the most afraid that we would get caught) for a sufficient amount of bush to be able to adequately imitate *el monte* or the sacred grove/bush for Ogun’s annual celebration. This particular year, the *ile* had not had the adequate funds to purchase the bush from a landscaping company as they had the previous year, so we had to be creative in obtaining what we needed. Although we had a substantial amount of foliage from the amateur landscaping that Alex and Sean had done in the Balogun’s overgrown backyard, there were still certain types of leaves and bush sacred to Ogun that the Balogun also wanted on the throne so once it got dark, we jumped over hedges and climbed park gates with large black plastic bags that we filled to the brim and then transported back to the Balogun’s backyard. When we surveyed the eight garbage bags we had brought back in addition to the six or so that we already had from the Balogun’s own backyard, I commented that we certainly had more than we needed. Alex and Sean just looked at me and laughed. “We just might have enough,” Alex commented. I thought the late hour coupled with the maybe four hours of sleep we were all operating on had perhaps skewed his judgment. But as we stapled leaves and branches, under the experienced direction of Sean, Alex, and Roger, to the wooden structure erected the day before, and the sun began rising over the top of the trees at the end of the backyard, I saw that we had gone through at least ten bags and we’d only covered two-thirds of the space. I began to see that the desired denseness (about which us novices had vociferously complained) created by the specific and purposeful positioning of the leaves gave the space an eerily real feeling of being in

the wilderness. While we worked, we sang Ogun's chants to bring his energy to this sacred "grove" that we were creating with pilfered foliage. We paused so that Sean and Roger could take a smoke break, and everyone else exited the throne that was about 10 feet deep and 6 or 7 feet wide, but I began walking towards the back of the throne. I felt as if I was walking into a dense forest where no path had been cut and I found myself stroking the leaves and feeling a compelling impulse to walk deeper into the wilderness.

The Balogun came out just then to inspect our work and saw what I was doing and immediately called me loudly, gesturing as he told me to "Come off of the throne!" When I explained to him the feeling of wildness that had come over me, he simply nodded and said he'd seen it around me, and he thought it would be best if I went in the house and sat down for a moment. "You're a child of Ogun, a *guerrero*, the wilderness can come to feel like home to you. You know Ogun's true nature is to be deep up in the mountain, working at his forge or hunting. The wilderness will call to you in a way that it won't with children of the other orisha, but you can't give in to it. You live in a city and you can't call that wild energy here into your house, it can cause all types of chaos and destroy your home, that's why I put the throne up out here. Some people will put up all the bush in their houses and if you don't do the proper *ebos* first then it can cause all types of problems in your home. Like bringing Esu into the house. All that raw wild untamed energy does not need to be in a house. You see where I leave Esu, right? Right where he belongs-outside!...Go inside and go get some civilization before you start stripping down out here and hunting squirrels," he said chuckling as I made my way slowly into the house, leaving the bush and crossing the threshold back into polite society.

By constructing a "sacred grove" or recreating *el monte* in an urban backyard we had imbued this small space with the energy of hard work and wildness innate to Ogun. With our

chanting, we had called his energy to be present as we painstakingly hung wild bush and temporarily transposed the energy of the forest to our little parcel of Brooklyn. Unknowingly, but effectively, I had participated in creating a portal for Ogun's energy to manifest itself. The pull of which I had felt keenly, and was therefore very careful to not enter the throne again.

Over the past seven years, however, the Balogun has put up his throne in his throne room for the annual celebration of his priestly initiation. This is only one of the annual events that take place over the course of the year that requires a rearrangement of the Balogun's *ile* to accommodate elaborate thrones, spiritual possessions, and a large number of attendees. A certain level of regular maintenance is thus necessary and expected. Usually, a complete and thorough cleaning of the Balogun's house from top to bottom is required. The maintenance of a *santero's ile* is supposed to be a communal duty shared between the godchildren. Maintenance of the Balogun's *ile* has been a huge problem over the past few years as his elder godchildren, due to age, are less able to perform regular housekeeping duties, and the younger ones either live out town (like me) or are too busy to do a regular cleaning. Some resent having to clean what they view as the Balogun's home and voiced this resentment one night as it was nearing 3am and we were just finishing with the cleaning. Diane, an elder priestess of Obatala, who was there to assist the Balogun with refreshing his *ocha*, overheard the comment and reminded us that, "it was not just the Balogun's house, but Ogun's temple!" Obatala's wisdom shared through his daughter served as a reminder that sacredness is not just about outer appearances, but a cognizance of the spiritual energies present in a place and how you interact with it. Ogun's temple, if treated with respect and maintained with the care due the deity, would then extend its the blessing and sacredness to us. The sacrifice of time and energy does not go unnoticed and

unappreciated by the orisha. Because the presence of Ogun resides within the physical structure of the home, all who enter bask in his energy and can be blessed and cleansed by it.

