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RICE UNIVERSITY

Asho Orisha (Clothing Of The Orisha): Material Culture As Religious Expression In Santería

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A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Doctor Of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

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"Asho Orisha" suggests that the objects surrounding and the items clothing the Orisha of Santería (also known as Lucumi or Orisha religion) form chains of signifiers tied to the theological and philosophical core of the religion. It focuses on the domestic displays devotees maintain for their deities on a day-to-day basis, the altar displays (thrones) created by devotees for the anniversaries of their initiation into the priesthood, and the body of the new initiate (the iyawo). This work traces the ways in which theological concepts from Africa are redefined and reinterpreted in the Americas so as to maintain a consistent conceptual system in a new environment. It uses a combination of participant-observation, individual interviews and photographic documentation. It includes 13 photographs of altars and clothing.

The focus of this work is divided into three principle sections. Chapter 3 looks at the altars as a whole to see the ways pre-colonial African, colonial Cuban and contemporary American ideas about how one presents and approaches the holy are incorporated into these displays.
Chapter 4 looks at the portions of displays devoted to six major Orisha (Obatala, Shango, Yemaya, Oshun, Ogun and Eleggua) and suggests that color forms a primary semiotic system. An analysis of color symbolism aids in the analysis of the other objects found in these displays.

Chapter 5 extends this semiotic analysis to include the initiation experience and the extended liminal period of the iyawoage. Like the altar displays, the iyawo embodies the Orisha and thus functions as a mobile sacred site. The construction of the persona of the iyawo and the rules surrounding the iyawoage are fruitfully interrogated to explicate additional theological and philosophical concepts. Issues of cross-gender and cross-status dress highlight the ways that clothing serves as a symbolic system to maintain Yoruba ideas about the sacred relationships embodied in the iyawo.

Chapter 6 concludes this work with a discussion of the place of Spanish terminology and Catholic imagery within the semiotic system and briefly discusses the ways in which the religious displays work as mnemonic devices.
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Maferefún Yemaya, Maferefún Eleggua
Maferefún Oshun, Maferefún gbogbo Orisha.

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**Preface**

Santería, the primary focus of this dissertation, is a religion developed in Cuba by Africans. The terminology, prayers, songs, etc. are in either 1) the African language of Yoruba, 2) a creolized Spanish version of Yoruba commonly referred to as *Lucumi*, 3) Spanish or 4) English. Some authors choose to use the Yoruba spelling including tone markers (diacritic marks above the vowels indicate high ['] or low tones [‘], with midtones left unmarked) and distinguishing marks (dot or line below particular letters [ṣ, ḑ, ḕ]). Many authors keep the tone markers but eliminate the distinguishing marks. In those cases, they may or may not substitute English letter combinations to indicate the missing marks. For example, “ṣ” sounds similar to “sh” thus “sh” may be substituted for the missing “ṣ” instead of just using an unmarked “s”.

Some authors drop all Yoruba markings and only use Spanish accent marks. They also often make other substitutions based on Spanish pronunciation. For example, Spanish doesn’t have an “sh” sound at the beginning of words so a “ch” is substituted. *Lucumi* is the name often given to these language changes, although Lucumi also includes changes attributed to dialect differences and misunderstandings of Yoruba words or sounds.

English speakers tend to drop all diacritic marks but maintain the Spanish/Lucumi pronunciation (although some revert back to Yoruba-style
pronunciation/spelling when the sound is available in English, for example, replacing the “ch” at the beginning of a word with “sh”).

Using these descriptions, the deity of thunder would be Ṣango in Yoruba, Chango in Lucumi, and Shango in English.

Since I am English-speaking and working with a mixed English- and Spanish-speaking community I have generally dropped Yoruba marks and accents while some retaining Spanish accents and only revert to alternative spelling and pronunciation marks when quoting someone who uses them.

Various portions of this work were originally published as a chapter in Sects, Cults, and Spiritual Communities: A Sociological Analysis, edited by William W. Zellner and Marc Petrowski and have been used with their permission.

All photos have been used by permission and unless otherwise noted are from my personal collection.
Chapter 1: Introduction

The visual materialization of unseen natural and supernatural forces is a basic African impulse, as it is in most parts of the world....Rarely, though, is a clay or wood figure itself considered a god or spirit. Rather it is a vehicle or symbol, a tangible indication of something ineffable that nevertheless compels belief. African art often exists to embody spirit forces, to augment the effectiveness and emotional impact of rituals, to remind people, through visual metaphor or allusion, that they are only in part responsible for their destiny. (Herbert M. Cole)¹

Colleen McDannell in her book Material Christianity suggests that American religious scholarship has put too great of an emphasis on the mental, cognitive and ethical dimensions of Christianity and has failed to account for the connection between spirituality and the body (McDannell 1995, 274). Although modern Christian theology, particularly Protestant Christianity, has downplayed the significance of the body in spiritual practice, her work exemplifies how material culture is used to mediate and express religious experiences and accentuates the relevance of the physical self in religious practice (McDannell 1995, 275).² This same preference for mental elements has limited our view of oral religious systems. Without a religious text and its explications we are often at a loss to discuss these religions and

¹(Cole 1989, 32).
²See also David Morgan's Visual Piety, an analysis of the use of a specific material culture item, religious images, within American Protestantism (Morgan 1998).
thus leave them to the fields of anthropology, sociology and psychology. However, as McDannell shows, the material culture of a religious group can be used to discover the religious beliefs and practices of its members thus opening these types of religious expressions to our purview.

I will examine the material culture of Santería tracing the chains of signifiers tied to religious artifacts in an effort to develop an understanding of how the basic theological and philosophical ideas of its local practitioners are exhibited. I will focus on the following elements of the religion as presenting regular and available access to it and its practitioners: 1) the altar displays created by practitioners for the anniversaries of their initiation into the priesthood, 2) the domestic displays in which practitioners maintain their deities on a day-to-day basis, and 3) the regulations and taboos surrounding the newly initiated priests during their iyawo\textsuperscript{3} year.

Within material culture analysis it is understood that no object has an intrinsic meaning of its own. Rather everything becomes meaningful within specific patterns of relationships. Thus it is only through an examination of the context and relationship among objects that we can determine their meaning (McDannell 1995, 4). It is important to understand that these objects exist within a mythological environment that also shapes their use and meaning. Thus we must become familiar with that mythological environment before we can fully explicate the objects presented to us. While some experts in material culture believe that they can, by examining the object itself, derive information about it without recourse to outside sources (McDannell 1995, 15) such a limitation in respect to the material objects

\textsuperscript{3}Newly initiated priests remain in a liminal state for twelve months after their initiation. During this time they are called iyawo, a Yoruba word which means “bride younger than the speaker” and indicates their new relationship to the Orisha (the deities of the religion).
utilized by Santería quickly leads one astray. As we shall see, objects are often completely redefined by their context. Thus it becomes important that we not only look deeply into the culture presented to us but also that we realize that what is visible is only partially available to our analysis; like an iceberg, much remains hidden, invisible and unknown.

In his discussion of “Flamenco Spirituality” presented to the American Academy of Religion, November 1997, John McCarthy suggested that Flamenco resisted analysis as a spiritual system, first because Flamenco has not been a textual or a self-reflective phenomenon; secondly, because of a “certain reticence, a certain privacy, even secrecy, a certain emphasis upon ‘insider-outsider’ distinction”; finally because “Flamenco is a moving target. For almost every important statement or observation that I have found someone make about it, I can find another who also says, ‘But what about...?’ or ‘Oh, but that is not the way that so-and-so did this’” (McCarthy 1996, 1). Although much work has been done on Santería especially in the areas of anthropology, sociology and ethno-musicology, it resists analysis of its philosophical and theological aspects for the same three reasons. However Dr. McCarthy was able to open Flamenco to analysis by combining personal interaction with flamenco dancers and musicians with scholarly analysis of their culture. In the same way I will combine personal interaction with scholarly analysis to begin to discover the ways in which Santería works as a religion and spiritual path.

My methodology has been to use a combination of participant-observation and individual interviews with practitioners of Santería in the Houston area supplemented by research into other, similar communities and available scholarly work. As a practicing member of the local religious community I have had unique access to both the public and hidden faces of
the religion. Because many of the elements of the religion are considered sacred and not open to those not properly initiated, I have limited my discussion to those elements generally available to interested observers. This means that in some cases I have not been able to follow the chains of signification as far as I know them to go because of the confidentiality limitations imposed on practitioners. Agreeing with Alasdair MacIntyre that a "commitment to some particular theoretical or doctrinal standpoint may be a prerequisite for—rather than a barrier to—an ability to characterize data in a way which will enable inquiry to proceed" (MacIntyre 1990, 16–17), I believe that full access to the religion and its participants has allowed me to provide both *emic* (insider) and *etic* (outsider) viewpoints⁴ while the limitations imposed have not seriously handicapped this effort.⁵ There is more than enough material available "in the public domain" without resorting to the betrayal of sacred secrets.

In addition to working with practitioners, I have also included information collected from related sites on the Internet. Like many of their contemporaries, practitioners of Santería (and related religions) have joined together to construct on-line discussion groups, web sites and newsgroups. Although the quality of the information available on the internet is often of dubious quality, accessing these sources has put me in touch with a wide range of believers and other interested parties. Properly considered, and if

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⁴David Hilary Brown says following Andrew Apter that these terms have been replaced with "local and global," "particularizing and totalizing," and "derived and imposed" positionalities (Brown 1996, 131 fn. 3).

⁵Nancy Ramsey discusses the questions of identity and positionality raised by insider research. She identifies the problems encountered by both insiders and outsiders in conducting and presenting field research and provides a strong argument for the inclusion of an insider point of view, particularly in the study of marginalized or non-mainstream communities (Ramsey 1997).
possible verified by local sources when that seems appropriate, on-line information has provided additional source material.

Material culture specialists, according to McDannell, look at the physical, sensual, corporeal and phenomenal world as providing insight into the religious practices and thoughts of individuals and groups. By looking at objects and their environment, the form, distribution, function and changing character of objects, they hope to discover patterns of beliefs, social needs and behavior of the people who use these things and experience the space they inhabit (McDannell 1995, 2). She divides material culture into four categories; artifacts, landscapes, architecture and art. Artifacts are the objects, the stuff, that surrounds us (2–3), while cultivated nature characterizes landscape (3). Architecture and art include the buildings, paintings, sculpture and photography that form the environment of religious life (3). Although I have used elements from each of these categories, in order to avoid enlarging this project unduly, I have primarily focused on artifacts and the space they inhabit.

In his 1989 dissertation for Yale University, Garden in the Machine, David Hilary Brown complains that “the oricha throne, often a huge, stunning altar-installation of colorful cloth, vessels, fruit, flowers, beaded objects, candles, and prepared food—the pride and joy of its creators, and the focus of virtually all important ritual events—has, curiously, received no more than a half-dozen pages of description in all the scholarly literature on afro-Cuban religion combined” (377). He goes on to add about a hundred pages to that total.6 In those hundred pages he describes three types of thrones: those constructed for initiations (trono del asiento, Sp., throne of the

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6He has subsequently enlarged this literature by publishing portions of his dissertation work (Brown 1993, Brown 1996).
"crowning" ceremony), those built to celebrate the anniversary of the initiation (trono de cumpleaños, Sp. birthday throne), what I am calling here "birthday altars," and those constructed as part of a drumming ritual (trono del tambor, Sp. drumming throne). Then he discusses the African and Spanish precedents for the design of these thrones. Finally he discusses the place of thrones in the exchange system of the religion. Ysamur Flores-Peña and Roberta J. Evanchuk have also added to the literature on the material culture of Santería with their book Santería Garments and Altars which focuses on the design and construction of the presentation clothing worn by initiates and the birthday thrones.

