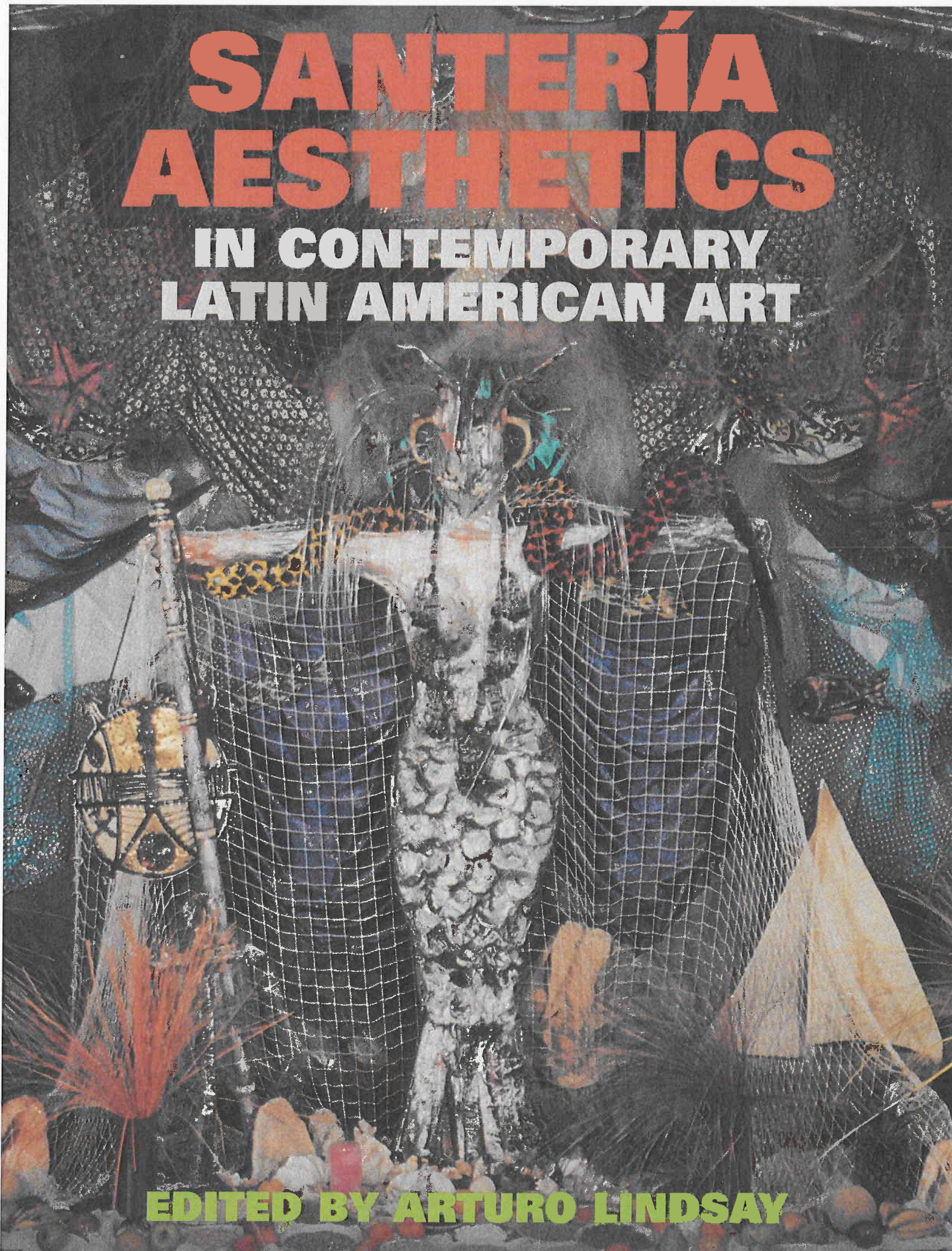


SANTERÍA AESTHETICS

**IN CONTEMPORARY
LATIN AMERICAN ART**

EDITED BY ARTURO LINDSAY



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MIGUEL "WILCIE" RAMOS

AFRO-CUBAN ORISHA WORSHIP

For more than three centuries, approximately ten to twelve million Africans were transported to the shores of the New World (Knight 1970; Uya 1989). As human commodities, the Africans were shipped off to new lands where they received brutal, inhuman treatment and the inescapable sentence of suffering under the yoke of another man who claimed superiority based on "religious salvation," skin color, and the preposterous notion of race. The major part of this human cargo was imported from the western shores of the African continent, particularly West and Central Africa, two areas largely exploited by traders dealing in human beings.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE YORUBA

In the initial stages of the trade, the demand for slaves on the island of Cuba was minimal. Yet, at the turn of the nineteenth century, especially after the Haitian Revolution, Cuba became the leader in the production of sugarcane in the New World. This shift from minor cattle ranching and tobacco farming to the "sugar revolution" transformed the course of Cuban history, for the change in production required an extremely large labor force, and as a result the presence of African slaves on Cuban plantations increased tremendously (Knight 1970; Uya 1989; Castellanos and Castellanos 1988).

It has been estimated that the total number of Africans transported to Cuba ranged somewhere from 750,000 to more than one million (ibid.). The exact numbers are still subject to debate, principally

because of the impoverished system of record keeping employed by the traders. Consequently, accurate figures for the different tribes and ethnic groups transported to Cuba during the duration of the trade are difficult to establish. Based on the survival of many cultural elements of different African groups in Cuba, one can safely say that the Yoruba people were present in substantial numbers, especially during the latter part of the trade (see Castellanos and Castellanos 1988:vol. 1:43). A great number of the slave ships that arrived in Cuba were loaded in Benin (formerly Dahomey), a country located southwest of Ile-Ife in present-day Nigeria (see Buxton, in Sandoval 1975), the city recognized by the Yoruba as the cradle of civilization.

Along with their devastation and corporal captivity, the Yoruba transplanted their culture to Cuban shores, contributing not only their sweat, blood, and lives (literally), but also many aspects of their culture including their religious beliefs and practices, their major endowment to the embryonic cultural institutions of the island after the European colonization.

The Yoruba were an urban people, favored by the plantation owners because of their "docile and industrious"¹ character, possibly two reasons for which many were employed in domestic services. This afforded a greater degree of access and contact with the "master" class, an important factor in the retention and transmission of Yoruba culture. As a result, many female slaves would nurture and rear white children. In these respects, the socialization of white children by the slaves serves as one of the vessels for the transmission and later assimilation of the two cultures.

Among the Yoruba, various subgroups were present: the Egbado, Ijebu, Ketu, Ekiti, Ife, Ilesha (called Yesa in Cuba), Egba, and, especially during the latter years, the Oyos. Also, from neighboring Dahomey (today the Republic of Benin) to the west of present-day Nigeria, arrived the Ewe-Fon (collectively called Arara), Sabalu, Mahi, Agicon, and the Cuevano (Sandoval 1975).

The Yoruba slaves came from the southwestern portion of present-day Nigeria. Yorubaland covers about 70,000 square kilometers. Toward the south, it meets the Gulf of Benin and is adjacent to Dahomey, where large numbers of Yoruba and their descendants can also be found. Yorubaland extends approximately 300 kilometers from the Guinea Coast inward, meeting the Niger River about halfway through its course.

Yoruba territory is 1,600 feet above sea level, with a gradual increase in elevation as one moves north. It is an area of savannahs and includes some of the great forests of equatorial Africa. The coastal areas are low and marshy. The language is of the Kwa family of languages, belonging to the Niger-Congo branch of the great Congo-Kordofanian language family (Bascom 1969c).