Within most other religions there is a distinct physical demarcation between private home and place of worship, but within this religious tradition that line as with the one between sacred and profane is so blurred that it simply usually ceases to exist. Many of the African American *santeros* that were the generation right under the elders, had large houses in which the chores could rotate or in some *iles*, the members deemed it more expedient to pool their resources and pay for a cleaning professional. While many of the elders look down upon this because it appears to them as if the godchildren are shirking their responsibility to “put their hands in it” by caring for the *ile* themselves. One even commented that, “you would **never** find that in a Cuban *ile*.” However, these African American devotees are in the process of indigenizing this religious way of life, and as they have the benefit of greater economic resources, should they not put them to use if the end result would be the same?

### **Conclusion**

Devotees navigate the city hyperaware of the various spiritual energies moving around them at all times. In some places that spiritual energy is stronger and in some it might be more negative than positive. Through their cosmological understanding of how energy functions and manifests itself in different spaces and places, devotees are able to recreate spiritual spaces when necessary or avoid certain places at particular times. The rapidly changing urban landscape forces devotees to have to look longer and harder, and widen their geographical searches for sacred sites in which to perform spiritual works or leave ritual offerings or cleanings. Having to share the city with religious others and secular institutions proves challenging for access to sacred spaces,

necessitating that devotees advocate for their religious right to occupy both place and space within New York City.

Cuban out-migration has forced devotees to rely on other ethnic communities to provide needed ritual supplies. While the herbs and other religious items purchased at *botanicas* often do function in rituals or ceremonies in healing capacities, it is not necessarily the primary means by which these devotees give or receive healthcare. The loss of knowledgeable fully-stocked *botanicas* and live poultry markets has created difficult situations and adversely effected ritual performance. Although devotees could travel to New Jersey where there is still a Cuban American community, the thought of driving to New Jersey to find ritual and ceremonial supplies and food is unappealing to devotees who live within the five boroughs either because they do not have easy access to a car or because they simply will not accept that these items cannot be found within the city limits.

Within domestic abodes, devotees must make space for the sometimes large assortment of orisha and eguns who accompany them in this religious way of life. Devotees demand religious effectiveness and the price to pay for that is to cede of control of design and structure of domestic space. More than willing to pay this price, and make this sacrifice for the proven spiritual returns, devotees' homes are peppered with small shrines, altars, and offerings for these entities. Consideration for their needs, wants, and desires are often placed above the consideration of those whose names appear on the lease or mortgage.

As the struggle to share public space considered sacred by devotees encounter opposition due to religious intolerance and a lack of desire to change the normativity of what constitutes "religion" and legitimate religious practice in the larger American imagination, devotees will need to consider how they will effectively advocate for their community. The structure of

community in orisha devotion is decentralized with the concentration of devotees into houses and smaller communities with somewhat different and varying religious traditions. These devotees will have to consider if this structure is a possible reason why no concrete collective exists to act as a religiopolitical body in legal and civil society. Will devotees have to compromise this way of religiously organizing their bodies and space in order to be legitimately represented or will they resist attempts at institutionalization and perhaps miss out on an opportunity to change the image of African diasporic religious lifeways in American popular religious imagination?

## Conclusion

In New York City in 1959, a journey began that would change the landscape of African American religious devotion within the city, and subsequently throughout the United States. New York became the birthplace of an African American Yoruba/*Lucumi* religious subjectivity that would serve as the foundation for the creation of a number of different communities of orisha worship. Among the African American devotees in New York City who are my teachers, fellow devotees, friends, and interlocutors, this tradition has continued to blossom and transform to suit contemporary urban conditions. Just like any other religious tradition, orisha worship is also indelibly influenced, transformed and even in some instances restructured when moved into a different locale. Although The African American devotees with whom I work through their own words and actions strive to maintain what they feel is a “traditional *Lucumi*” way of worshipping orisha, they have still made certain transformations that will change religious praxi and transmission. For instance, the method of using history as a teaching tool probably does not date back to Cuba. This appears to be a specifically African American method of religious transmission that due to its use in training younger African American priests will now become a part of this “tradition.” To point this out to devotees will usually illicit denials simply because they do not think of these changes in such clinical terms. Within these religious traditions, praxi is passed down orally and through hands-on teaching and assisting from a master. So one learns how to do things in a way that has been passed down for generations in a spiritual family from master to student. However, this does not preclude that changes or additions will not occur but there is still consistency in the method in which a ritual is approached and conducted. *Santeros*

implicitly understand this although they may perhaps not explicitly state it. Often times questions concerning myths or patakis are usually prefaced with, “Well, depending on whose telling it, such and such deity may have been such and such deity’s wife....” Despite the tendency to want to cling to an ideal of fixity, the reality is that the fluidity and dynamism of orisha devotion will usually preclude those attempts.