However, Brown's complaint continues to ring true, there is a dearth of material describing these altars and their place in the religious system. Particularly there is a dearth of literature looking at these altars and the various items they contain from a semiotic point of view. Very little has been written about the ways in which these altars are used to both exhibit and explicate the mythological basis of the religion. One of the my goals has been to look more closely at these phenomena in an effort to gain a greater appreciation for the ways beliefs and practices interconnect in a web of signification. In particular I have looked at these spaces as religious constructions and thus consistently calls them "altars" rather than the more common usage of "thrones." Thrones they surely are, for the sacred kings and queens of the religion are enthroned there; but just as surely they are altars, sacred spaces, where the visible and invisible worlds meet and interact.

McDannell suggests that objects are important in the lives of average Christians because they can be "exchanged, gifted, reinterpreted and manipulated." People use objects to "establish and maintain relationship with supernatural characters, family and friends" as well as to "tell
themselves and the world around them who they are." Objects are not merely decoration that masks serious belief but the way in which the "invisible world becomes known and felt" (272). I have investigated how objects are used in the Santería environment and compared this uses to those suggested by McDannell. In the course of my investigation it has become increasingly clear that each object found in Santería religious displays is an important component of the overall story of the religion and of the religious lives of individual practitioners. These objects not only glorify the Orisha (Yr. deities of the religion) by their beauty, they provide an important vessel for insight into the nature of the Orisha as seen by their devotees.

My study is not, however, limited to altar displays but also looks at other aspects of the material culture of the religion including the initiatory period known as the iyawoage. The iyawoage presents an interesting study in the construction of a religious persona. As part of the initiation process the new priest is subjected to a year-long liminal period during which all aspects of his life are controlled and governed by metaphors of birth, marriage and power. By looking at this period, the restrictions imposed and the face presented to the community by the new priest we can learn more about how various religious ideas are manifested in the lives and actions of practitioners. The end of this iyawo period is marked by the construction of the priest's first altar display. Like the altar displays, the iyawo embodies the Orisha and thus functions as a mobile sacred site that can be fruitfully compared to other types of altar displays and symbolically interrogated concerning theological and philosophical concepts.

In an effort to trace the signification of the various elements of the religion I have diped into contemporary American culture, colonial and post-colonial Caribbean culture particularly that of the island of Cuba, and West
African, primarily Yoruba, cultural and religious practice. This religion has a tripartite heritage (African, Hispanic-Caribbean and North American), thus I have relied on a variety of sources including the work of missionaries and anthropologists as well as observers of colonial and contemporary culture for background information detailing the cultural contexts of various practices. Because this religion continues to be primarily transmitted orally, a major portion of its philosophy and theology are encoded in the divination systems brought from Africa to the New World, particularly the diloggun (sixteen cowry) system. In this project I have tied particular practices, chiefly those exhibited in altar displays, back to the related divination verses and stories where possible. This has entailed collecting stories and proverbs from a variety of sources, including published material as well as formal and informal discussion with diviners, elders and other practitioners.

**A First Introduction to the Religion**

Santería\(^7\) is a religion that was developed by slaves brought to the New World from Africa. (Maps 1 and 2 shows the Yoruba area of West Africa and the island of Cuba.) It is part of a religious system generically called Orisha worship that has spread from Africa to the Americas and around the world. Sandra Barnes estimates that more than 70 million African and American

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\(^7\)There is some discussion both with the larger community and among scholars of the appropriate name for this religious movement. Although “Santería” is generally recognized it carries a variety of negative connotations. Among the general public it is often associated with a range of unsavory practices and practitioners (Cárdenas 1993, 474–75, Flores-Peña and Evanchuk 1994, 7); within the African-American community it is associated with unwellcome Spanish elements incorporated into what was presumed to be “pure” African practices (Curry 1997,117f). Julio Sánchez Cárdenas suggests “Orisha religion” or “Orisha tradition” to highlight its African origins and “Lukumí” is popular within the African-American community. Regla de Ocha (Sp. & Yr. the way or rule of the Orisha) is another common name used to distinguish this Afro-Cuban religion from others, such as Regla de Congo (Palo Monte and Palo Mayombe), etc. I will continue to use this suspect term for a variety of reasons: it is the accepted term within the Houston community, it is commonly recognized, it carries a recognition of the heteroglossic history of the religion. In my conclusion I will have more to say on this issue of names and naming.
people participate in, or are familiar with the various forms of Orisha worship, including Yoruba tradition religion in Africa, Candomblé in Brazil, Shango religion in Trinidad, Santería in Cuba and of course variants of all of these in the United States (Barnes 1997 (1989), 1). Although Santería principally uses religious elements from its African sources for deep ritual, its public face has incorporated a wide variety of religious and secular elements from the colonial Spanish society of Cuba, where it was developed, as well as from North America. The public face of Santería is most obviously presented in the large altar displays built yearly by practitioners to celebrate the anniversary of their entrance into the priesthood of the religion.

Each Santería priest\(^9\) is initiated as the 'child' of a particular Orisha. As part of that initiation he receives the tools and emblems of that Orisha along with the tools and emblems of a set of related Orisha. This group forms the priest's primary pantheon to which other deities may be added from time to time. Although the altar displays focus on the primary Orisha each member of the pantheon is represented in a variety of ways, both presentational and representational.\(^10\) The individual Orisha themselves are present on the altar, usually hidden within a covered container in the colors associated with that Orisha. Non-initiates are not generally allowed to actually view the deity and its implements. However surrounding the pot are various items representing the Orisha and its mythology. These items include cloth,

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\(^8\)Barnes is discussing the religious systems that include the Orisha Ogun who is worshipped throughout Africa and the African diaspora.

\(^9\)Although I will use the term "priest" to designate the religious functionaries of Santería, both men and women are included in all of the descriptions unless noted otherwise.

\(^10\)A core group of an Orisha's tools and emblems are believed to contain the actual presence of that Orisha in the same way that the consecrated host is said to contain the actual presence of Jesus Christ for Catholics. Other items may represent the Orisha but are not believed to embody its presence. Thus I distinguish between items that represent the Orisha and those that are believed to be the Orisha. Understanding this distinction between presence and representation will be important as we look at various aspects of this religion.
flowers, candles, fruit and other food items, statues and other anthropomorphic images, and manufactured items. To the knowledgeable observer, initiate or non-initiate, the items displayed and their relative positions within the display tell the story of the practitioner and his or her relationship to these particular deities.

In Africa the cults\textsuperscript{11} of the various Orisha construct altars to the deities in their homes, in free-standing structures within the family compound or in public areas, and in the bush outside of town. Each of these cult groups, like their Cuban and American counterparts, are also formed around a primary deity and related deities. Shrines contain the presence of these Orisha, usually hidden in pottery containers or calabashes, as well as other items associated with the Orisha. However, many of the items freely available in Africa were not available to those slaves and freemen and women who reconstructed the religion in Cuba. In addition, the religion in colonial Cuba was developed in a highly Christianized atmosphere. Thus the early Cuban practitioners incorporated many Roman Catholic as well as purely secular elements into the displays they constructed as a way to honor the deities. Since, as part of this process of acculturation, each Orisha was associated with one or more Catholic saints, in times of persecution it was easy to camouflage the Orisha behind these Catholic saints. However, as Scher has suggested is true for Trinidad (Scher 1997 [1989]) #304], it seems that the correspondences between

\textsuperscript{11}The word “cult” has a long a venerable history within the world of the social sciences. However today it is tainted by its association with “inauthentic” religions. At the same time, especially in the case of non-Western religions, “cult” carries a connotation of the ‘other’ as a cultural specimen to be studied. I have used it to identify subgroups within the larger Yoruba religious complex. Although all of these groups are working within a wider mythological complex framed by the Ifa corpus of stories, each focuses its religious energies on a one or more members of the religious pantheon. To describe these groups as cults is meant neither to diminish their authenticity nor to alienate them from our own experience of religious denominations and sects.
the Orisha and the Catholic saints was well in place before the need for camouflage arose.

The Yoruba culture in Africa that fostered this religious complex was completely oral. The religious and historical past was preserved in the minds of the various functionaries of the society, as well as in the proverbs and stories of the culture. In the case of the religion, all of the mythological and liturgical elements were encoded in the verses associated with the Ifa and diloggun divination systems and maintained in the memory of the various priests. When these people arrived, naked and alone, in the New World it was those memories that enabled them to reconstruct their religious system. Perhaps because of that oral history, or perhaps because of the hostile religious environment in which they later found themselves, the Cuban descendants of those slaves, in spite of being members of a literate society, and perhaps in spite of being literate themselves, chose to continue to propagate their religious heritage through oral channels. To this day there is very little “official” printed material available describing the religion, its rituals, theology or history. Most of the available material is written by outsiders; anthropologists, sociologists and the like.¹²

Although there have always been people who have been born into the religion, a vast number of the participants have come to it as adults.¹³ One of the most common ways that newcomers are introduced to the religion is through participation in the more public events—religious birthday

¹²This is changing as more adherents provide a market for published material. However, the quality of this material is very uneven and not well-received by local elders. Teachings received orally are still more highly valued than those gained through written sources.

¹³Because Santería is a form of mystery religion even those born into practicing families still must receive the appropriate initiations before they can have full ritual access and knowledge.
celebrations, drum parties and the presentation of newly initiated priests. It is at the foot of the altars built for these events that newcomers are introduced to the deities and their stories. The most common mode of introduction is to describe what one sees. Because every part of the display is symbolic it can be used as a teaching space. Because it draws on all of the senses it provides a strong imprint on the mind of the viewer—not only will one see the colors and items displayed, one will smell the flowers, perhaps hear the music as well as the stories, feel the textures of the cloths and mat, and taste the foods associated with each Orisha. All of these sensual inputs are associated with religious beliefs.

In the description of Eastern Catholic icons, it is said that these icons are not idols, are not offered the worship due to God alone, but rather are doorways, passages through which one might reach God (Baggley, 1987 #4, 4). These icons rather than being realistic images of the saints are visual representations of Biblical and saintly stories presented through the use of metaphor and symbol. Each element of the icon is designed to carry the mind in meditation to God through the depiction of a particular event in saintly or biblical life. Within the European tradition two types of symbols might be used for religious displays. One type, the public symbol, can be exemplified by the religious icon. This symbol displays itself to the viewing public. It is ineffective as a symbol unless that public both recognizes it as a symbol and can identify the idea or concept it symbolizes. The second type of symbol is the personal symbol similar to those used by medieval scholars to place important works into their memories (cf. Carruthers). These symbols, while expressive for the individual, may or may not communicate their meaning to others. In both cases, the symbol is used to incorporate a large amount of information into a single image. A religious icon might remind one of the
incarnation thus leading to a meditation on the relationship between God, man and the way in which Jesus bridged that gap for the salvation of mankind. On the other hand, an old hag drawn into the margins of a medieval book, surrounded by a variety of disgusting plants and animals might be used to remind one of a treatise on vice and its punishment. In both cases the symbol not only requires meditation to expose its full meaning but also requires that one be familiar with a wide range of cultural elements outside the symbol itself.

In the same way the Santería altar displays are an exposition of both public and private symbolic messages. Each element of the display is designed to move one to a consideration of an aspect or characteristic of the deity with which it is associated. Some of these associations are in the form of public messages available to the least knowledgeable observer. Others are personal, private and representative of individual messages. For each element one must first observe the item itself, then see it in relationship to the other items surrounding it and finally one must apply what one knows about the cultural background of the religion in general as well as the background of the particular individual who constructed this altar. I have looked at several altars constructed by a range of different practitioners and attempted to follow the chains of signifiers that they provide.