Yoruba influence in West Africa was great, especially in the time of the Oyo empire, which was a period of political and cultural greatness. Nonetheless, they were

considerably debilitated by the incessant wars with neighboring, non-Yoruba tribes, a major influence in their deterioration. During the eighteenth century, the Yoruba began to decline, mainly because of constant territorial wars with Dahomey. The Fulani, a subgroup from the north of Africa, took advantage of this state of confusion to penetrate into Yoruba territory (see Johnson 1921). The Yoruba collapse coincided with an increase in the demand for the importation of slaves in certain parts of the New World, particularly in those areas where sugar was the major crop.

In Cuba, the Yoruba are known as Lucumi or Locumi. The origins of the term *Lucumi* are still obscure, and a number of conflicting opinions exist regarding this issue. In the early literature, references are made to the Kingdom of Oulkoumi or Ulkumi. Early scholars make use of the terms Ulkami, Ulkumi, or Alkamy to refer to the Yoruba (see, e.g., O. Dapper and J. Barbot, in Awoniyi 1981:365). Awoniyi (1981:104) attributes this term to the customary usage of *oloku mi* ("my fellow tribesman") commonly employed as a salutation when two members of the same tribe meet.

Although other African tribes have left their legacies,² Yoruba influence in Cuba as well as in Brazil, Trinidad, and other areas of the New World was very strong. Today we encounter Yoruba vestiges in the music, art, folklore, and culinary styles of Cuba. However, the greatest of the Yoruba legacies to the island is undoubtedly the religious complex which survives to this day. The coming together of two traditions, two distinct religious systems and cultures, united through the influence of destiny, gave birth to the Afro-Cuban Orisha tradition.³

THE CULTURAL ENCOUNTER

Christianization and conquest occurred simultaneously in the New World. Prior to departure for the New World, or shortly after their arrival, the slaves were introduced to Christianity by force, through the ritual of baptism (Laviña 1989:46). Whether or not they were taught the doctrines of Christianity mattered little. Justification for slavery was juxtaposed with the "generosity" of the Europeans, for not only were they "saving souls," they were helping the Africans to achieve "liberation from barbarism . . . and the acquisition of the category of 'human'" (ibid.).

The Spanish crown and the Roman Catholic Church placed little emphasis on educating the slaves in the doctrines of Christianity (ibid.:47). So long as they had ensured the safety of the "pagan's" soul, everything else was of little importance. So ironically, for the crown and the church, the enslavement of the body mattered not, as long as the soul was guaranteed a safe passage into the Christian heaven (Laviña 1989; Bastide 1978a, b).

In spite of its deficiencies and errors, the presence of Catholicism played an important role in the retention and transmittal of Yoruba religion in the New World. When Olodumare,⁴ the Supreme Being in Yoruba belief, created the earth and all

things therein, he also created the orishas, the minor divinities that would serve as intermediaries between heaven and earth. Each orisha is related to one or more aspects of nature and earthly existence. The orishas are divine in their own right, believed to be not only representatives of the Supreme Being, but also manifestations of Olodumare's omnipresence and omnipotence. Their aid is sought at all major crossroads, and especially in times of distress, infirmity, and disorientation.

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The orishas are also extremely humanlike in their character, an important aspect of the deity that allows for a closer association between the devotee and the object of worship. Every orisha has specific dominions, places of habitat, offerings, taboos, colors employed in their vestments and paraphernalia, and ritual emblems. Shango, the virile and hot-tempered orisha patron of thunder and lightning, receives offerings at the foot of a royal palm (*Roystonea regia* [H.B.K.] O. F. Cook) or silk-cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*, L.). Shango forbids lies and deception, receives sacrifices of rams, turtles, and roosters; enjoys bananas, mamey apples, and okra stew with corn meal porridge; dresses in red and white, wears beads of the same colors, and dances brandishing a double-bladed ax.

On the other hand, Roman Catholicism bears a very close resemblance to Yoruba religion, especially the popular practices of rural (or medieval) Catholicism,⁵ the "cult" of the saints, very prevalent in Spain and Portugal (Bastide 1978a,b). This belief system employs a pattern of worship in which homage and devotion toward a particular saint obscure that given to the church and its strict principle of monotheism. Adherents acknowledge and worship the Supreme Being in accordance with Catholic dogma: the Holy Trinity composed of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three essences in one being. Unlike orthodox Roman Catholics, adherents of rural Catholicism believe that the Catholic saints, like the orishas, have control over certain natural phenomena and spheres of human life.

Special powers and roles are attributed to the saints, allowing them to intercede with the Supreme Being on behalf of a devotee. Every saint has a particular day of the year set aside for his or her celebration or worship, and is also thought to have particular preferences and aversions.

A devotee can petition special favors from the patron saint by promising to execute certain deeds, processions, or wear particular garments associated with the saint. But the devotee can also "punish" a saint that refuses to concede favors. An example of this, still very prevalent in most of Latin America, is the custom of placing St. Anthony's statue upside-down, under running water, when a lonely female is searching for a husband or lover.

Therefore, it is not difficult to see how Yoruba religion and rural Catholicism share common elements that would facilitate the assimilation and understanding of one by the devotee of the other. A popular analogy, often called "syncretism," was

the eventual result. Although they were not fully versed in the doctrine and practice of Catholicism, through the encounter with the popular beliefs of the master class, devotees juxtaposed the African orisha with the Catholic saint.

There is much debate today over the actual level or degree of syncretism between Catholicism and African religions in the New World. Whether syncretism was a fusion of the two concepts or simply a mechanism of camouflage continues to be an ardent subject (cf. Houk 1992). Most Afro-Cuban devotees make a point of distinguishing the differences between one religion and the other, but nevertheless, for nearly every Yoruba orisha, there is a correlation in the Catholic pantheon. It would be futile to negate the extreme importance of the presence of Catholicism as an influential factor in the process of adaptation for the Africans. It would be just as futile to pretend that this encounter has not taken its toll on elements of Yoruba religion that as a result may have been modified or diluted. Yet, had Catholicism not been the dominant religious form, I speculate that African religions in the New World would not have survived intact.⁶

Regardless of whether the two religions fused, or the African religion simply hid behind a "veil" of Catholicism, in the mind of the adherent, the similarities between the two religions were too many to go unnoticed. The correlative process not only facilitated understanding of Yoruba religion for the Europeans but also served to ensure its survival. It must be emphasized that devotees make clear and definite distinctions between the orisha and the saint, and the Yoruba practices are, as a rule, separated from the Catholic ones. Nevertheless, Yoruba theology is at times replaced or obscured by the dominant Catholic dogma, particularly in the case of converts to Orisha worship who were originally Catholic.

As in the days of slavery, many Orisha priests require that their disciples be baptized Catholics. This custom is apparently losing force today among religious descendants of the Cuban diaspora, yet in Cuba it still prevails. Slavery obliterated or obscured many Yoruba rituals which were not necessary or possible in the new social setting. Yoruba rituals were replaced by Catholic rituals that served similar functions. This is understandable when coupled with the fact that those who did not adhere to the Catholic rituals as dictated by society were the victims of ridicule and persecution. So with the passage of time, Yoruba ceremonies that relate to birth, marriage, passage into adulthood, and many other aspects of life in Yorubaland were displaced by the dominant norms of Cuban society.

Regardless of the displacement process, Yoruba customs survive and continue to be transmitted through the oracles and their myths. In the Ifa, Dilogun, and Obo oracles⁷ employed by Afro-Cuban Orisha worshipers, one returns to Yorubaland in all its regalia and glory through the *patakis* or myths narrated by the diviners in consultation. As with all cultural encounters, the *patakis* also go through a process of

adaptation and reinterpretation, but closer scrutiny of the oracular corpus will reveal the richness and variety of Yoruba culture contained within them.