The discursive and embodied process by which an African American Lucumi religious subjective body is made is a complicated one fraught with physical, mental and emotional struggles. Devotees must learn to seek balance between their inner personal religious worlds and the outer social secular world in which they reside and work. Oftentimes tension and conflict are unavoidable aspects of their daily lives. Marginalization occurs on multiple levels and devotees must find ways to cope with this marginalization in their personal and professional lives. Devotees’ commitment to the orisha is tested through interactions and intimate engagements where the devotee is forced to choose between their spiritual path and family and friends because of the inability to share this aspect of their lives with these individuals. Faith and the material proof of orisha’s effectiveness are beams of support upon which devotees lean when they choose to follow the advice of the orisha that they find emotionally difficult. Navigating socially acceptable (or even expected) behaviors that are taboo in their religious way of life is a constant challenge in devotee’s lives. While the freedom of religion amendment guarantees one thing, the lived religious reality of devotees attest or demonstrate a sub-class enjoyment of this “God given right.” Their narratives demonstrate that devotees feel an inability to freely communicate their religious truths in a society where all voices, religious and otherwise, should be heard equally. This is a problem that perhaps institutionalization may help devotees to address.

## **Institutionalization: The Future of Orisha Devotion?**

Perhaps the fact that the orisha community in NYC does not have a sacred center to call home or a permanent dedicated structure where the collective could gather accounts for the fractiousness of the larger African American and orisha community in general. There is no permanent religious space in which to create a “a religious, communal, and political identity” (Kunin 1998, p. 26) that could serve as a base for organizing along religious and/or sociopolitical lines (Olupona 2011). A discussion about institutionalization has begun within the larger orisha community on the East Coast and has been gaining more attention and traction among this community of African American devotees, particularly because they feel as if they are being left out of the discussion.

Although not prone to using the internet as a source of gaining religious knowledge, devotees do still come across interesting news articles pertaining to their religious practice while surfing the internet. One devotee in particular uses a service that gathers any article published through any on-line news feed that pertains to orisha. In October of 2014, a video was circulated amongst devotees in the Balogun’s house and a few other connected *iles* and elder *santeros* that documented the coming together of Ernesto Pichardo’s Church of the Lukumí Babalú Ayé and Kola Ifa of Miami, a group of Cuban *babalawos* signing an ecumenical accord that would create a larger institutional banner of *Santería* devotion. In the video Pichardo says, “We’re headed towards institutionalization, globally with this...And what’s going to happen here is if you have a rogue element in the priesthood, you know they’re going to start having a hard time because now you have the hierarchies have come together-there’s goin’ be rules, ok? And it’s back to the ethics and morals of this faith and the tenets of this faith. So it will no longer be such a free for all, do whatever environment that we have now...The way we’ve been operating, which is

chaotic, everybody kinda does whatever they want to do and there's no center to this...Now coming together allows us to focus on when those problems arise with some maturity and respect and with some force to deal with it and not the way things are right now. So we're going from chaos to order" (Miami Herald 2014). While devotees respect Pichardo for taking the case of animal sacrifice in religious rights all the way to the Supreme Court, they are extremely uncomfortable with his latest move to place himself as a co-head of an organization that posits an authority not vested in it by the larger community. Questions that were asked during the email and in-person conversations were, "First of all, why is he calling it ecumenical? We are not Christians! And what communities is he talking about? If he's saying globally, how on earth does he think that his religious authority could reach globally? Why would someone in Brazil follow his rules? They don't know him from a hole in the wall!" In theory, the idea of regulating what they also agree is "deviant religious behavior" is something to which they could adhere but they object to the these two groups who represent such a small sample of orisha or even Lucumi devotees coming together to supposedly make decisions for the larger community.