No Hay Ningún Santo Aquí!:\textsuperscript{14} The Use of Human Figures within Santería

Among the Yoruba people of West Africa religious altars are relatively devoid of anthropomorphic figures and those figures one does find on the altar are generally stylized or realistic representations of worshippers rather

\textsuperscript{14}(Sp. There are no Saints here!).
than figures of deities. Most descriptions of early Afro-Cuban altars for the African Orisha suggest that Catholic saints and other European objects have invaded and perhaps even overwhelmed the purely African elements (Bascom 1950, 64–65, Lawal 1996). In spite of what one might have come to believe based on the literature, my research has shown that in North American Santería there are few anthropomorphic figures regularly found on altar displays.\[^{15}\]

Most of the literature on the religion suggests a strong correspondence between the Orisha, the deities of Santería, and Catholic saints. Most books have a chart of correspondences between the Orisha, the saints and, in some cases, other items (Brandon 1983, Table 2–1 175–77, Brandon 1993, 77, Brown 1989, 494, Lawal 1996, 29–32, Murphy 1993, 42-43).\[^{16}\] In the article based on his presentation to the Second Afro-Brazilian Congress in Bahia, Brazil in November of 1936 Melville J. Herskovits give an early version of these correspondences as collected by researchers in Brazil, Cuba and Haiti (Herskovits 1937, 641–42). (His earliest citation, Nina-Rodrigues’s *L’Animisme Fétique des Nègres de Bahia*, was published in 1900.) Herskovits suggests the most common explanation for this syncretization: an effort on the part of the practitioners of these “fetish cults” to hide their activities behind a veneer of the dominant religion (Herskovits 1937, 636). He suggests that what he saw as the prominent displays of Catholic elements and the identification between the “African gods and Catholic Saints” (his capitalization) was evidence of a “synthesis between aboriginal African

\[^{15}\] It should be noted that a review of photos of both historical and contemporary altars in the Candomblé (Brazilian) and Vodon (Haitian) traditions reveals the presence of Catholic saints’ statues more often than is found within Santería. This is an important distinction that calls for further research.

\[^{16}\] See Appendices 2 and 3 for similar charts.
patterns and the European traditions to which [the Negroes] have been exposed” (Herskovits 1937, 635–36). Although there are many disparities between the lists collected by different researchers in different times and places, Herskovits suggests that the remarkable similarities between them reveals “to what extent the inner logic of the aboriginal African cultures of the Negroes, when brought in contact with foreign traditions, worked out to achieve an end that, despite the handicaps of slavery, has been relatively the same” (Herskovits 1937, 643).

While I was in the process of researching and writing this dissertation an adult education group at a local church asked me to present a series of workshops based on my research. After a session introducing them to the religion, I wanted to share some of the research on the construction of Santería altars and the way these altars are a hybridization of the West African and Spanish forms of sacred space.¹⁷ Based on my research I wanted to put together a set of slides showing African, Spanish, and Santería altars. One of my points was to be the way Catholic sacred personages, the saints, had been added to African altars that are relatively devoid of anthropomorphically images.¹⁸ But when I began to look for a picture of a Santería altar “festooned with saints,” as I was preparing to say in my talk, I couldn’t find any.

The local Santería community, for the most part, does not have Catholic statues on their altars. This was not immediately surprising. Several reasons suggest themselves: 1) many members of the local community were

¹⁷That talk was based on an early draft of Chapter 3 below.

¹⁸William R. Bascom says: “...chromolithographs and plaster images of the Catholic saints are prominently displayed in the shrines and houses of the santeros...” (Bascom 1950); Babatunde Lawal says: “The most sacred symbols of the ṉiṣá were placed on an altar concealed among Christian images such as crucifixes, madonna statues, chalices, and the chromolithographs of the appropriate Christian saints” (Lawal 1996, 28).
not current or former Catholics; 2) although many santeros have Catholic backgrounds, many had abandoned the church and its iconography; 3) practitioners from Protestant backgrounds appeared to find saints even stranger than the African gods they were worshipping and are unlikely to look at them as appropriate representations of their new deities.

However I found that photos from other sources also showed the absence of saints from Santería displays (Brown 1993, Flores-Peña and Evanchuk 1994, 64–72, Mason 1997, 129 plate 211, 158 plate 263, passim, Thompson 1993, 156 plate 175, 157 plate 176, 162 plate 183, passim). So I began to look more closely at my local community. The absence of saints from domestic and birthday altars did not mean that the saints were entirely absent. Among the more traditional Cubans there were saints, all the saints one is lead to expect to find, they just weren’t sharing space with the Orisha. A single example will suffice at this point. When I visited the home of a Cuban elder on the occasion of his religious birthday, I discovered that the fireplace in the living room had been filled in and the mantle converted into a shrine housing a 3/4 human scale statue of la Virgen de Regla, who is associated with the Orisha Yemaya. But the birthday display for the Orisha was in a back bedroom, completely separated from the Catholic-style display and completely devoid of Catholic religious figures. The saints were in the public living room, while the Orisha had their own private room in the rear of the house.20

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19I will be using the terms santero/santera as general terms to describe practitioners of this religion. However, normally the term is reserved for those who have received the asiento initiation and are priests of the religion.

20John Mason suggests a similar organization in contemporary Cuba (Mason 1994, 242).

Kay F. Turner also describes two altars constructed by one her informants, one, in the living room, was “simple and elegant” designed “to show people who come to the house that I believe in the Virgins”; the other, in a back hallway off the kitchen, is “a mess”, cluttered with a variety of sacred and secular objects. But “This is where I come to pray everyday....And
An excursion to New York City confirmed this insight. Both through personal observation and interviews with practitioners I discovered that Catholic saints are minor decorative elements on domestic altars and essentially absent from public displays among the santeros I questioned. Several santeros told me that they had statues of saints in their homes but they pointedly told me that these statues either were acquired before their initiation into Santería or were gifts from others to themselves or their Orisha. In most cases these statues were kept separate from their Orisha altars. This absence calls into question the place of Catholic elements, particularly saints, in Santería. I will discuss this issue further after I have had a chance to share what I did find on altars.

Although saints may be absent from Santería altars, material objects are not. Both birthday and domestic altars are festooned with a variety of objects, objects that have been presented to the Orisha, or that in some way represent the Orisha. I have looked beyond the saints associated with Santería to examine the larger material culture of Santería in an attempt to trace some of the chains of signifiers tied to its religious artifacts. It is an effort to develop an understanding of how the basic theological and philosophical ideas of its local practitioners are exhibited through these artifacts. Herskovits describes the methods he used in Haiti to determine the god-saint correspondences. One was to just let them come up in the general discussion of theological problems; the other was to show the practitioners commonly available chromolithographs of saints and to "obtain information concerning the
manner in which the saints are envisaged by the people, and those loa\textsuperscript{21} or African deities they are believed to represent..." (Herskovits 1937, 637). Using a similar method, that is asking practitioners what Orisha they associate with a particular object, concept or phenomena and why they make that association I have determined that everything can have an Orisha correspondence: fruit, flowers, natural phenomena, personality types, food, manufactured items, anything one can think of can be associated with an Orisha. William R. Bascom, describing the Orisha among the Yoruba in Nigeria, said “For each of the hundreds of deities there are appropriate songs, dances, rhythms, musical instruments, taboos, praise names, insignia, shrine carvings and other paraphernalia, leaves, sacrificial foods, and symbols through which they are fed” (Bascom 1969, 97). I will make the claim that there is nothing that cannot be associated with an Orisha and used to represent it in some way.\textsuperscript{22}

**Iyawoage**

Iyawo is a Yoruba term meaning “wife, junior to the speaker.” It is used in Santería to designate a person who has just completed the asiento ceremony and has been initiated into the priesthood. For a calendar year after the ceremony the new priest (the iyawo) dresses in white, is subject to a wide

\textsuperscript{21}Loa is the general name of deities in the Fon (Dahomey) tradition that formed the basis of Haitian Vodou. It is similar in concept to the Yoruba word Orisha.

\textsuperscript{22}An interesting parlor game when visiting with santeros is to ask them which Orisha is associated with an item without a commonly accepted Orisha association. Even though they may not agree among themselves everyone I have talked to has been willing and able to make these types of associations.
number of taboos and is generally "in training" toward his or her eventual position as a fully certified priest.

Typical of many rites of passage, the initiation into the Santería priesthood consists of three phases: separation, marginalization and reintegation. During the first week of his initiation the iyawo is taken out of the community and confined to a single room. It is in this room that the Orisha is "made" by the community.\[^{23}\] During the rest of the year the iyawo's status is ambiguous. He has left behind his previous position but is not yet accorded full membership in the religious community. The iyawo is set apart from the religious and secular communities and marked in both blatant and subtle ways as separate. As the year progresses these restrictions are loosened or lifted so that the new santero is slowly reintegrated back into both communities. However it is not until the completion of the iyawo period that the initiate is accepted as a fully functioning member of the religious community and reintegrated into his or her previous life.

All of the restrictions imposed upon the iyawo are designed to protect the newly-born initiate, to help him or her connect with the Orisha seated in his head (Murphy 1994, 104) and to develop his iwa (Yr. character). All have religious significance. Some tell the story of death and rebirth, growth and maturity in the body of the iyawo; others teach about the Orisha and the time before time when they inhabited the earth; still others prepare the new priest to take his place as a ritual specialist and the embodiment of the gods. Through his life the new priest will continue to learn and develop these skills but it is during this iyawo period that the cosmology of the Orisha are also inscribed directly on his body.

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\[^{23}\]The initiation of priests is called in Spanish *hacer el santo*, making the saint. Not only are new priests created during this ceremony but also new manifestations of the Orisha are constructed.
Although almost every work on Santería contains a section on the asiento ceremony and the taboos surrounding the iyawo, I have found little that looked behind the taboos in an effort to explore their deeper meanings. As a study of material culture of religion, I will look closely at the iyawo as another element of the religious system. I will view the iyawo as another religious artifact that can be interrogated to learn more about the beliefs and practices of Santería.

Both the birthday altar and the iyawo provide us with a window into the religious system called Santería. Although the different framing devices will provide different views, together they provide a fuller view into the core beliefs of the religion as well as the practices that exemplify those beliefs.

**Theoretical Basis of This Study**

Each year, on the anniversary of their initiation into the priesthood, Santería practitioners build elaborate altar displays as a part of the celebration. I will explore the ways in which these altar displays and their iconography are used as a secondary locus of memory to exhibit the particular theological and philosophical ideas that are primarily encoded within the divination texts and oral material of the religion. I will describe both the general iconography found on most displays as well as particular items used to mark specific Orisha paths, or individual encounters with the deities. I will look at the ways these altars are used to display religious, philosophical and theological concepts to knowledgeable observers so that these ideas can be passed down to subsequent generations of believers. I will use not only altars built by elders in the religion who have had many years to collect and synthesize their beliefs into such displays but also at those constructed by newly-made priests, those completing their iyawo year, whose displays incorporate the minimal level of iconographic content.
Walter J. Ong suggests that while literate cultures focus on the eye and sight as the primary means of communication, oral cultures depend on the ear and hearing not only to share information but as the primary site of thought and memory. That is, oral societies can only remember what can be formulaically constructed and spoken through song, story or proverb. However, much of what we know of early oral cultures are available to us not through their words, which disappeared at the moment of speech, but through the various items through which they encoded their lives and stories. Oral cultures use both internal sight, that is the creation of mental pictures, and external sight, iconography, as additional sources of memory and thought. Thus we reconstruct ancient cultures through their material culture, the artistic and religious artifacts left behind.

Contemporary Santería is a pocket of orality in a literate culture. It is based on a primarily oral African society and, in spite of its intermingling with the literate society of colonial Cuba, it has maintained its oral nature into the twentieth century. Although the majority of Santería practitioners are literate in at least one language, the tenets of the religion are conveyed to new practitioners through oral rather than written media. Myths and stories told during divination events and in front of elaborately constructed altars convey to the newcomer as well as the elder many of the philosophical and theological principles of the religion. Through the use of color, the placement of objects, and the overall iconography of any particular altar display priests express a detailed and sophisticated but often idiosyncratic understanding of their religious path. For those who are trained to read them and for those

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24 Robert Farris Thompson makes a similar point when he says: “However privileged the ear in verbal cultures, it has always been true that man has lived by his eyes” (Thompson 1971, 3/6).
willing to explicate them to others altars serve as a reminder of the essential elements of belief, a visual catechism.