THE ORISHAS

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The deities worshiped in Yoruba traditional religion and its offspring in the New World are collectively referred to as orishas. The deities that make up the Yoruba pantheon are innumerable (see, e.g., Epega 1931), and although many survived the transatlantic voyage, not all the orishas worshiped in Yorubaland are known in the New World. In certain areas particular orishas appear to be more popular than others. Other orishas were retained in one country and lost in another: knowledge of Logun Ede, for example, was virtually lost in Cuba where the orisha is known as Laro; on the other hand, Ifa and the initiation into its priesthood survive intact in Cuba, while it is only currently finding its way back to Brazil.

As with any transplanted culture, adaptation and transformation are inevitable. Many orishas acquired new domains and attributes in the New World. Yemoja, patron orisha of the Ogun River, after crossing the Atlantic, divides rulership over the ocean with her husband, Olokun. Oshun in Yorubaland rules over the river that bears her name, yet in Cuba Ochún becomes the patron deity of all rivers. Oshosi in the New World is not only the god of the hunt, but also the patron of fugitive slaves and, by extension, of all those who flee from injustice.

The orishas are humanlike in their characteristics, as well as in their preferences and aversions. Every orisha has its own town of origin, its own personality, a particular archetypal behavior often emulated by its devotees, and a series of observances and taboos that must be adhered to by all. Additionally, practically every orisha is related to an aspect of nature, as well as certain details or components of the human condition. Most important, the orisha is not only a representative of the Supreme Being, but also a manifestation of his wisdom and supremacy.

According to E. Bolaji Idowu (1962:61), the term *orisha* is a corruption of *orishé*, a name originally used in certain parts of Yorubaland to refer to Olodumare. Idowu's translation of the term *orishé* is as follows: *ori*—head source; the soul or guardian entity that resides in the head; *shé*—to originate, begin; to derive or spring from. The name *orishé* would then be an ellipsis of *ibiti ori ti shé*—the origin or source of *ori*: Olodumare himself. Idowu notes that the name *Orisha* is applied to Olodumare in certain parts of Yorubaland, emphasizing that Olodumare is "indisputably not one among the divinities" (ibid.:60) but the source of the *orishas*. *Orisha*, then, is an adulteration of *orishé*, therefore confirming the belief that the Yoruba orishas are manifestations of the Supreme Being (ibid.:61).

Olodumare is present in each and every one of his creations. Elemei—Owner of the (life-giving) breath—alludes to the deity's personal imparting of the breath from

which life emanates into the bodies created by Obatala. Obatala molds and creates the human body, but only Olodumare can give it life. Olodumare is therefore present in every creature that breathes.

Furthermore, Eleda—Owner of the head—is an appellative for the Creator that is also employed interchangeably with the Yoruba *eri* or *ori* to refer to an individual's "head." This not only alludes to the exalted position of the head in Yoruba traditions; it also implies the divine presence of the deity in each of his creations. It is precisely because of these considerations that worshipers are offended by the claims of studies that refer to Olodumare as a "distant, remote, or inaccessible deity." Olodumare not only takes an active role in his creation, but he is a palpitant and living entity that communes with his creation through the orishas and the ancestors. Olodumare is omnipresent and participates in the daily affairs of human existence through his divine presence in the bodies of human beings, for all humans must breathe.

The Supreme Being is also called Olorun—Owner of the sky (or Owner of the sun, depending on the position of the accent)—and, among Afro-Cubans, Olofin—Owner of the heavenly palace. Although few rituals in the worship system are directly performed in his honor, Olodumare permeates each and every aspect of worship through his representation in the orishas. At the onset of any ritual, devotees salute Olodumare, calling to the deity by all of his appellations and flattering praises before saluting the ancestors and the orishas. No matter how powerful an orisha is believed to be, its power is always dependent on the will of Olodumare, for if "Olodumare does not will it, it cannot be."

Before birth, Olodumare allows his subjects to select the type of life they wish to endure on earth. Each individual is allowed to choose his or her *ori*, a Yoruba concept that relates to destiny. The *ori* of a human being is a personal entity, a guiding force, and, similar to the Catholic concept of the "guardian angel," the *ori* accompanies the devotee throughout the earthly cycle. Unlike the Catholic belief, however, *ori* is physically present in the head of the devotee and not just a guiding spirit. The chosen destiny is forgotten once the individual is born. On earth, this person will live out that which was chosen in *orun*, although care must be taken that the negative entities⁸ that live among humans do not provoke events or occurrences that can alter the individual's existence. Only through the intervention of these entities will the chosen destiny deviate from its path.

The orishas also have power to alter a person's destiny or, depending on the devotee's behavior, intercede in the life cycle to improve the individual's lot on earth. This is brought about in accord with the person's behavior and *iwa* (character). Through the oracles, devotees are warned about forthcoming events in their lives

that may be avoided either with particular behaviors or a propitiatory ritual. Failure to heed the warning of the deities could provoke Elegba to "play" with the individual. By causing havoc or placing obstacles in the person's path, Elegba attempts to bring about the desired performance in the devotee. Sometimes people are so stubborn that not only do they not comply with the guidance of the oracles, but they refuse to acknowledge or accept Elegba's timely warnings. The consequences may be catastrophic.

The orishas also have the prerogative of punishing human beings for improper behavior. Human beings are required to be proper and righteous, as is everything that emanates from Olodumare, yet they are not required to be perfect. Possessing virtues and flaws, some people may allow their defects to permeate their life. Warnings will be issued, which, if not heeded, will result in the first "pinch" from an orisha trying to spare his or her child from calamity. The orishas, in their parental role, always tend to treat a devotee as a mother would her child. At times this may involve indifference or a period of inattentiveness in hopes that the person will acknowledge and rectify the behavior.

When all warnings and/or punishments fail, as a last resort, the orisha can eliminate its tutelage altogether and allow *iku* (death) to attack the person. The orisha cannot occasion death, for Olodumare will never willingly destroy what he creates, nor does he permit the orishas to do so. Only when all else fails will he allow the orisha to withdraw its protection from an individual so that negative forces can attack a person.

If a person dies before the destined time, whether as the result of punishment or the work of malignant forces, the individual will not be able to return to heaven until the time stipulated in the chosen destiny is up. This person will roam the earth as an *iwi* or *iwin*, lurking in desolate places. The *iwi* delight in scaring people and causing havoc. These are the spirits that evil magicians sometimes use to inflict harm on others.

Upon returning to heaven, Olodumare will judge the individual's earthly behavior. The righteous individual will be allowed to go to *orun rere* (the good heaven), where he or she will enjoy an afterlife full of the rewards Olodumare reserves for the righteous. From *orun rere*, the *araorun* (citizen of heaven) can intervene on behalf of descendants, and when he or she so desires, request to return to the world of the living and live among loved ones and their offspring.

Orun buruku (the bad heaven) awaits those whose earthly behavior was not in accordance with Olodumare's dictates. Here the individual will reside in total desperation, for all types of punishment and torment await. Intervention on behalf of descendants is impossible, and reincarnation is out of the question. But Olodumare is merciful. Once the punishment has served its purpose, the individual will be al-

lowed to return to the world of the living, although as a lower being (an insect or an animal). Progression on the evolutionary ladder up to the category of human being will depend on the original behavior for which the person was first reprimanded.

ASHE: THE DIVINE FORCE

In accordance with the Yoruba creation myth, everything that emanated from, or came into contact with the deity, whether in Yorubaland or elsewhere, was imparted the ineffable power of *ashe*. In western terms, there is no equivalent for this concept. It is similar, though, to the Polynesian idea of *mana* and the Oriental *chi*. *Ashe* is the animating force that moves both earth and cosmos. It can be found in a plant, an animal, a stone, a body of water, a hill, the heavens, the stars. But *ashe* is also present in human beings, and can be manifested through bodily actions, but is especially active in words (*afud'ashe*). When a priest speaks to the orishas, *ashe* is at work, for the words he employs are loaded with religious and magical meaning, imploring particular actions from the deities and their attention to problems of the daily cycle. *Ashe* also allows for the effectiveness of the diviner's predictions. It is believed that when a diviner speaks to a client, the orishas are speaking through him.