Devotees also feel that the ethnolinguistic bias is once again emerging as the video states that classes will be held in the Spanish language, and the website of Kola Ifa of Miami is completely in Spanish. One elder African American priestess commented, "Here we go again with this Spanish only shit! The religion has grown too much for them to be so narrow-minded. We're in America, the national language is English! This is just another way of them saying fuck you, niggers! Again!" There is no proof to support these African American elders' claim of deliberate marginalization on the part of Pichardo and the leaders of Kola Ifa of Miami, however, there is no mention of attempting to reach out to other orisha communities. Their feelings of suspicion that an attempt to organize institutionally along Hispanic lines had already been raised

by an earlier meeting in late September called by Miguel Willie Ramos to discuss the “state of the orisha community” (personal e-mail communication, August 2014). The Balogun had received the email third-hand from one of his goddaughters who had received it from her friend who was a New Jersey-based Cuban *santera*. The majority of the names on the original email list were all identifiably Hispanic. The Balogun was uncertain that he would attend as he had not been specifically invited although the email clearly stated that “the presence of the elders” was highly desired. He called a few of the other African American elders in the community and was even more upset when he realized that they had also not been invited. What was even more surprising is that one of the elder African American priestesses had a close association with Ramos and even she had not been invited. Both of these incidents have already generated negative feelings amongst these elders towards these individuals who are presenting themselves as leaders within the orisha community, which will make future attempts at geopolitical religious institutional-building challenging, at the least. One priest suggested that perhaps Pichardo was anticipating the lifting of the Cuban embargo and the possibility that more Cuban Santeria devotees may find their way to the United States. This is a real concern as an increase in the number of Cuban orisha devotees could change the orisha religious landscape locally and nationally. If past patterns of Cuban migration repeat themselves, then the New Jersey-New York area could see an increase in Afro-Cuban migration, thereby possibly opening back up decreasing lines of communication and interaction between these two diasporic religious communities. The next five years will be interesting to observe as significant transformative geopolitical and religious events could have serious impact on this community of devotees. As things stand currently, it would take a very strong and overt olive branch from these Cuban *santeros* to prompt African American elders to attend any multilateral orisha communal meeting.

The gesture would have to adequately signal that the Cuban *santeros* would be willing to work with and treat these African American devotees as equal partners in any joint institutional endeavor.

These developments make one ask whether or not a religion needs institutionalization in our modern times in order to not only survive but thrive? After so many years of the *ile-casa-temple* structure, how will devotees respond to legally recognized orisha institutions that attempt to speak on behalf of and/or regulate the larger community? Is institutionalization the only way to garner greater recognition and respect within the larger American society and religious landscape or is that only trying to fit an African diasporic religious circle into a Western institutional square? In adopting Western ways of religious organization and structuring will devotees be inviting an antithetical way of viewing religion and spirituality into their lives that could potentially damage and harm that which make these religious traditions unique, and for some devotees, uniquely “African”? And more importantly, who will represent their religious interests? These are questions that African American devotees will have to wrestle with and discuss within their communities as these institutionalization efforts move forward without them. Will we see greater organization within the community to be able to represent themselves at the meetings that will no doubt continue to take place as institutionalization-building efforts gain greater momentum? While there is a lot of talking amongst individuals, I have yet to see any evidence that some kind of more formal coalition or collective is emerging. Some of the younger devotees are discussing whether or not, and how, to respectfully prompt the elders into forming a collective that the younger devotees would willing aid in any capacity. These discussions are inchoate so therefore they have yet to yield any concrete solutions, but I am heartened that they are occurring within the community.

Ultimately, orisha devotion is as powerful, dynamic and mobile as are the orishas themselves. Transplanted from African soil to the New World, the orishas have adapted and flourished from then until their move to the United States, making them available to those willing to devote body, spirit, and soul. They are above the boundaries of ethnicity, nationality and language. This is evidenced in its rapid growth into a transnational religious devotion with networks and devotees. As African American orisha devotion continues to evolve and spread, devotees will have new challenges to face as they continue to “become orisha people” and strive to incorporate their religious way of life into the American religious landscape in a manner that does not feel exclusionary or forced.

As the Balogun says, the only thing constant about nature is that it changes, shifts and continuously transforms itself. I will add that it does so in order to survive just as orisha devotion among African American *Lucumi* devotees has shifted and adjusted to articulate itself on American urban soil through the particular experiences and expression unique to these African Americans. Devotees have a lot to think over and discuss about the future of their religiocultural tradition and its survival. How will devotees step up to safe guard their natural environment, the sacred spaces and materials of the orisha, and simultaneously safe guard the space they have cultivated for their religious devotion in New York City? The younger generation will have a greater role to play as events unfold in the preservation and perpetuation of this religious tradition. Guided by the orisha, the egun and their elders, the strides they make in the near future will determine the course of African American *Lucumi* devotion for their children and the ones not yet born.

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