McDannell tells us "[m]aterial culture in itself has no intrinsic meaning of its own. Objects or landscapes are understood and gain significance when their 'human' elements can be deciphered. Objects become meaningful within specific patterns of relationships. It is only through an examination of the historical and present context of material culture that it can be 'read'" (McDannell 1995, 3–4). She goes on to say that particular religious artifacts can only be recognized if one is familiar with the iconography of the religious group and with its history and rituals (4). Although the meanings attributed to religious objects may be directed and controlled by an institutional body, even within Christian traditions, McDannell tells us that "[s]uch meanings, however, do not always help us understand the personal meanings that people find in their daily use of religious objects. Individual meanings do not merely mirror the intentions of a clerical elite or express the idiosyncratic whims of the masses" (17). Rather she suggests that meaning is constructed by individuals as "theological and cultural 'tools' to build responses to their own spiritual, psychological, and social longings" (17). As we shall see, in an environment with no real cultural elite or institutional control, this sort of individualism has been foregrounded even in the presence of certain informal guidelines. While no hard and fast rules exist for the construction of altars and the use of objects, certain limits exist within the tradition (Flores-Peña and Evanchuk 1994, 30). Using these rules as a type of grammar priests build altars that make sense to both themselves and others, altars that we can use as an entering wedge into the theology of this religion.
In justifying her study of material Christianity, McDannell says that not only has the material dimension of American Christianity been ignored because of dualistic notions of sacred and profane but also by the privileging of certain kinds of religious expression over others. She suggests that scholars believe that "meaningful" Christianity can best be defined by religious specialists and that the purchase, construction or use of religious objects is deemed less spiritual or authentic than the study of theology, the participation in reform movements or the involvement in church leadership. Those who use non-literary means of expressing their ideas about the supernatural and its relationship to the everyday have not been considered fully "adult" Christians. Christians who use objects or images in their devotional lives or who feel that certain places are imbued with special powers, are seen as needing spiritual helps or crutches. These "weak" Christians who require physical "aids" are separated from "strong Christians who grasp spiritual truths directly" (McDannell 1995, 8).

She suggests, using Jon Butler's research, that "the study of American religions has been hobbled by the discriminate application of the Puritan model" which overemphasized "the Word," "privileged the ear over the eye, hearing over seeing, the word over the image, and the book over the statue" (13) and assumed that the illiterate or improperly trained "frequently mistake the image of the divine for the divine itself" (10). I will suggest that what has hobbled the study of Christianity (and by extension other religions based on written sources) has doubly hobbled the study of religions without a grounding in a written scripture. I will explore a wide range of sources focusing on both ear and eye, word and image, scripture and statue. Although Santería may properly be called an idolatrous religion—among all the objects displayed on an altar the physical presence of the deities are believed to be
embodied within particular objects—there is a clear understanding among
the practitioners that most objects represent the deity and are not divine
themselves. I will explore how the deities are both present and represented
on these altars and the ways practitioners distinguish between these two types
of objects.25

Analytic Tools

Several analytical tools present themselves for the study of the
material culture of Santería including those of iconology, semiology, dialogic
and orality. I have chosen among these tools as appropriate for looking at
various aspects of this phenomenon.

Iconology

Before it is possible to attempt any other type of analysis each instance
of material culture needs to be described both as it is in itself and in situ,
within its environment. For each element one must first observe the item
itself, then see it in relationship to the other items surrounding it and finally
one must apply what one knows about the cultural background of the
religion in general as well as the background of the particular individual who
constructed this altar. Erwin Panofsky (Panofsky 1972) provides the basic
process for this kind of analysis.26 The first step in looking at iconological
objects, Panofsky suggests, the pre-iconographic description, requires the
observer to describe the object, whether a work of art or religious artifact, in
exacting detail. Using Vermeer’s A Lady Weighing Gold as his example,
Roelof van Straten says “we see: ‘a woman in an interior space, standing by a

25 This terminology of “present” and “representation” comes from Rosaline Hackett’s
analysis of the relationship between art and religion in Africa (Hackett 1996).

26 However this description of the method draws heavily on Roelof van Straten (van
Straten 1994, 15) whom I find to present a clearer, more straight-forward description of
Panofsky’s method.
table...". The second step, *iconographical description*, involves putting this object into a class with other, similar, objects. "The picture belongs to the iconographic type of 'woman weighing gold or money.'" The next step in the process, *iconographical interpretation*, requires us to assign iconographic meanings to what we have described and classified: "A Lady Weighing Gold is a personification of Divine Justice." The final step, *iconological interpretation*, deals with the question of why the artist chose this subject and this representation (van Straten 1994, 15).

Panofsky suggests that during the first step of the analysis one can identify natural or primary meanings inherent in the motifs used by the artist while in the second step one can recognize how the artist uses these natural motifs to develop particular themes or concepts (Panofsky 1972, 5–6). However as we begin doing cross- or inter-cultural analysis we may be forced to delay even the recognition of natural motifs until later in the analytic process since motifs that are "natural" for the artist may be foreign to us and not as easily recognizable as Panofsky suggests. The final two steps, which I have conflated into a single step called *interpretation*, is where the in-depth analysis of the object takes place. Here we can interrogate both the tradition and the individual for the meaning and place of this object within the religious experience. By calling on our knowledge of the iconographic traditions in which it is placed as well as the cultural background(s) it represents we can begin to interpret an object's meaning and place.

A second tool we can use in looking at the objects is the work that has been done in analyzing other iconographic objects including Eastern Orthodox Christian icons and African religious and non-religious art. Until the advent of graphical computer interfaces the most common understanding of the term "icon" was as a description of the religious pictures that have a
prominent place in the life and worship of Eastern Orthodox Churches. John Baggley in his analysis of some of these pictures, *Doors of Perception: Icons and Their Spiritual Significance*, says that the word “icon” comes from the Greek word meaning image. This is the same word that is used in the Greek translation of *Genesis* to describe man as made in the image of God and by Paul when he speaks to the Colossians of Jesus Christ as being the image of the invisible God (Baggley 1987, 1, Weitzmann 1978, 7). Baggley suggests that icons are doors through which we can pass into the divine realm, “a meeting place of divine grace and human need,” as well as into our own interior life (Baggley 1987, 4). As Christianity moved from the Holy Land to the wider Mediterranean area, he suggests that it used not only words but also images to provide an “experience of God’s presence in Christ” to its followers (Baggley 1987, 9). In this way the “language of iconography, like the language of Scriptures and the dogma of the Church, [became] part of the Churches spiritual tradition” (Baggley 1987, 13) so that man could be lead to a deep spiritual life through a variety of channels.

Religious art in other traditions serves the same type of functions. It leads the viewer, whether devotee or outside observer, to a meeting with the divine and the inner experience of the gods. As we will see in this analysis, a language of iconography can provide a doorway into a deeper understanding of many theological concepts.

**Semiology**

Umberto Eco defines the field of semiotics as concerned with “everything that can be taken... as significantly substituting for something else” whether that something else actually exists or not. He also says that as a discipline semiotics studies “everything which can be used in order to lie” (Eco 1976, 7). He uses a variant of Ferdinand de Saussure’s definition of sign
as composed of signifier and signified, renaming the two elements *signvehicle* and *meaning* (14). While, according to Eco, Saussure was unclear in defining the signified, Eco himself tries to define it as widely as possible without the use of Platonic forms by suggesting that "every time a human group decides to use and to recognize something as the vehicle of something else" a sign is present (17). Thus a message is the transmission of a sign-vehicle (signifier) in order to communicate its corresponding meaning (signified) (Eco 1976, 54). However, he suggests, any single sign-vehicle may be interpreted according to a diverse set of codes according to the cultural context of both the sender and the addressee so that the message may in fact be a text containing multiple levels of discourse (57).

Because he has rejected Platonic ideas of eternal forms, Eco bases his understanding of the signified on society and the languages it creates. Thus he suggests that signs are constructed by societies and are linked to the cultural order in which they arise so that rather then expressing some sort of eternal or ideal form they are merely conventions established by a group in order to communicate within that group. Thus for each sign we must define the referent (the signified) in terms of the cultural context in which we find it without resorting to any idea of a 'real' object of meaning. Eco suggests that meaning is a *cultural unit* that distinguishes a "person, place, thing, feeling, state of affairs, sense of foreboding, fantasy, hallucination, hope or idea" (66–67). This cultural relativism leads to a series of infinite regressions as each referent (signified) can become the signifier of some other cultural unit (69). Thus although we can discuss the referent for a particular sign-vehicle, it is always possible to look behind that referent to another referent. There is implied an infinite chain of signifiers without any ultimate, final, absolute signified to which they refer. Within this semiotic system sign-vehicles can
refer to each other and be, in a certain sense, self-referent. (For example, /salt/ signifies «sodium chloride» but in another context /sodium chloride/ can just as easily refer to «salt».) This fluidity between the signifiers and their signifieds is necessary because “culture continuously translates signs into other signs, and definitions into other definitions, words into icons, icons into ostensive signs, ostensive signs into new definitions, new definitions into prepositional functions, prepositional functions into exemplifying sentences and so on” (Eco 1976, 71). This complicates our analysis of a particular system of signs because the only way we can analyze a cultural unit is through the use of other cultural units — it is impossible to step outside of our cultural context in order to view either our own signs or those produced by others. Thus we need to be continually aware that at some very high level every series of signs is self-referent and their description is circular (Eco 1976, 121f).

Eco’s definition of semiotics and signs challenges our assertion that the objects found on Santería altars are really signs. Do these artifacts really form a language we can use to understand this religion? Can we use a theory of language to analyze non-verbal systems? Using Eco’s own definition of a sign as something that can substitute for something else and that can be used to tell a lie, I would propose that much of the material culture of Santería consists of signs because almost everything represents something else. More significantly some of these signs have a history of being used to lie. I’m

\[\text{\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{27}}Eco uses the conventions in which single slashes indicated something intended as a sign-vehicle while guillemets indicate something intended as content so that /salt/ is the sign-vehicle for «salt» (Eco 1976, xi).}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{28}An example of a semiotic lie is the coyote’s cry Indians emit in Western movies. To the Indians the sound of the coyote is an arbitrary device designed to transmit information while to the White “it is a fictive sample produced in order to mean «coyote» (instead of «Indian»)” (Eco 1976, 304 fn. 26). We will find similar “lies” in the semiotic universe of Santería.}}\]
referring of course of the appropriation of Catholic and other European imagery to represent African deities and religious concepts. Homes festooned with Catholic saints suggest the presence of a devote follower of Christianity. This is both a truth and a falsehood—while these people may sincerely believe in their own Christianity, they are also practitioners of Santería and in their homes are also altars for African deities.29

By pointing out a way to analyze cultural units within a system of signs, Eco gives us with a valuable tool for looking past the object to its referents, to the chain of signifiers. By explaining the self-referential nature of signs he cautions us to look beyond the surface or most obvious connection between the object and referent to the chain that has developed even though our analysis may lead us back to the original object in an endless ring of signification.

**Dialogic and Heterologic Elements**

A syncretic religion is one that combines different forms of beliefs and practices into a fusion of two or more originally different forms. Santería and its sister religions (Vodon, Candomblé, etc.) are often cited as examples of syncretistic religions because they appear to be a synthesis between “African aboriginal patterns” and “the European traditions to which they have been exposed” (Murphy 1993, 120–121 quoting Herskovits). Joseph M. Murphy critiques Herskovits’s unreflexive view of these religions suggesting that it misses the “creative and self-conscious decisions that underlie [S]antería syncretism” (121). He believes that the religious practitioners of Santería see through the Catholic elements, particularly the images of the saints, to the

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29In another example of semiotic lying, I was told that some santeros exchange two Orisha, moving the fundamentos (sacred objects) of one into the vessel of the other, thus camouflaging the Orisha even from their fellow practitioners (Personal communication, Ewin Leti, 12/30/87).
Orisha behind them, that the saints allow the santero to live in both an African and a European world and build a bridge between their public and private religions (121). He also cites Roger Bastide who calls the juxtaposition of these different cultural expressions an example of a “mosaic syncretism” and Leslie Desmangles who suggests that the word “symbiosis” best describes the way in which African and Catholic elements can coexist without merging (121–122). He suggests that what “began as a pretense of Catholic worship...gradually became [a] religious mosaic...a careful organization of Yorùbá and Catholic elements into a meaningful whole” (123). He thinks that the santeros became bilingual, bicultural and bireligious, that they were able to “think” in Lucumi (Yoruba) and “speak” in either “Orisha” or “saint” depending on the context (124). Murphy suggests that the creation of Santería was an “elegant, creative and clever” act of religious accommodation to a hostile world (124).