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All humans are born with *ashe*, although the degree of this power varies in accordance with the individual's chosen destiny. Through the initiation rituals, devotees of the orishas are further endowed with this ineffable force. *Ashe* (in the form of a mixture of herbs and other things) is placed on the head of the initiate, transforming the individual from a "normal" human being into the equivalent status of "mediator" for the orishas and Olodumare among human beings. This not only affords status but also allows the priest to mediate with the orishas on behalf of a client.

Through divination, the priest or priestess can employ *ashe* to tap into the source or origin of human conflicts, suffering, and earthly afflictions. Once the source is identified, through *ebo* or sacrifice, the priest helps the client to tap into the *ashe* contained within other elements, and employs this power to bring about an immediate solution to the client's problems. Sacrifice in Yoruba religion could mean any one of a series of purification rituals: food offerings, propitiation, prayers, bathing with herbs, cleaning the body with particular herbs, or animal sacrifices. The Yoruba emphasis on the "here and now," and their obsession with life and the world of the living, are marked by the importance placed on *ashe* and *ebo*.

Ebo eje (blood sacrifice) entails the offering of an animal to a deity in exchange for the orisha's protection or involvement in the affairs of the living. Worshipers consider the sacrifice of an animal as the most intimate contact between the spheres of the sacred and the profane. It is a communion, the establishment of a bond between worshiper and deity that serves as a medium of exchange.

After the animal is sacrificed, the meat is cleaned and prepared for consumption. Certain parts, such as the heart, lungs, kidneys, and other internal organs,

along with the head, feet, and, in the case of a fowl, the tips of the wings, are cooked for the orisha. These offerings, also called *ashe*, are cooked in accordance with the specific tastes of the orisha to whom it will be offered⁹ and placed before the receptacle containing the sacred implements that represent the deity. The rest of the animal is cooked for human consumption, and, as in the case of initiation ceremonies, is communally eaten by worshipers in a ritual meal on the following day.

The belief that *ashe* is contained within everything that exists justifies the existence of this transcendental force in other cultures and religious beliefs, for Oloдумare is not the exclusive domain of the Yoruba. He made his presence known to all human beings, regardless of "race" and skin color. This explains why Yoruba descendants in the New World were not only receptive to Christianity and Catholicism, but also to other African beliefs, Kardecian spiritualism, and the indigenous practices that prevailed throughout the Americas. In the New World, the Yoruba and their descendants find *ashe* in the holy water and candles of the Europeans, the magical practices of the Bantus and Abakwas, the Vodun of the Ewe-Fon and Rada, possession by "spiritual guides," and the maize and tobacco of the indigenous populations.

A devotee of the orishas can feel equally at home in a Catholic or Protestant¹⁰ church, a Kardecian spiritual séance, or in a Haitian or Dominican Vodun ceremony. This all-encompassing nature, coupled with its facility to adapt to any setting, is a strong feature of Orisha worship, as has been demonstrated in the many New World settings where Yoruba religion survives and continues to thrive.

THE PANTHEON

Most of the Yoruba deities worshiped in the New World are the same in Brazil, Cuba, and Trinidad. Adaptational and regional differences exist, as well as phonetic and grammatical variations in the spelling of the names in accordance with the dominant language in each country. The sound of the Yoruba *s*, pronounced *sh* as in the English "shoe," does not exist in Spanish. The same holds true for Brazilian Portuguese. In Cuba, this sound is replaced by the stronger *ch* sound, as in the English "choice," while in Brazil the *x* serves this purpose. So the Yoruba Oshun is written and pronounced Ochun by Afro-Cubans, and Oxun among Afro-Brazilians. Wherever possible, I have tried to maintain the standard Yoruba pronunciation, although not necessarily the proper and accentuated Yoruba spelling, while placing in parentheses alternative spellings of the orisha's name.

The following table lists the principal orishas worshiped by Afro-Cuban devotees, as well as their Catholic counterparts, their roles in the pantheon, and the ritual instruments and colors used to identify them. The deities are listed in the hierarchical order employed in the worship system.

THE AFRO-CUBAN PANTHEON

| ORISHA | CATHOLIC SYNCRETISM | DOMAIN | RITUAL INSTRUMENT | RITUAL COLORS |
|------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|--|---|
| Elegba | Holy Child of Atocha | crossroads | <i>garabato</i> ¹ | red, black, and white |
| Ogun | St. Peter | iron/war | cudgel/machete | black, green, and red |
| Oshosi (Ochosi) | St. Norbert | hunting | bow and arrow | dark blue and amber |
| Osayin (Osain) | St. Sylvester | healing/traditional medicine | beaded gourd | no preference |
| Erinle (Inle) | St. Raphael | fishing/healing | fishing rod | turquoise, green, and coral |
| Orishaoko | St. Isidore | agriculture | plow | turquoise and mauve |
| Babaluaeye | St. Lazarus | smallpox and epidemics | <i>ja</i> (broom of palm fibers) | brown, black, and red |
| Ibeji (Ibeyi) | Sts. Cosmas and Damian | twin births | none | white and red (sometimes blue) |
| Dada | Our Lady of the Rosary | unborn children | calabash adorned with beads and cowries | red and white |
| Bayani (Abañale) | St. Raymond Nonato | same as Dada | none | red and white |
| Iroko | Immaculate Conception | silk-cotton tree | beaded cane | green and turquoise |
| Aganju (Agallu) | St. Christopher | volcano | double-edged ax | brown and opal |
| Shango (Chango) | St. Barbara ² | thunder/fire | double-edged ax ³ | red and white |
| Obatala | Our Lady of Mercy | purity | <i>iruke</i> (horse tail) | white |
| Oduduwa | St. Manuel | death | coffer ⁴ | white and opal |
| Oba | St. Catherine | river | coffer and key | brown, amber, and coral |
| Yewa | Our Lady of Montserrat | cemetery | beaded horse tail | mauve and crimson |
| Oya | St. Theresa ⁵ | tempests/marketplace | beaded horse tail and machete | brown, red, or burgundy ⁶ |
| Yemoja (Yemaya) | Our Lady of Regla | ocean and all waters | fan adorned with peacock feathers | blue and opal or crystal |
| Olokun | none | ocean | none | dark blue, red, coral, and green |
| Nana Buruku | Our Lady of Mt. Carmel | lagoon | wooden knife | black and mauve |
| Oshun (Ochun) | Our Lady of Charity | river | brass fan | amber, yellow, and coral |
| Orunmila | St. Francis of Assisi | divination | divining chain and tray | yellow and green |

ELEGBA (ELEGGUA)

Elegba, the god of the crossroads, represents the ever-watchful eyes of Olodumare on *aiye* (the earth). Elegba tests humankind's faith and devotion to Olodumare. Elegba is the messenger that links humankind with Olodumare, the orishas, and the egungun (ancestors). Afro-Cubans understand his irascible nature as childlike, and his tests of faith as if these were the mischievous pranks of a child.

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Elegba is present when human beings choose their destiny before birth. He knows the type of life the individual will live, along with all the events that will occur, both jovial and dismal, and can place obstacles and rewards in the individual's path. But Elegba never punishes unjustly. When he does, he must have due reason, and obtain Olodumare's permission beforehand, for he cannot interfere in human life capriciously.

The juxtaposition of orishas and saints has brought about the erroneous and arrogant equation of Elegba with the Judeo-Christian Satan among many New World orisha devotees.¹¹ It is important to distinguish that Elegba's nature is not intrinsically evil. Elegba uses his manipulative power to test people, but he also compensates for good behavior. Elegba is not the evil Satan whose sole purpose is to separate human beings from their Creator. Elegba's role is to seek and ensure absolute devotion to Olodumare and the orishas.

OGUN

Ogun is the god of iron and war. He is the patron orisha of blacksmiths, yet in our modern era, Ogun's patronage is also extended to chauffeurs, pilots, astronauts, policemen, and all whose profession brings them into contact with metal. It is also Ogun who guides the surgeon's scalpel. Consequently, before submitting to surgery, Ogun's aid is enlisted. Furthermore, Ogun is also a hunting deity, patron of hunters. Because of the facility with which he manages the cudgel, Ogun is able to cut through the densest of forests, thereby considered a path "maker" or "opener." Ogun opened the path for all the orishas on their descent from heaven. It is Ogun who lends his *obe* (knife) to the *ashogun* or priests who perform sacrifices.

OSHOSI (OCHOSI)

Oshosi is the god of the hunt, patron of hunters. Oshosi is endowed with the ability to hunt any animal (or foe), regardless of distance. Yet he depends on his brother Ogun to clear the path through the bushes in order to reach his prey. Oshosi is also the avenger of injustice. Piercing the guilty with his arrows, it is Oshosi who allows the criminal to be punished and the innocent to be set free. For this reason, Oshosi is propitiated when one faces an undeserved battle in court.

OSAYIN (OSAIN)

Osayin represents flora and fauna. He knows the secret of the *ashe* contained within all of Olodumare's creations and its use in providing the remedies for the maladies that afflict human beings. Worshipers consider Osayin a magician, shaman, and

healer, simultaneously. Without Osayin, the worship of the other orishas would be impossible, for it is he who provides the sacred herbs for the preparation of the *omiero*, a sacred infusion of herbs employed in the consecration of the orishas and the initiation into the priesthood.

Osayin is a horrendous but powerful man. His head is disproportionate to the size of his body. He has only one leg and one arm, a single eye, an enormous ear through which he hears absolutely nothing, and a very tiny ear through which he can hear a pin drop halfway across the world. He hops along through the forest, and works closely with Aroni and Aja (Aya), two companion orishas that help him with his daily chores.

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ERINLE (INLE)

Erinle is the patron orisha of fishermen. Oshosi hunts on dry land; Erinle hunts in the water. Because of his syncretism with the Archangel Raphael, he is often called the "divine doctor." Together with Abatan (orisha of the marshland) and Otin (a minor orisha, also related to Yemoja), Erinle administers the cure while Abatan and Otin supervise the patient.

ORISHAOKO (OCHAOKO,
ORICHA OKO)

Orishaoko is the god of agriculture. In compliance with a pact he made with Olo-dumare, Iku (death personified), and *aiye* (his father, brother, and sister, respectively), he nourishes human beings with the fruits of his labor. In turn, humans must eventually repay him with their worship and, upon death, repay his brother and sister for their cooperation in the process. His aid is also sought in cases of sterility or impotence for Orishaoko can inseminate any barren field. He shares his agricultural duties with his brother Korinkoto, who ensures the germination and rooting of his seeds.

BABALUAYE

Babaluaye,¹² the wrath of Olo-dumare, has control over smallpox and, by extension, of all skin sores and diseases. He is highly respected and feared; devotees implore his aid at the slightest onset of disease, but especially in times of epidemic. Among the Yoruba, Shoponno, as he is sometimes called, is dreaded, and his devotees seek to placate his wrath. Although Afro-Cubans also fear his rage, their worship centers around the procurement of health and remedies for the afflictions of life.

When epidemics spread out of control, some devotees offer an *agban*, a cleansing ritual that employs beans, tubers, fruits, meats, and all types of food. These items are put on plates surrounding a basket that contains an open piece of jute cloth. Devotees take handfuls of the food, grip it tightly in their hands, and run their closed fists over their body, starting at the feet, working their way up to the head. These items are then thrown into the basket. Symbolically, this ritual expels sickness from the body.

IBEJI (BEYI, MEYI)

The Ibeji are the patron orishas of twins. According to the myth, the first twins were children of Oshun and Shango, and were fostered by Yemoja. Because of their childish and mischievous nature, no obstacle is so great that their influence cannot overcome it. One myth about their cunning nature describes how they were able to deceive evil, thereby forcing it to spare their lives. They are small but powerful. Feasts for the Ibeji include such things as the distribution of candies and sweets to children, and may also include a piñata, obviously a New World adaptation.

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The Ibeji pantheon consists of seven different orishas. The original Ibeji, Taiwo and Kahinde, followed by Idowu (Ideu), Araba (Alaba), Oronia, and Olori, all under the auspices and guidance of Aina, who is revered as the "mother"¹³ of the Ibeji.

DADA AND BAYANI
(ABAÑALE)

Dada and Bayani are elder siblings of Shango. Dada, his elder brother,¹⁴ and Bayani, Shango's older sister and Dada's complement, represent Shango's crown. Together they afford the thunder god with the righteousness and serenity necessary to be a suitable and decorous ruler. Dada is Shango's adviser, while Bayani soothes his temper. Dada is also the god of unborn children. Children born with curly hair or a crownlike formation on the head are sacred to him.

IROKO (IROCO)

Iroko, the orisha of abundance and fecundity, is worshiped at the foot of the *araba* or silk-cotton tree, the sacred meeting place of all the orishas. Once when Olodumare was offended by human behavior, he withdrew to a distant place in the heavens. As a consequence of his withdrawal, drought visited the earth. During the drought, Iroko accumulated the last water that remained on earth within the roots of the *araba*. Every species that walked the planet gathered at its roots to quench its thirst. The *ceiba*, as it is called in Spanish, was the only tree whose branches reached high enough into the heavens to beseech Olodumare's mercy. After convincing Olodumare to forgive his creation, Iroko was credited with saving the world from annihilation.

Similar to Maya myths (see Schele and Freidel 1990), Afro-Cubans believe that Iroko and the *ceiba* tree are endowed with mysterious energy that separates the realms of the living and the dead.

AGANJU (AGGALLU)

Aganju is the explosive but renovating force contained within the earth's core that flows when a volcano erupts. Aganju is also the orisha of the desert and barren terrains. Like the Roman Atlas, Afro-Cubans concur that this orisha sustains the earth in its place. Some worshipers revere Aganju as Shango's father, yet others consider him Shango's elder brother. The syncretism with St. Christopher has also extended to Aganju the role of protecting travelers and navigators, ensuring their safe arrival at their chosen destination.

SHANGO (CHANGO)

Possibly the most popular orisha of the Afro-Cuban and New World traditions, Shango is the god of lightning and thunder and, along with Ogun, also a war god. He avenges evil, deploras deceit, and combats and punishes those who offend Olo-dumare's divine principles. There are many myths that relate accounts of his multiple romantic encounters and tell of his virile, seductive manner. Because of this, Shango's priests are generally boastful and at times attempt to emulate the behavior of their patron divinity. Shango created the ritual of initiation into the priesthood, and, in honor of this, his mortar serves as the seat where an *iyawo* (wife) of the orisha (novice) goes through the rite of initiation.

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There are several orishas related to Shango's worship. Aina, the "mother" of the Ibeji, patron of fire and of children born entangled in the umbilical cord, serves as the magic element that allows Shango to spew fire from his mouth when he punishes the wicked. Oge (Ogue), ex-slave of Oya which she gives to Shango after violating one of his taboos, is the orisha of the pathways. Oge is represented by a pair of bull horns and helps Shango to find his way in battle. Ibokun, his military adviser, designs his war strategies.

OBATALA

Obatala is the god of creation, and of purity, suggested by his ritual use of white. His name means "the king of the white cloth." He molds human bodies from clay. Priests equate Obatala with Jesus Christ, conceptualizing him as the son of Olo-dumare and his direct earthly representative. Obatala is also considered the father of all the orishas, making him the most revered of all the deities, and the only orisha able to placate the wrath of all of them. All the deities must acquiesce before him and acknowledge his superiority and wisdom. Regardless of the tutelary deity of the priest or priestess, Obatala is the "owner" of all heads, and all humankind are his children.