Although the use of the term “syncretic” to define a religion is often considered derogatory, proclaiming it creative is a common contemporary response intended to commend its developers. I would suggest, however, that the Africans who formed Santería out of a variety of religious elements were not just bilingual but masters of a multivocal discourse that extended back to mythical time and forward to the present. The Orisha cults as they existed in Africa were already the products of a synthesis, a juxtaposition and an integration between a wealth of indigenous elements, thus the formulation of a new religion in the New World that included not only Catholic elements but other European elements was a natural Yoruba response to their forced migration. And that process of dialog continues today. As natives of the United States, particularly non-Hispanics who have been involved in non-
Catholic and non-Christian religions, join the religion we are seeing a further evolution of religious forms.\footnote{Phillip Scher's discussion of the way Hindu elements have incorporated into Orisha religion in Trinidad provides a provocative example of just such an evolution in a sister tradition (Scher 1997 [1989]) #304.}

M. M. Bakhtin’s ideas of hybrid speech provides the best tool for deconstructing the polyvocal elements of Santería. In his analysis of novels Bakhtin suggests that the author’s voice is present in varying degrees: in the descriptions of activities and characterizations of the major players in the novel but also as a “second accent” underlying the characters’ own direct speech. This second accent may express the author’s response to the character and his actions and may be ironic, irritated or whatever (Bakhtin 1981, 319). He defines \textit{hybridization} as a “mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor” (358). This hybridity allows two or more voices to “speak” at the same time within the novel so there may be a dialog between not only the various characters but also between the individual characters and the author himself (320).

Bakhtin defines \textit{heteroglossia} as “another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way.” Within the novel heteroglossia expresses two different intentions, that of the character who is speaking and the author whose intent underlies the character’s speech. This puts the character and the author in dialog with each other while expressing “two voices, two world views, two languages” (324). One of the most important aspects of this hybridity and heteroglossia is that they represent dialogues between “two individualized language consciousnesses...two individual language-intentions” (359) so that the dialog
is “not only double-voiced and double-accented...but also double-language” representing two individual consciousnesses that have “come together and consciously fight it out on the territory of the utterance” (360).

Using Bakhtin’s terminology I will suggest that Santería is both a hybridization, a mixture of several ritual and religious languages combined dialogically into a single ritual system and an example of heteroglossia, the use of another’s speech in another’s language. Like many “folk” indigenous traditions, Santería has incorporated a wide variety of genres into its religious vocabulary. These genres include not only the stories, songs and dances from Yorubaland but also images, decor, songs and religious elements from Spanish and other European sources. As we shall see these incorporated genres are especially prevalent in the iconography associated with the Orisha. But the European elements, for the most part, are an overlay, a juxtaposition that allows Yoruba and European components to exist together. Thus we find two interlocking dialogues: that between the various Yoruba elements and that between the African and European elements. And there are differences between these two dialogues. Because the African elements are hybridized into a common language they have become part of a single new language. At the same time, European elements placed in a heteroglossic relationship remain juxtaposed, but not fully integrated into the language system. Understanding how these differences are played out will become important as we begin to look at conflicting mythological and iconographic elements. For each of the Orisha there is a multitude of stories each of which enlarges or contradicts the others. It is through these stories that the various ideological positions of the story-tellers are revealed and the community continues its hybridization. I use Bakhtin’s work most fruitfully in Chapter 3 when I look
at the development of Santería altar displays from African and European precedents.

What Bakhtin calls a frame, François Hartog, in The Mirror of Herodotus, describes as a grid. He actually suggests that the term grid can be understood in two different ways. First of all, he suggest that there is a grid of shared knowledge between the author and the reader that organizes and explains the symbolic meaning of the narrative. He compares this shared knowledge to the frame of threads or lines a watercolorist uses to organize his painting. Although the grid is invisible in the final work it shapes and controls the placement and organization of the entire work. Thus the symbolic meaning assigned by Herodotus in his description of the Scythians depends upon the shared knowledge of Scythians among the Greeks of the fifth century B.C. (Hartog 1988, 320). Because of this invisible grid, Hartog suggests that after we finish reading the Histories we know more about the Greeks and what they think about the Scythians than we do about the Scythians themselves (367). At the same time, seminal works like Herodotus’s Histories become institutions in their fields so that the work itself is used as a grid through which subsequent work is viewed (339). Thus the frame (grid) of a narrative is not only affected by its place in the shared language and knowledge base of the individuals involved (including the audience) but it also affects subsequent work, adding to the institutional grids available to future dialogs.

In looking at the elements of Santería we will begin to see the shifting grids that structure the religion: African village life and the realities of lineage and empire, the dislocation of slavery and the ways in which African beliefs and practices were reconstituted in the New World, the later dislocations of emigration north from Cuba to Miami, New York and Houston and finally
the newest grid whose lines are still being drawn with the movement of the religion into the lives of middle-class Afro- and Euro-Americans. In each case shared knowledge is changed in dialog with changing political, economic and social forces. Many newcomers are bringing a new vocabulary, a new language and a new grid to the religion. These searchers, having already come out of a European tradition, may have experimented with Neo-Pagan, Asian or Native American religious systems and bring those new voices and accents with them. At the same time the increased interest of scholars is providing a new, or expanded, institutional grid against which not only scholarly work but also the interactions among practitioners is evaluated. Many are coming to the religion with a “book” knowledge of practices that may or may not match the practices of the community they are endeavoring to join.

The ideas of Bakhtin and Hartog will be extremely important as we begin to explore the chains of signifiers within Santería. We will need to look for both the hybridized and heteroglossic elements as well as the frame(s) that shapes those elements into a common symbolic language. Both hybridized and heteroglossic dialogs are present and we need to be aware of both. Bakhtin says that each person’s ideological development is an on-going struggle for hegemony among a variety of ideological points of view (Bakhtin 1981, 345). I will suggest similarly that the dialog within the religion and between the religion and the outside community will continue as long as there are new contexts, new voices and new ideologies moving into the discourse. Thus I will suggest that hegemony is impossible, that the language of Santería will continue to be heteroglot as long as it moves in the intersection between a variety of religious dialects. That these dialects themselves are hybridizations of earlier discourses means that the dialog
cannot be integrated, can not be synthesized but must always be open to the possibility of new discourses with new dialog partners.

**Orality**

Studies of orality (Ong 1982, Tyler 1978, 18) generally suggest that the oral world is focused on the aural while the literate world uses the visual. However my observation of Santería seems to indicate that the visual as well as the aural are used as communication media. In this case aural includes drumming and singing as well as story-telling and divination. Visual includes altar displays and costumes. Additional elements outside of the aural/visual dichotomy include ritual structures, taboos, hierarchy, fictive familial relationships and the like. Because much of the aural is communicated in Yoruba or Spanish, one or both of which are alien to the new practitioner, visual as well as kinesthetic elements\(^{31}\) become important modes of communication. Thus I will suggest that Ong has overstated the reliance on orality in a non-literate environment. This is not meant to repudiate the theories of Ong and his followers, merely to open up our view of an oral culture. In fact the understanding of oral cultures provided by Ongian analysis has been quite helpful in the analysis of various elements of the culture of Santería.

**Methodology Consideration**

It is important at this point to bracket out certain areas that would appear to be of interest. These bracketed elements include a discussion of the ontology of the various beings will be describing. In this case I have followed an emic (insider) orientation, that is I will speak of the various gods, deities,

\(^{31}\) Non-Spanish speakers often find themselves “pushed” into a religious position with little or no explanation. Mason provides examples as well an excellent analysis of the kinesthetic elements of a ritual (Mason 1994).
and spirits identified by religious practitioners as if they were real actors without regard to questions of their ontological status according to other, perhaps more scientific, categories. In addition I have generally bracketed out an in-depth discussion of the psychological health (or lack thereof) of the participants in the various activities and rituals described. In general, I have assumed that these people are no more neurotic or psychotic than the general population and that this religion serves the same types of general spiritual needs as do more "mainstream" religions. Lastly, I have bracketed out questions of religious authenticity. That is I have not questioned whether this religion is more or less "true" than other living religions; whether its gods and deities are more or less "real" than the gods and deities of other religious systems; whether this spiritual path is more or less legitimate than other spiritual paths. Although these questions of ontology, psychology and theology are all worthy of further exploration they are outside the scope of my project and have generally been avoided.

A second area I have bracketed is any analysis of practitioners' "experience" of this religion. There are two reasons for this decision. The first lies in the previous studies of the religion itself. Since most of this work has been done by anthropologists, sociologists and the like, most of the literature focuses on the observable characteristics of this religion with little analysis on the personal subjective mental events or inner processes of the practitioners. The second is perhaps more important to the future understanding of this religion and its followers. Internal, mystical or subjective experience is not valorized in the communities with which I have

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32See Robert H. Sharf’s critique of the category of experience in the study of religion. He suggests that making the inner experience of religious practitioners a category in the study of religion is "ill conceived" because religious experiences as generally understood (internal, mystical, ineffable) is, by definition, "nonobjective, that which resists all signification" (Sharf 1998, 111, 113).
worked. This is not to deny that individuals may have intense personal experiences but that they are rarely discussed and given little credence in the communities. A simple example may suffice to describe this attitude. There is a point during the initiation ritual where many initiates are touched by the spirit of the personal deity (the Orisha that owns their head, see below for fuller descriptions of these concepts). This 'touch' may include full possession trance or something less. If this happens the focus of ritual attention is on the presenting Orisha—no one seems concerned about the internal experience of the initiate during this event. Although this may be a mystical experience for the initiate, there is no discussion later of his or her 'feelings' at that time. What is discussed is an analysis of the external event: messages from the Orisha to the initiate are delivered, a description of the event—in the case of less than full possession a statement like "Yemaya really threw you around" suffices to recognize the event. On the other hand, full or partial possession is not required for the efficacy of the ritual itself. An initiate that is not 'touched' does not have his or her initiation invalidated or questioned on that account. What is important is that the appropriate ritual activity has been performed by qualified ritual specialists. What is done is more important than what one experiences internally.

Another concern is the use of a wide range of materials. Much of the work describing colonial Spanish (and Portuguese) society focuses on Mexico, Peru and Brazil all of which were developed by Spain and Portugal one or two full centuries before Cuba. Although Cuba was one of the first New World settlements, it was a backwater until the nineteenth century when it

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33This is in opposition to Durkheim who says that rituals are "destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states" (Durkheim 1915, 22). Within Santeria, rituals may give rise to mental states, particularly trance, but that is not the primary reason for most ritual enactments.
became the powerhouse of the Spanish sugar trade. However, since James Lockhart and Stuart B. Schwartz assure us that many social and political organizations were not discernibly different in the colonies in the eighteenth-century than in the mother countries in the fifteenth century (Lockhart and Schwartz 1983, 1–2), I will assume that descriptions of other, earlier colonial societies and the Spanish mainland can be used as windows into Cuban society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries while acknowledging the differences and developments across time.

Much of the scholarship I have used comes from work done by anthropologists and ethnographers. Many of these authors faced a problem of terminology in our politically correct world. In his work on African tricksters, Robert D. Pelton highlights this problem by quoting the following passage from Finnegans’s *Oral Literature in Africa*:

> There is no truly suitable word to describe the kinds of people we are dealing with here. Primitive, traditional, premodern, preliterate, nonindustrial, savage, archaic, and non-Western have all been used, and all are inadequate—at best misleading, at worse simply false. “Traditional” seems most useful to me, widest in scope and least pejorative, and “primitive” by far the worst because of its overlapping meanings and its tone of cultural smugness (23, fn. 32).