Obatala has many "roads": different aspects or manifestations, avatars in the Hindu sense, in which the characteristics and attributes of the orisha vary tremendously. These range from a belligerent and bellicose warrior, Ajaguna, to a feeble, absent-minded old man, Oshalufon, who relies on a cane or staff for walking. Obalufon introduced the vocal chords, and thereby taught humans the art of speaking. Baba Asho shares with Obalufon the art of weaving and clothing humankind. Baba fururu and Alamorere are the sculptors of the human body. Yeku yeku represents the aging process and, along with Orolu, the wisdom acquired with age.

Although his masculine aspects dominate, certain "roads" are considered female manifestations of the deity (e.g., Oshanla, Eru Aye, Obanla). The syncretism of Obatala with Our Lady of Mercy can be said to be a "generic" veil of the major attributes encompassed by the deity. This is emphasized by the fact that each "road" is also equated with a particular Catholic saint: Ajaguna is syncretized with St. Se-

bastian; Oshaogiyan (Oshagriñan) is syncretized with St. Joseph; Oshanla is syncretized with St. Anne.

Obatala also counts on the assistance of various orishas: Oke, the god of the mountain, represents immortality; Ogan serves as Ajaguna's war general, along with Obon and Oboni; Ogidai (Agidai) helps him in controlling the spread of epidemics.

ODUDUWA (ODUA, ODDUA)

Among Afro-Cubans, Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yoruba race, is the supreme orisha, above or equal to Obatala, sometimes considered Olodumare's direct presence among his creation. He answers to no one but Olodumare. He is recognized as the "king of the dead" and is believed to induce the decomposition of the human body after death. Initiations into the worship of this orisha seldom occur, but he may be consecrated for priests of other orishas when the need for his protection arises, either as indicated by the oracles or because of failing health.

Boromu and Borosia are two orishas that are closely connected to Oduduwa; the former is related to ailments of the body, and the latter to afflictions of the head.

OBA

Oba is the patron divinity of matrimony, Shango's original and "legitimate"¹⁵ wife. She represents true and unconditional love, which she demonstrates when, in order to preserve her failing relationship with Shango, she falls prey to the vengeful deceit of her co-wife, Oshun. As instructed by Oshun, Oba cuts off her ear¹⁶ and makes okra stew with it for Shango, in the belief that by so doing she would finally attain Shango's love. The thunder god became infuriated, resulting in Oba's departure from the palace. Oba, feeling hurt and useless, takes her life by jumping into a river, and is eventually deified and worshiped as an orisha. The river bears her name.

Oba is also related to death. Another version of this myth says that when Oba departed from the palace she went to live with Yewa in the cemetery. She notifies Iku when an individual's allotted time on earth has expired. Iku then takes over the transition process from life to death.

YEWA (LLEGUA)

Yewa is an orisha intrinsically connected to death. Yewa was Olofin's favored daughter or, as frequently described by priests, the "most beautiful flower in Olofin's garden," for whom sexual intercourse was proscribed. Nonetheless, Yewa falls prey to Shango's seduction, violating her taboo. When the offense was discovered, she proscribed her own punishment, choosing to withdraw to the cemetery and live in seclusion among the dead, where no living man could ever set eyes upon her again. Together with Oduduwa, Yewa regulates the decomposition of the human corpse.

Yewa is a very chaste and secluded deity. Yewa forbids sexual promiscuity, condemns polygamy, and the sexual conduct of her devotees must be discreet. She rec-

ognizes only one husband for her daughters, and it is not uncommon to find daughters of Yewa who have never married nor had sexual intercourse.

OYA (OLLA)

Oya, the fierce Amazonlike deity of the winds and tempests, third wife of Shango, is well known for her belligerent nature. It is Oya who always precedes Shango's arrival, for she is represented by the lightning rod which she gave as a present to her husband. Oya is believed to lead Shango's forces into battle, opening the way for the ensuing raid, after which Shango will then enter the battleground. When in battle (or enraged), Oya takes on a masculine personality; she grows a beard, converts her skirt into a pair of trousers, mounts her horse, and rides away with Shango to serve justice. Afro-Cuban priests sometimes affectionately call her *obini toto, olo shokoto mesan* (the fearful woman, owner of nine pairs of trousers). As related by the Ifa myth for the *odu* Osa Ogunda (see Castillo 1976), Oya is as powerful as the buffalo or bush cow whose hide she employs as a disguise when she withdraws from the world.

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Oya plays a role in the death cycle. Olodumare gave Oya the right to accompany the soul on its journey to *orun* (heaven). She clears the path of the righteous, ensuring his or her return to the place from which all things emanate. In funeral rites, Oya's *iruke* (whisk) is employed to symbolically cleanse the cadaver of earthly impurities.

Despite all her hypernormal characteristics, Oya can be as seductive, charming, and beautiful as Oshun. It was her elegance and beauty that attracted Shango's interest when he stole her heart from his brother Ogun.

YEMOJA (YEMAYA,
YEMALLA)

In Yorubaland Yemoja is principally associated with the Ogun River, but in the New World she is the mother of all waters and receives offerings at the seashore. All the riches of the ocean are at her disposal, and when she believes her children are deserving, she rewards their good deeds with countless blessings. Yemoja controls the reproductive organs and their function, as well as the gestation process. She fills the womb of the infertile woman and regulates the production of milk in a woman's breasts. Yemoja is the mother of many of the major orishas. One myth says she gave birth to seventeen orishas, including Elegba, Ogun, Oshosi, Shango, Oya, and Oshun. Because of this important role, Yemoja is considered a very maternal, understanding, and loving deity who consoles her children in times of woe.

Yemoja's character is often compared to the ocean. She can be as calm as the most serene body of water, yet suddenly she can be as devastating as a tidal wave. Some of Yemoja's "roads" emphasize her versatility. Yemoja Asesu is very relaxed and carefree. Asesu spends her time counting the feathers of her mascot, the duck. If she loses count, she will start all over again. Her children are taught the virtue of

patience. Yemoja Ogunte or Okute, on the other hand, is as fierce as Oya. She is the wife of Ogun, and brandishes the cutlass as well as, or better than, her husband. Mojelewu, the Yemoja whose breasts are so large that she can nurture the whole world, is also represented by the eddy, and can be just as revolutionary. As in the case of Obatala, Yemoja's roads are also equated with various Catholic saints.

OLOKUN (OLOCUN)

Olokun is the Yoruba god of the ocean, the West African Poseidon. According to one myth, he considered himself so powerful that he challenged Olodumare to compete for the dominion of the earth. Olokun eventually lost and was condemned to live in the deepest part of the ocean. Two roads of Yemoja, Asesu and Ashaba, were assigned to assist him, along with Eshu Ayanki, the Elegba that brings Olokun's messages to the surface. The tidal wave is an indicator of his power, and when he encounters Oya, hurricanes frequent the world.

Olokun has various wives, among them the two roads of Yemoja already mentioned, along with Olosa, the goddess of the lagoons, and Ajeshaluga, the goddess of wealth. Aina, the "mother" of the Ibeji, is the daughter of Olokun and Ajeshaluga. Olokun has no priesthood among Afro-Cubans, nor does he possess any devotee, but he is consecrated and propitiated. His "scions" are initiated under the tutelage of Yemoja, and "receive" (have the attributes of the orisha consecrated) Olokun.

In Yorubaland as well as in Cuba, Olokun is considered male by some devotees and female by others. I have also heard some people describe Olokun as an androgynous orisha. A proverb of the Dilogun odu Irosun states that "No one knows what is at the bottom of the ocean." Priests attribute to this proverb the confusion surrounding Olokun's gender, emphasizing furthermore that the issue of gender is irrelevant when compared to Olokun's extensive power.