Choosing an appropriate term for describing a culture that appears radically different from our own civilized, literate, (post)modern, industrial and Western one is not my primary challenge. Rather I have attempted to keep in mind that the practitioners of Santería described are fully functioning members of contemporary American society. They are teachers and business professional as well as laborers and small business owners. Many are bilingual. While many have only a minimal education others have earned baccalaureate and post-graduate degrees. The fact that they share beliefs and practices with groups characterized as “[p]rimitive, traditional, premodern, preliterate, nonindustrial” calls into question certain implicit and explicit
assumptions about the evolution of religious world views.\textsuperscript{34} Although the
issue of the legitimacy of such evolutionary theories of religion is outside the
scope of this project, it is necessary to keep in mind that many of the basic
premises of such theories are called into question here. If “traditional”
indicates as Werner Kelber suggests “something that is immutable and
resistant to change” (Kelber 1995, 152) then these people (both contemporary
practitioners and their Yoruba forebears) and their religious system is the very
antithesis of traditional. For, as we shall see, it is a willingness to adapt to
changing conditions while maintaining the fundamental elements of their
religious understanding that characterizes the practitioners of Santería.

The problem of using the work of anthropologists and others remains
however. Universally when describing societies like the pre-colonial Yoruba
these scholars imply that these societies are significantly less well-developed
than their own European culture. In the case of the Yoruba this is patently
untrue. As Murphy explains the Yoruba were “a great urban people who have
lived in cities for at least one thousand years. They have been master brass
and iron smiths, weavers and dyers, and carvers of some of the finest
sculpture arts in the world” (Murphy 1993, 7). Rather than attempting to
“correct” the usage of those authors who disparage these people to bring them
into line with contemporary thinking I have chosen to retain their
language—in spite of its often offensive nature. It is important to realize that
none of the various cultures whose religious and cultural practices I am

\textsuperscript{34}William James perhaps expresses most vividly why these religions are seldom
studied as if they were legitimate religions when he says “In the ‘prayerful communion’ of
savages with such mumbo-jumbos of deities as they acknowledge, it is hard for us to see what
genuine spiritual work—even though it were work relative only to their dark savage
obligations—can possibly be done.” (James 1985 (1902), 490).
analyzing are archaic, primitive, etc. All are highly developed and sophisticated.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{Participant-Observation}

In addition to reviewing the works of other scholars in the field, I have used participant-observation and interviews with practitioners to look at the ways the local Houston community uses and thinks about these issues. As an initiate myself I have participated in the construction of thrones and altars and have attended birthday parties, drummings and other ritual events. Several elders within the local community as well as members of a related house in New York have graciously given of their time to talk to me about their own practices as well as the religion in general. I have had access to a range of participants including Hispanic (Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, etc.), African- and European-American practitioners. Because the local community is small its members often invite practitioners from other areas, especially New York and Miami, to participate in rituals. In addition, local practitioners often travel to other communities to participate in ritual events. This means that the local community is in constant communication with other communities and is influenced by a variety of ritual houses.

In addition to the work done with the local community a short visit with members of a related house in New York city in the summer of 1998 confirmed much of the research conducted in Houston.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{35}For critiques of the use of such terms as archaic, primitive and the like see Tomoko Masuzawa, Marianna Torgovnick and Edith Wyschogrod (Masuzawa 1993, Torgovnick 1990, Wyschogrod 1997).

\textsuperscript{36}This research was funded by a summer travel grant from the Dean of Humanities, Rice University.
Review of the Literature

Colleen McDannell says that her goal in writing *Material Christianity* was an "understanding [of] American religious practice and thought through a close examination of the physical, sensual, corporeal, and phenomenal world." Since this "non-written text is also a language of expression of American life and culture" she suggests that we can learn to "read" these texts by paying attention to the objects themselves, their form, distribution, function, character, and environments; that is we can discover in them specific religious messages (McDannell 1995, 2). In the same way, I will suggest that the material culture of Santería provides us with a rich text that we can use to discover specific religious messages meaningful to the practitioners of this religion. A survey of the literature indicates that although there is a wide-spread interest in the religion on the part of scholars in a variety of fields very little has been written about the religion from a religious studies standpoint or of its material culture as expressive of the religious beliefs and practices of its adherents.

Garden in the Machine

David Hilary Brown’s 1989 dissertation for Yale University, *Garden in the Machine: Afro-Cuban Sacred Art and Performance in Urban New Jersey and New York*, may have been one of the primary moving forces in my decision to focus on Santería altar displays. In attempting to fill a lacuna he found in the literature, he gave us the basis for further research. Chapter 7, "Thrones of the Orichas: Altars, Artistry and Ritual performance in La Regla de Ocha,"37 describes not only the design of the major types of altar displays but also explores the relationship between these altars and the other types of

37Brown has reworked and published portions of this chapter along with Chapter 1 in the October 1993 issue of *Africa Arts* (Brown 1993).
sacred and royal displays early practitioners may have used as models for the
development of their own religious displays. Brown suggests that the styles
and materials used by the eighteenth century Spanish royal court and the
Catholic Church were incorporated into the design and materials used in
Santería thrones and altars (Brown 1989, 379–80). Santería thrones\textsuperscript{38} are built
in conjunction with three religious events: the initiation of a new priest, the
party celebrating the anniversary of that initiation, and the drumming
ceremony held in honor of an Orisha. Although all three types of thrones
incorporate the same basic design, Brown suggests that the initiation throne
stands as the prototype for the other two. All three thrones frame and
structure temporary religious space and serve as monuments to particular
milestones in the life of their makers. All serve as conduits for exchange
between the visible world of the practitioner and the invisible world of the
Orisha (381–82). Of the three thrones the birthday throne erected every year to
celebrate the anniversary of one’s initiation provides an on-going site for
religious expression. Each year a new throne is constructed using not only
materials from the previous year but new items acquired during the ensuing
time. In addition, as new Orisha are received by the celebrating priest their
symbols must be added to the display (414–15).

While basic rules govern the design of the altar space and the
organization of the Orisha and their symbols within that space, each
practitioner’s understanding of the mythological or ritual relationships
between the particular Orisha represented (along with, of course, practical
space considerations) govern their placement (415). In addition to the pots
and containers that are home to the Orisha themselves, the altar also contains

\textsuperscript{38} Although the term “throne” is the most commonly used term within the religion to
describe these displays both the terms “altar” and “throne” are used interchangeably in the
literature.
various objects which express the qualities of those Orisha (219). These objects may be acquired by the priest himself, or they may be received as gifts from godchildren or other members of the religious family (470).

Brown also discusses the fruits and sweets placed on the altar “at the foot of the Orichas”. These cool sweet foods metaphorically suggest the priest’s desire for a cool house and a sweet year (430). Here again we find particular items associated with particular Oricha although Brown provides only a cursory description of the relationships between the Oricha and their favorite foods (430–31). John Mason and Gary Edwards’s Onje Fún Òrisa; Food for the Gods (Mason and Edwards 1981) provides additional insight into these relationships. Mason and Edwards offer descriptions of the characteristics of the sixteen most popular Orisha, a list of the favorite foods for each and sample recipes. In many cases Mason and Edwards provide insight into the types of foods favored by an Orisha. For example they say that Eleggua “loves sweet and spicy foods” which represents his childishness and lust for life (47) while “Obàtálá’s food is cooked without salt or seasoning” (64) since he is old and unable to stomach highly seasoned or difficult to digest foods (60).

Although Brown provides some insights into the signs and symbols used on Santería altars, he focuses more of his discussion on the historical background of the altar design. From him we learn that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries “china” (porcelain) soup tureens, both as part of the China-export trade and from European-centered manufacture, were prized objects in Cuban homes of all classes and thus they provided an alternative to

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39Eleggua, Ogun, Ochosi, Osanyin, Obatala, Shango, Aganyu, Ibeji, Orisha Oko, Erinle, Olokun, Babalu-Aiyé, Yemaya, Oshun, Oya, Obba.
40We will look into some of these food signifiers in Chapter 4.
the traditional African calabash as the home for New World Oricha (450). He also clearly shows the relationship between Santería altars and the styles of Spanish royal edifices and wealthy residences (453f) as well as Catholic church and home altars (456f). From this discussion we can begin to appreciate the ways in which European elements became recontextualized into “signs for the greater glory of the Lucumí orichas” (458–59). I am continuing Brown’s discussion and moving beyond his work to explicate what those recontextualization signs represent in the context of religious belief.

In his chapter on sacred domestic space (Chapter 5 “Igbodún (‘Sacred Festival Grove’): Sacred Domestic Space in La Regla de Ocha”) Brown cites Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett who suggests several questions for urban folklorists and ethnographers to ask about sacred urban space and geography including “How do [people] appropriate and rework mass-produced commodities and shape the built environment?” (Brown 1989, 255–56 256 citing “The Future of Folklore Studies in America: The Urban Frontier,” Folklore Forum, Vol. 16, #1 (Winter 1983), esp. 183–185). Although his chapter looks at a variety of ways space is redefined, by focusing only on the altars built within personal interior space I am narrowing Brown’s field of inquiry. One of the first concepts that his description of Santería ritual space calls into question is the concept of sacred and profane.41 Because a variety of sacred objects and images are usually distributed throughout the home of the priest they must coexist with the mundane objects of living including beds, toilets, stereos and toasters. As spirits and Orisha are incorporated into the nuclear family their sacred implements, images and iconography are integrated into the domestic living area (257). At the same time different

41Of course the ideas of Mircea Eliade (Eliade 1987) and Emile Durkheim (Durkheim 1915) are important here.
classes of spirits require separation from each other and from certain human functions and spaces. Brown described in detail how this separation is negotiated in a variety of individual homes. What has been important for me is the understanding that because the practice of Santería traditionally has had no separate physical location, no church, synagogue or mosque, the homes of practitioners must serve as sacred space. In addition as one moves through the cycle of ritual celebration, different areas of the home may be temporarily redefined as sacred.

One element of domestic space that we may find of interest because of the way it is used to conceptualize ideas of inside/outside, us/them, home/world is the threshold. Brown discusses these concepts using the work of Mircea Eliade and Mary Douglas (Douglas 1980) but doesn’t discuss the ways in which different Orisha are associated not only with the threshold itself but with locations on either side of it (Brown 1989, 261–62). Thresholds and the boundaries they demarcate are important not only to domestic space but also when ritual space is created. During the initiation ritual, the initiate crosses several boundaries on his way from one life to another (Brown 1989, 275f). The first birthday altar also marks a transition from one state to another while the altar itself demarcates sacred space within the ordinary space of the priest’s home. Issues of threshold in respect to the Orisha are discussed in Chapter 4 while the threshold crossed as part of the initiation experience is included in Chapter 5.

**Santería Garments and Altars**

In 1994 Ysamur Flores-Peña and Roberta J. Evanchuk published *Santería Garments and Altars: Speaking without a Voice* describing religious altars and the consecration garments worn by initiates (Flores-Peña and Evanchuk 1994). This book adds to the conversation begun by Brown. In his
portion of the book, which describes the consecration garments, Flores suggests that all the elements of a ceremony should educate the observer, communicate the myths and stories, transmit the values of the religion, and describe the characteristics of the Orisha (15). He explains that the stories that summarize the culture of the religion are contained in the Ifa and Diloggun divination verses (16) and that each garment should tell a story from that corpus (17). Thus he associates a garment with a particular road (Sp. camino, version or advocation) of the Orisha and its corresponding story (18, 19, 21–22). As many Orisha have multiple roads and all are involved in a wide range of stories, each outfit can reveal a different aspect of the Orisha.

Flores describes two other “garments” or ceremonial clothes associated with the Orisha. The first of these are the paños or cloths used to cover the pots of the Orisha. These are brightly decorated squares of cloth that are often draped over or around the pots holding the Orisha. Like the clothing described earlier, paños also can tell the stories and describe the characteristics of the Orisha they represent (24). Finally, various types of beaded jewelry are used in the religion. Flores talks specifically about mazos (Sp. bunch, bundle), the large and heavy ceremonial necklaces that are generally only worn as part of the initiation ceremony. Like the paños, mazos are draped over the pots of the Orisha and serve as decoration for the Orisha themselves (24–25). Although Flores includes examples of both paños and mazos in his illustrations he leaves the interpretations of each example to our imaginations. I will begin an interpretation of these items in Chapter 4 when I look at the iconography of particular Orisha.

Although Flores grew up in the religion his co-author Evanuchuk discovered it while studying for her doctorate in folklore and mythology (5). Like many who come to the religion as adults, Evanuchuk was drawn to the
altars or thrones (27). She describes a variety of such altars, focusing as I will
do, on altars built for birthday celebrations. A large portion of her material
describes the process of altar building particularly how material is assembled
and prepared. She uses as examples a variety of altars including a birthday
altar constructed for Oya (29f), an initiation altar for Oshun (34–35) and two
different birthday altars for Oshun (36–37). She describes to some degree how
the various elements are used to encode the characteristics the altar-builders
want to convey about the Orisha being honored. The final altar she describes
was built by a priest of Shango to commemorate the United States Supreme
Court decision upholding the right to slaughter animals for religious
reasons.42 This altar was built by Ernesto Pichardo, the priest whose
congregation was the focus of that decision (637). In this case the altar, rather
than telling a particular story of Shango, exemplifies in fabric the name of his
priest, Oba Irawo (“king of the stars”), a praise name for Shango (38).

Evanchuk also discusses issues of ceremonial dress. She suggests that
generally participants wear white since the Orisha favor it “because of its
strong positive power (ashé).” However she also says that often priests wear
the colors of their patron Orisha (32). She also mentions but does not describe
the necklaces and bracelets worn by those with various levels of commitment
to the religion (33). Although the work of both Peña-Flores and Evanchuk
provide interesting openings into the symbolism of the garments and altars
the brevity of their work precludes in-depth analysis.

42 On Friday June 11, 1993 the United States Supreme Court overturned a Florida city’s
ban on animal sacrifice. Ruling unanimously that the ban breached the constitutional right to
the free exercise of religion the court said that the city of Hialeah’s laws forbidding the ritual
sacrifice of chickens, lambs, goats and other animals unfairly targeted adherents of the
Santería religion (Greenhouse 1993).
The Dead Sell Memories and Others

Among the resources Brown lists for information about Orisha altars and thrones is George Brandon’s Rutgers University dissertation, *The Dead Sell Memories*. Other Spanish language sources cited by Brown are Cabrera’s *Yemaya y Ochun*, (176–179), and Huguet’s, “La Casa-Templo en La Regla de Ocha,” Gêmez Agreus, “Estudio de un Casa-Templo” (122–123). Cabrera’s work based on research done in pre-Castro Cuba describes the initiation ceremony in detail. The portion of Cabrera’s work referenced by Brown actually describes the so called “Middle Day” presentation of a newly initiated priest and the initiation throne. She only devotes one short paragraph to the initiation anniversary and does not describe any sort of altar display (Cabrera 1980, 232). He also cites several catalogs of art exhibits highlighting these displays from an art rather than ethnographic context (Brown 1989, 377–78). Robert Ferris Thompson’s catalog for the traveling exhibit of displays *Face of the Gods* exhibit, although not referenced by Brown, also provides information about the history and design of various types of altar displays in both Africa and the New World.

Before begining to look at the material culture of Santería it will be helpful to have a quick overview of the history of this religion. In the next chapter I will look at the culture of the Yoruba focusing where possible on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries looking for precedents to contemporary Santería beliefs and practices; then I will look at colonial and post-colonial Cuba to see how the religion was recreated in the New World; finally I will follow it north to the United States focusing on the origin and development of the Houston community. In Chapter 3 I will visit a group of birthday thrones and other altars. Using Bakhtin’s theories of dialogic interrogation I will look at the ways in which contemporary thrones and
altars form a palimpsest of African, European and America elements. In Chapter 4 I will look more deeply at particular altars and deconstruct the displays of several Orisha. In that chapter I will look in depth at the iconography surrounding six Orisha: Obatala, Shango, Yemaya, Oshun, Ogun and Eleggua. In Chapter 5 I will look at the new priest in training, the iyawo, focusing on the ways he is made into a mobile sacred site. Finally, in Chapter 6 I will tie these threads together.
Chapter 2
The Religion

"My curse be on ye for your disloyalty and disobedience, so let your children disobey you. If you send them on an errand, let them never return to bring you word again. To all the points I shot my arrows will ye be carried as slaves. My curse will carry you to the sea and beyond the seas, slaves will rule over you, and you their masters will become slaves." (Prince Adebo)\(^1\)

Whenever two cultural or religious systems interact they are changed.\(^2\)

These changes are not merely reactions to an alien culture but creative responses to them. Such creativity transforms an old idea into a new one while maintaining much of the previous structure (Lawson 1984, 76). The history of Santería is a history of creative response to an on-going interaction between and among alien cultures.

The Yoruba peoples of west Africa were one of the most urban of the traditional civilizations of Africa. Their cities date back to the middle ages well before the period of European penetration (Bascom 1969, 3, 8). Art produced there between the 10th and 12th centuries was far superior to any produced in Europe at the same time. However, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries the Yoruba peoples waged a series of wars with their neighbors

\(^1\)(Johnson 1960 (1921), 192). It is believed that because of this curse placed upon the Yoruba people by one of their kings, they were enslaved and brought to the New World.

\(^2\)In this description of the development of the religion I am particularly indebted to George Brandon and Joseph Murphy (Brandon 1993, Murphy 1993).
and among themselves.³ One of the results of these wars was the enslavement of multitudes destined for the Americas.⁴ But before we look forward to the results of that enslavement, we need to look backward to the social milieu of 19th century Africa.

The standard understanding of pre-colonial Yoruba religious practice among both scholars and practitioners is that each city-state focused its ritual attention on a single Orisha: Shango in Oyo, Oshun in Osogbo, etc. (Bastide 1971, 115–116, Curry 1997, 124–25, Edwards and Mason 1985, iv, Maugé 1993, 4, Murphy 1993, 113). Among scholars, J. Lorand Matory (Matory 1994) and Andrew Apter (Apter 1992) present a more complex relationship between the various Orisha and their worship groups. Matory’s work focuses on the place of the priests of Shango in the political workings of pre-colonial Yoruba society. Although Apter’s research also focuses on political rather than religious issues, his history of a single Yoruba town traces for us the history of its religious groups and opens a vista into nineteenth-century religion among the Yoruba. Through both of these works we see the way the different cult groups interacted to form a polyvocal multivalent religious environment in the African context prior to European influences. This is important in that it calls into question the view that the religion of Santería developed its own multivalent and polyvocal form only in response to the Spanish colonial environment and slavery.

³Yoruba is a European term describing a group of West African people belonging to a single language group. The Africans named themselves according to their city of origin. The designation “Yoruba” includes those associated with Oyo, Egba, Egbado, Ijesa, Kuebu, Ekiti, Nago, and other ethnic groups. In the literature the term “Yoruba proper” refers to the people of Oyo. Although the Yoruba can be divided into several cultural subgroups that have linguistic, social and religious differences. In the Americas these differences were mitigated as the people reconstructed their lives in an alien environment (Bascom 1969, 5, Mason 1996, 74, Olupona 1991, 14).

⁴Of course European involvement in West African began much earlier. The Portuguese reached the Congo in 1481 (Williams 1984, 13).
The grand founding myth of Yoruba culture focuses on the city of Ile-Ife where, according to the “historical” record embedded in the sacred Ifa corpus, the Orisha first descended from the heavens (Apter 1992, 26). Quoting Robin Horton, Apter says that after the fifteenth century the city of Ife was the center of the Ifa divination priesthood and as such it exercised region-wide political influence of an “elder-statesmanly” nature (33). Although it had lost power to the expansionist Oyo kingdom, Ife and its priesthood (the babalawo, Yr. father of secrets) maintained control over the religious, mythological basis of Yoruba society. It was the babalawo who, through his divinatory stories, established the relationship not only between the various Orisha but also between the Yoruba kingdoms with Ife as the honorary, if not actual, superior.6

Political superiority in the seventeenth and eighteenth century in the Yoruba region was centered on the city of Oyo, capital of the Oyo empire. Among the administrators of the empire that spread throughout Yorubaland were the priests of the Shango cult. This group fused with Oyo’s imperial administration to distribute the Alaafin’s (Yr. king’s) ritual power and political authority. The ministers of the Alaafin were initiated by the king’s wives who were also Shango priestesses (Matory 1994, 11) and Shango priests from the various vassal towns traveled to Oyo for their final initiation and instruction, uniting the empire under the power of the divinity of thunder and lightning (Apter 1992, 24–25). Thus every Yoruba town within the Oyo empire would have had at least two competing priesthoods: those of the Orisha Shango who were loyal to the empire of Oyo and those of the

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5Since ile means home or city, Ile-Ife is sometimes shortened to simply Ife.
6Even as late as the 1920s the Oni (king) of Ife was considered the senior among the Yoruba kingdoms. He was considered the “father” of them all, even of the more powerful; king of Oyo (Bascom 1969, 6).
divinatory Ifa corpus who were loyal to the birthplace of the people in Ife (as well as whatever local group(s) may predate or postdate the town’s entry into the Oyo empire).

From 1837 to 1878 wars between the successor states of the Oyo empire, Ibadan, Ilorin Ijaye and Abeokuta, established new military strongholds and centers of influence throughout Yorubaland (Apter 1992, 35). Apter’s research focused on a modern town on the eastern fringe of the Ibadan empire named Ayede. In the modern era two Orisha cults dominated the religious scene of Ayede when he did his research: that of Orisha Ojuna (58) and that of Yemoja, the mother of the Orisha (61). Both of these groups housed a cluster of deities whose subgroups included priestesses, sacrifices, drum rhythms and devotees. The relationship between the main deity, for example Yemoja, and the deities of the subgroups was one of kinship and affinity. The deities of the subgroups were considered Yemoja’s spouse, children, siblings and so forth (61). The two different main cults were loyal not only to a different set of Orisha but also to different political and social powers. Ojuna’s cult was associated with the older regime, Yemoja’s with the more recent royal lineage. Thus, Apter says, among contemporary inhabitants of Ayede “Orisă cults enshrine rival interpretations of power which are ritually sanctioned and only secretly discussed” (69).

In describing what he called “the most prominent ritual of kingship in Ayede” Apter says that “Yorùbá orisá worship is multivalent and polyvocal in both the literal and abstract senses of these terms....the public sees many

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7 Apter also names several lesser cults brought to Ayede by various immigrant groups. However he says that the cults of Orisha Ojuna and Yemoja had overwhelmed the other cults in the town (56). He fails to mention the Ifa cult that probably was also present in the town but outside the direct political maneuvering that was his concern. Contemporary cultic practice is complex, reflecting both social and political realities. Suffice it to say that several cults were in conversation in both the historical and the contemporary worlds.
powers and hears many voices” (97). In this case, he says, the secrets of the ritual are powerful “because they reflect on the contradictory conditions of effective government” (97) since the female power of Yemoja, her priestesses and the women in general have “two antithetical values, or sides” (112). Briefly, the ritual entails the high priestess of Yemoja, possessed by the Orisha, carrying a sacred calabash balanced on her head from Yemoja’s shrine in the bush to the palace where the king awaits her. The calabash contains “the concentrated powers (âse) of kingship, conceived of as a ‘hot’, explosive, and polluting force.” The priestess, who on Apter’s reading becomes the king during her journey from bush to town center, visits graves of former cult members and chiefs along with the major town and market shrines before proceeding to the palace. At the palace the actual king awaits her and her sacred load. When she arrives in the presence of the king she “walks up to the king and turns to the crowd, blocking his view. She turns toward and away from him three times, and with the calabash still on her head, almost obscenely obscures his body and face.” He is recharged with the power of the calabash when he places his hands on her and prays that he will live to witness the next annual ceremony (105–106).