NANA BURUKU (NANA BURUCU)

Nana Buruku is the owner of sweet water. It is Nana who gives the river to Oshun. Nana is also Babaluaye's wife, whom he marries after expulsion to Dahomey. Some priests consider Nana Buruku to be a road of Obatala. Nana is more revered in Dahomey, where the Fon consider her the mother of Mawu-Lisa, the Fon equivalent of the Supreme Being. Since Olodumare in Yoruba belief cannot possibly emanate from any entity, for he is the source of all life, it is possible that the correlation with Obatala came about as a misunderstanding of the exalted position given Nana among the Fon.

Upon the descent from heaven, after Ogun cleared the path for the orishas' entrance into life, all the deities paid tribute to the god of iron. Access to Ife would have been impossible, for the path was covered with dense brush. Nana refused to pay tribute to Ogun because she did not consider it fitting that a woman of her standing would have to bow before such "brute" force. Ever since, Nana refuses to

acknowledge Ogun's power, prohibiting the use of metal for her sacrifices. Therefore, Nana's sacrifices are performed with a wooden or glass knife.

OSHUN (OCHUN)

Oshun is the owner of the river, a role she predominantly acquires in Cuba, for although a river deity in Yorubaland (patron of the river that bears her name), the Yoruba do not associate Oshun with all rivers. Oshun is better known for her alluring and sensual nature. Past scholars have equated Oshun with the Greek Aphrodite or the Roman Venus. Honey, a delicacy that she receives from Orishaoko's bees, is her lure. With it, even Olodumare has succumbed to her whims. Oshun can be the most capricious of all the orishas. Although she is the youngest of all the deities, Oshun employs her sensuality and capriciousness to achieve whatever she desires.

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In spite of her apparent hedonistic nature, Oshun represents the suffering of womankind, reputed to defend her daughters from the abuse of *mankind*, often attacking men where it hurts most! Oshun laughs when she is annoyed, and cries when she is content. Her honey can be delightfully sweet, but at the slightest offense she can convert it into an extremely bitter purge. In a similar fashion, she rewards the righteous by "sweetening" their lives, and punishes the evil by making every aspect of their existence as bitter as she can.

Oshun controls the flow of blood in the human body. She chastises those who break the divine laws or incur her displeasure by attacking the circulatory system, the blood, or the heart. Oshun has been known to "sweeten" the bloodstream of many an offender.

ORUNMILA (ORUNLA,
ORULA)

Orunmila is the god of divination, master of the Ifa oracle that is sometimes confused with the deity. Both names are used interchangeably by the priest to relate to the orisha. Orunmila's name means "only heaven knows those that will be saved," and it alludes to this orisha's presence when an individual chooses his or her destiny before birth.¹⁷ For this reason, only Olodumare, Orunmila, and Elegba can guide an individual that has somehow deviated from his chosen destiny. This guidance is provided by the oracles.

Orunmila does not possess his priests, the *babalawo* (father of the secrets). Initiation into his priesthood is reserved for men. According to an Ifa myth, the worship of Orunmila and the initiation into the mysteries of Ifa were once female endeavors. Orishanla, a female road of Obatala, failed to heed the advice of Orunmila and initiated her two sons. As had been foretold, the children of Orishanla surpassed the women in their ability to memorize the *patakis* and rituals, resulting in the usurpation of the status by men and the proscription of the cult for women.

Afro-Cuban devotees also employ two other oracles that are offsprings of Ifa. Owo merindilogun, or simply Dilogun, employs sixteen cowries (*C. monmeta* L. or

C. annulus L.). The diviner removes the convex portion of the shell with a file, so that when the cowries are cast in divination, either the natural mouth or the "open" side shows. After a series of invocations and prayers, the diviner casts the cowries on a straw mat, and counts the position of the natural mouths facing upwards. There are seventeen possible combinations, although sixteen prevail. The combinations, as in Ifa, are called *odus*.

Obi divination employs four pieces of coconut which are cast on the ground. As with the other oracles, invocations and prayers precede divination. When the coconut segments are cast, they are read in accordance with the position in which they fall (i.e., concave or convex; white or brown side up). There are five possible combinations, but the diviner also takes into consideration the position in which they fall and the pattern they form on the ground (an "L" shape, or a "T" shape may be interpreted in different manners by different diviners).

Both Dilogun and Obi are more popular than Ifa, although the latter is the "maximum" authority. As derivations of Ifa, these younger oracles have certain limits imposed on them. When a diviner encounters a problem in Dilogun or Obi divination, a *babalawo* or Ifa priest may have to be consulted. These oracles are popular because, as opposed to Ifa, they can be employed by all worshipers, both male and female.

THE PRIESTHOOD

The *babalawo* is the highest category in the priesthood. As said before, initiation into Ifa is limited to men; women cannot become Ifa priestesses.¹⁸ A *babalawo* can be an initiate of another orisha before going through initiation into Ifa. These are called *oluwo* (owner of secrets), while the *awo* (secret) is the Ifa priest who never undertook initiation into any other orisha before Ifa. In the Afro-Cuban tradition, the *babalawo* can initiate priests only into the cult of Orunmila and Ifa. He cannot initiate the children of other orishas.

Following the *babalawo* in the hierarchical ladder are the priests and priestesses, referred to collectively as *oloshas* (owners of orisha).¹⁹ The priestess is called *iyalasha* (mother of the orisha); the priest, *babalasha* (father of the orisha).²⁰ It is the *oloshas* who initiates other adherents into the worship of their tutelar orisha. They become the "spiritual" mothers or fathers of their disciples, and status is inferred by the number of people an *oloshas* initiates into the priesthood, as well as through the acquisition of certain orishas which are considered as marks of status and respect (e.g., Oduduwa, Yewa, Osayin).

Among the *oloshas*, the position of *oriate* is sought by many. Although historically it has been a position dominated by men, women can also aspire to become *oriate*. The *oriate* is the officiating priest and master of ceremonies of the initiation rituals. Regardless of the individual's years in practice, at an initiation the *oriate* is

considered the *oba* (king), and his word is law. It is the responsibility of this priest that the ritual be carried out in utmost detail and to perfection, in accordance with the established rites handed down from generation to generation. The *oriate* also interprets the oracle on the third day of the initiation, the *ita* ceremony,²¹ in which all the *orishas* the novice receives communicate with the person through the *dilogun* or cowries consecrated for the new *olocha*.

The novice is called *iyawo* (wife of the orisha). Initiation is considered a "marriage" between Eleda and *ori*, and the person's tutelar orisha. The ensuing relationship is one of mutual cooperation. The tutelar deity of the *iyawo* is identified by the oracles, principally Ifa or Dilogun. An individual cannot choose the orisha he or she would like to worship: the orishas choose their "children." It is believed that the priest is the offspring of the union between Eleda, *ori*, and the tutelar deity. Consequently, the orisha/devotee relationship is that of parent and child. A devotee is not only the worshiper but primarily the spiritual *omo* or child of the deity under which he or she is initiated.

The *iyawo* is a "newborn" child. This child must go through a series of steps to acquire "maturity" in the hierarchical scheme of the priesthood. For one year and seven days from the date of the initiation, the individual will observe a very restrictive dress and behavioral code. The *iyawo* must dress in white, wear a white hat or headscarf, refrain from liquor, dancing, and places where large numbers of people congregate, with the exception of religious ceremonies and celebrations. The *iyawo* is required to learn the different characteristics of the orishas acquired at initiation, as well as other ritual details related to initiations and other ceremonies.

At the end of the year, the *iyawo* celebrates the anniversary with a feast. The particulars of this feast may involve ritual drumming, and an elaborate array of fruits and sweets arranged before an altar or *trono* (throne) in which all the orishas are decorously displayed. The feast is open for all who wish to attend, both ecclesiastical and secular. This anniversary marks the rite of passage into the position of *olocha*. From there, the long and absorbing learning process begins, guided by the accumulated intergenerational knowledge of the older and more experienced worshipers.

The learning process of an Orisha priest is a very complex matter. Not only must the individual know how to deal with different elements of the world of the divinities, but the *olocha* must also learn how to deal with the idiosyncrasies and expectations of the living. The *olocha* is expected to guide others, and is called upon to intervene through divination and rituals on behalf of his or her godchildren.²² This is a process unto itself, and requires not only religious knowledge but a high degree of patience and understanding if the individual is to succeed in the religious community.

The people who frequent the home of an *olosha* for guidance are distinguished according to their affiliation with the household. The *aleyo* are those for whom the oracle has recommended certain consecrations, such as the imposition of the *elekes* or beads, or have "received" an orisha with the priest. Once they have undergone these rituals, the *aleyo* is considered part of the orisha family, and enters the religious lineage of the initiating *olosha*.

This individual is no longer a stranger to the house, for he or she is now a "spiritual" child of the *olosha* and has consequently acquired a religious family in which the other members of the house are brothers, sisters, grandparents, and so on, according to their relationship with the *olosha*. The afflictions of the individual are now the interest of the collective group, and a network of mutual help is born through which support is offered and exchanged.

There are people who will consult an *olosha* sporadically, without necessarily becoming affiliated with the house. These are the *iworo* (visitors). These people simply employ the aid of the *olosha* and the deities at specific periods of crisis without necessarily having to become an adherent of the religion.

Afro-Cuban Orisha worship is a complicated religious practice that requires the full devotion of the individual. The *olosha* must learn to play a multiplicity of roles, sometimes simultaneously. This individual is not only responsible for him or herself and the welfare of the immediate family, but also for the well-being of a multitude of people that compose the vast and extended religious family.

Unlike other religions, Orisha worship becomes an intrinsic part of daily living. It is not only a religion; it is a way of life. The *olosha's ita* is unique: a personal communication between the deity and the devotee, in which the individual is given the prescriptions and proscriptions that will amount to a full and proper life. These are individual and personal revelations that are forecast for the individual, and not theological and impersonal doctrines for the collective.

There are no churches, for the devotee's shrine is in the home. The home becomes the church, the temple, and the sanctuary. Each *olosha* has his own personal orishas consecrated especially for the individual. These deities are given to the priest or priestess, and reside in the individual's home as one more "member" of the dwelling. The orishas are not alienated from the worshiper; they are not in a distant structure to which the individual goes to pray on a weekly basis. The deities become palpable, personal entities that are active elements and participants in daily affairs. They share the devotee's joys and sorrows, comforts and aggravations, creating a bond that is born from personal devotion and dedication, from the devotee to the orisha and vice versa.

Although many may feel a calling, few are truly "chosen." It is these few who, in the short period of one lifetime, attempt to deposit a grain of sand in the vast ocean that represents human existence. And these few people, coupled with the experience they acquire with the years, continue to transmit this knowledge to all subsequent generations. A ritual chant for the ancestors expresses this sentiment: *alagba-lagba ofe n'soro* (the elders have seen and spoken).

NOTES

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1. Blassingame 1977:319, reprinting depositions that appeared in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, ser. 3, vol. 2, October 2, 1854, pp. 234–39.

2. In addition to the Yoruba, other groups also preserved aspects of their culture. The Efik (known in Cuba as Abakua), the Ewe-Fon, and many subgroups from the Congo, especially the Bantu, also retained their magico-religious practices. The Abakua secret society, known in Cuba as the *ñañigos*, is the Efik legacy. The Ewe-Fon preserved their religious practices, known in Cuba as Regla Arara. Palo Mayombe/Kimbisa comes from the various Congo groups. See Cabrera 1975.

3. I decline to use the term *Santería* because of its pejorative connotations. In this chapter I refer to the religion as Afro-Cuban Orisha worship or Orisha tradition. I use *Orisha* when referring to the religion, and lowercase *orisha* to refer to the deity. When I describe aspects of the religion as Afro-Cuban, I extend this classification to all practices of this tradition, which are no longer limited to Cuba and Cubans. As a result of the Cuban Revolution, there are now Afro-Cuban priests in the United States, Canada, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Panama, Venezuela, Colombia, Spain, France, and other countries where Cubans have migrated.

4. Also called Olorun (Owner of the heavens) and Olofin (Owner of the heavenly palace).

5. For which *Santería* was an opprobrious and demeaning label; see Ortiz 1965.

6. In today's totalitarian Cuba, the Afro-Cuban religions have been the major influence in the survival of Catholicism. Adherents go to the churches to worship the Virgin of Regla (Virgin of Charity), while simultaneously venerating Yemoja and Oshun at home. In these respects, we can say that the score is even.

7. For further reading on the Ifa oracle in Yorubaland, see Bascom 1969b; on Dilogun, see Bascom 1980; on Obi, see Epega 1931. For reading on the Cuban adaptation of these oracles, on Ifa, see Castillo 1976 and Bascom 1952; on Dilogun, see Cabrera 1980 and Bascom 1952, 1980; on Obi, see Ramos 1982a.

8. Witches, sorcerers, and the personified representations of *iku* (death); *arun* (sickness); *ofo* (loss); *eyo* (tragedy), and so forth.

9. Each orisha has specific details that are strictly observed in preparation for offerings and meals. Obatala forbids the use of salt and spices in his foods. Elegba, Ogun, Shango, Babaluaye, and the other fiery orishas delight in spicy foods. Oshun's foods are served in accordance with her refined nature.

10. As is the case in Trinidad where Yoruba religion merges with the beliefs of the Spiritual Baptists (Houk 1992).

11. Although this correlation does not apply for Cuba, in Trinidad and Brazil Eshu-Elegba is compared to Satan.

12. Babaluaye is syncretized with the biblical Lazarus widely venerated throughout Latin America, and not the canonized Lazarus. Although not recognized as a saint by the church, in popular Catholicism he is considered one.

13. She is considered the "mother" of the Ibeji because Aina is the eldest member of the seven orishas in the Ibeji pantheon.

14. In one myth, Dada is depicted as Shango's elder sister who raised him when his father, Obatala, enraged by an incestuous relationship between his elder son Ogun and his mother Yemoja, swore to kill any child born from Yemoja's womb henceforth.

15. The emphasis on the legitimacy of Oba's marriage to Shango and her role in the pantheon as the patron divinity of matrimony possibly attempts to account for polygamy, practiced by the Yoruba yet shunned by Christian mores. This may also account for the many amorous anecdotes attributed to Shango, since Oya and Oshun are also considered wives of the thunder god.

16. Oshun is reputed to be Shango's favorite wife. In the myth, Oba asks for Oshun's help. Oshun tells her that she has won Shango's unconditional love by feeding him a small piece of her ear in okra stew. Oba figures that if Oshun gained her status with a small piece, she could topple that position by feeding Shango her whole ear.

17. Besides Olodumare and Orunmila, the only other orisha present is Elegba. Orunmila and Elegba are intrinsically related to the three divinatory systems employed in Yoruba religion.

18. Recently an Obatala priestess, originally initiated into the Afro-Cuban system, was initiated into the cult by a Yoruba *babalawo*. According to sources, the initiation took place in New York City during the late 1980s.

19. The word *orisha* is frequently abbreviated to *osha* or *ocha*.

20. "Mother" and "father" are used figuratively, for although they do not physically give birth to the orishas themselves, these priests "give birth" to, or create, the orishas worshiped by an individual.

21. His function as "reader," or interpreter of *ita*, has given birth to the term *italero* (he who reads *ita*), a merger of Yoruba and Spanish terms.

22. The *oloshas* are called *madrina* or *padrino*, godmother or godfather. Their followers are their *ahijados*, or godchildren, obviously as a result of the Catholic influence.

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