Revitalized by the ashé of the calabash the king is invested with power for the coming year and his sovereignty is reestablished (106). This is the “official” view of this ritual. However, Apter goes on to describe its subversive nature—for the calabash is packed with symbolic power that is given to the king but only for as long as he is supported by the owners of the

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8The implicit gender change involved in the priestess, who is always female, symbolically becoming the king, who is male is not discussed by Apter and does not seem to be meaningful in the context of this ritual. I will however discuss rituals in which gender and gender constructions are important in Chapter 5.
calabash who have the power to demand his death (Apter, 108–110). In this ritual,

the king is “killed” in order to survive. His official charters are “falsified” by esoteric genealogies and counterclaims. His singular sovereignty fractures into multiple identities. As a ruler, he belongs to every town cult and chief. As a man, he embodies the female power of witchcraft and fertility. As an institution, sacred and perpetual, he belongs to the past, present, and future. As an incumbent, he is eminently selectable and substitutable (116).

On the same day that the Yemoja priestess carries water, the priestesses of another cult, that of Orisha Iyagba, whom Apter suggests “ritually objectifies the aspiring king in every civil chief” meet her and her priestesses in the marketplace where “a violent confrontation mimetically occurs.” The “warrior” priestesses of Orisha Iyagba (who are associated with the older political regime) “attack” the priestess of Yemoja (the new royal lineage) threatening the completion of the water carrying ritual and, at the same time, conveying the subversive threat of civil revolt (156–157).

I quote from Apter at length because we find in his description of the Yemoja festival and the actions of the priestesses in “killing” and resurrecting the king, as well as the relationship between the two groups, a multivocal dialogic of opposition and support. Because the relationship between the king, his chiefs and the priesthoods of the various Orisha are volatile and in constant flux, these relationships are renegotiated and reestablished during the various town festivals. Rival pantheons organize critical discourses that may support the political power structure (the king) openly and outwardly while inwardly and secretly honoring rival gods and kings (160). It is this kind of historical and cultural milieu that the majority of slaves brought with them to Cuba.

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9 It is not an overstatement to suggest that the king, although having enormous power, rules at the pleasure of the people. Several sources tell of kings who were asked “to go to sleep” (commit suicide) because of their misdeeds. Any king who refused to commit suicide would be killed (Bascom 1969, 31, McKenzie 1997, 193, 366–67).
Redefining the Orisha in Cuba

After 1762, when the English captured the Spanish port of Havana, the European passion for sugared foods was increasingly met by sugar from Cuban plantations. Hundreds of thousands of Yoruba were brought to the new world to work these plantations. By 1888 nearly 10 million African men and women had made the middle passage to the Americas. It is estimated between 500,000 and 700,000 of these Africans were brought to Cuba. A large number of them were Yoruba. In his history, *Santería from Africa to the New World*, George Brandon says that the Yoruba formed the largest group of people brought to Cuba during the final period of the slave trade. Naked and enslaved, they brought with them their own ideas of religion, culture and political power.

Eric Williams describes the “best slave” as “30 to 35 years old, about five feet eleven inches in height, without any physical defect.” Three such men were considered to be one “ton” of cargo, a contract in 1676 called for 10,000 ‘tons’ of slaves (Williams 1984, 139). Conditions aboard the ships were horrific. Three out of every ten slaves perished in the Middle Passage (Williams 1984, 139). Mortality was also high among those who survived the

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10Between April 1789, the death of the Alaafin of Oyo, and the British intervention to stop the Ekitiparapo War in 1893 was a time of tremendous upheaval throughout the Oyo Empire. The direct consequence of this upheaval was the shipment of millions of Yoruba people as slaves to the Americas (Mason 1996, 25). Between 1850 and 1880 about 200,000 Africans were brought to Cuba (Mason 1996, 25 quoting Fernando Ortiz, *Hempan Afro-Cubana: Los Negros Escalvos. Estudio Sociologico y de Derecho Publico*. Habana, 87–88.).

11During that final period of Cuban slavery, between 1850 until around 1870, slightly more than 34% of the slaves arriving in Cuba were designated as members of the Lucumi nation (actually the Yoruba language group), that is Oyos, Egbas, Ijebus and Ijeshas (Brandon 1993, 57–58, 55). Although the word *lukumi* is often translated as “my friend” and described as the greeting offered to companions in Cuba, the words *Lukumi, Ulcamí* or *Ulkany* were used on early maps of West Africa to designate the kingdom of Oyo (Hair, et al. 1992, 633 fn. 19, Mason 1996, 77). Mason says that captives who identified themselves as belonging to the Egbado ethnic group introduced the Orisha Olokun, Odua/Oudua, Boromu, Yewa and Ayalu/Ayaluwa into Cuba around 1850. Although the Egbado were under the rule of both Oyo and Benin, they remained loyal to Oyo after the fall of the empire (Mason 1996, 16).
Middle Passage. In Saint-Domingue (Haiti) about one-third of each new shipment died each year (Williams 1984, 147). Between 1763 and 1789 Cuba imported an annual average of 1,143 slaves. Between 1790 and 1804 imports totaled 88,746. Yet between 1787 and 1804 the total slave population of the island increased by only 87,660—a net decrease of approximately 4,515 over 17 years (Williams 1984, 264). These losses were tolerated because, based on the price of sugar, a slave could earn his original purchase price plus the cost of maintenance within two or three years. Thus after five or six years a slave had doubled the investment made in him. The broken hulk could be replaced by a new, vigorous individual (Lockhart and Schwartz 1983, 218).  

Although life on the sugar plantations numbed the mind and destroyed the body, slaves and freed slaves living in the cities, notably Havana, had opportunities to learn trades and work for wages—and thus to buy their own and their family’s freedom. By the mid 19th century over one-third of the black population of Cuba were gente de color, free people of color, and they constituted one-sixth of the total population. (For comparison, in Virginia at the same time free blacks were one-ninth of the black population and only one-thirty-second of the total population) (Murphy 1993, 21f.

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12Lockhart says that in general the New World sugar plantation expected to lose between 5 and 10 percent of its slave population each year. By way of comparison Morgan suggests that during the 16th and early 17th century, the chances of a colonist dying during his first five years in Virginia were better than fifty-fifty. Since a slave cost roughly twice as much as an indentured servant, he says, English servants were “a better buy” (Morgan 1975, 297–98). However, a decline in the willingness of English servants to work in Virginia as well as a decline in the mortality of colonists in the mid-seventeenth century engendered the development of a thriving slave trade there as well (Morgan 1975, 299). By the early 18th century white servants were the exception in Virginia tobacco fields (Morgan 1975, 308).
statistics from Herbert S. Klein, Slavery in the Americas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 202, 236).\textsuperscript{13}

Spanish artisans often formed themselves into guilds and lay brotherhoods called *confradias*. These groups tended to be used to organize an individual's corporate identity and structure his leisure activities. Members of the guilds organized and funded civic and religious activities, processions, plays, fireworks and the like. These groups were used extensively in the New World to create and reinforce the ties between people who may not have had the types of extended family connections seen in the Spanish upper classes or back home in Spain. Each confradia would be devoted to the veneration of a particular saint or saints associated with the guild-group. Confradias would maintain an altar for that saint in the local church, arrange for the compensation of a priest, and provide funeral and burial services for their members (Johnson 1986, 231–32, Lockhart and Schwartz 1983, 15).

Even before the end of slavery, freed slaves and enslaved trades-people living in the cities of Havana and Matanzas formed themselves into social clubs similar to the Spanish confradias called *cabildos*.\textsuperscript{14} By law and custom

\textsuperscript{13}Looking at the other end of the island, Cabrera, quoting from the census of 1827 reports that in Santiago de Cuba, the second largest town on the island, there were 9,302 whites, 10,032 free blacks and 7,404 slaves, 17,416 total blacks to 9,302 whites (Cabrera 1980, 60 fn. 42).

Based on the 1830 census there were 10,480,300 total free white people, 1,987,428 total slaves, and 312,603 total freed colored persons in the United States. For detailed and searchable US census data, see the United States Historical Census Data Browser at http://icg.fas.harvard.edu/~census/.

\textsuperscript{14}“Cabildo” usually designated the official governmental power of the city, the mayor and city council. Because their organizations are called cabildos rather than confradias, suggests that these Afro-Cuban groups functioned as quasi-political governmental bodies in addition to being social clubs.

Although almost every description of the cabildos describe them as being based on the African “nations” of their members it is unclear exactly what this means since there were no “nations” in West Africa at the time and the people did not even consider themselves to be members of a single “tribe”. The portion of Africa that was the home of most of the Cuban slaves was composed of a loose and fluid organization of city-states. In the New World there was a conflation of African language and ethnic groups into the western idea of nations. This
the members of each cabildo were members of the same African "nation" whose dances, drum types and songs were considered ethnically significant symbols (Brandon 1993, 71). In the mid-eighteenth century the Catholic church tried to bring religion into these clubs by providing an image of Our Lady to each club and assigning a clergyman to direct worship and teach Catholic doctrine (Brandon 1993, 70). Through a policy of guided syncretism that included injecting an African flavor into European Christian rites, the church hoped to sweep the Africans into the mainstream of Cuban Christianity so that they would eventually forsake their African customs (Brandon 1993, 71). As was common in Spain, the members of the Cuban cabildos took part in religious festivals by bearing their saint's image in public processions (Brandon 1993, 70). It was during these festivals that African-style dances were performed under the banners and images of Catholic saints (Brandon 1993, 71–72).

The cabildos used Spanish political structures to describe their membership and internal relations. Early cabildos were organized as kingdoms governed by kings, queens and lower-ranking officials whose titles

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15Black servitude was known in Spain before the discovery of the New World. Thus African-style drumming and dancing were known and somewhat tolerated. Blacks in Spain were converted to Christianity and had their own religious brotherhoods (Lockhart and Schwartz 1983, 18).

16It is interesting that in modern Yoruba the terms for religion (ọṣìn, ọsìn) are associated with the verb sin which means 'to bury' as well as with ọsinkù, 'burial, funeral arrangements'. Roland Hallgren suggests that "religion as service is actualized [in its relationship to funeral cults and the ancestors]" (Hallgren 1988, 18-19).
were derived from formal military hierarchy. When they marched in public festivals the cabildo officers dressed in the flamboyant costumes of the Spanish monarchy and military while dancers wore the costumes of the African masquerades (Brown 1989, 40–41). Brown says that “Public events were arenas of contested meanings with far-reaching political implications” as each miniature monarchy with its own royalty and army proclaimed its own set of overt and covert allegiances (41). Cabildos provided not only social organization but were also used by both their members and the Spanish authorities as political and administrative institutions. Members of the cabildo were "ruled" by a 'king' who presided over its internal and external affairs (Brown 1989, 50). This king was responsible to the members of the cabildo as well as to the Spanish authorities who could not only fine him and the cabildo but also could remove an unresponsive king from office (Brown 1989, 71–72]

Within the walls of these cabildos, Africans and Afro-Cubans brought their own organizational and religious structures into being in the colonial environment. Along with the administrative functions, the cabildos also nourished distinctive religious functions separate from that provided by the Spanish clergy. In its Spanish form the cabildo was responsible for the welfare of its members. In times of need the cabildo provided clothes, medicine, charity and a decent burial (Brandon 1993, 70). In the African cabildos, Brown suggests, two religious institutions were consolidated: Orisha worship staffed

17 Later cabildos adopted their titles from republican government: president, vice-president, etc. (Brown 1989, 40).

18 For example, he says that in the early 1800s cabildos were the birthplace of conspiracies against the island's Spanish leadership (Brown 1989, 41f).

19 The Yoruba word for king, oba, refers not only to the paramount chief or monarch but also heads of smaller political units like town sections. Thus the use of this title for the head of the cabildo is consistent with African usage.
by initiated priests and the cult of the Ancestors (51). He suggests that both of these institutions had Catholic or Spanish parallels: the Orisha worship has often been compared to the veneration of Catholic saints and the public processions and dances while the cult of the ancestors is considered to be tied closely with the Catholic church's own cult of the dead and burial rituals.20

Each cabildo was dedicated to a particular santo/Orisha: Brown quotes from a registrar of associations for Cabildo Africano Lucumí that was reorganized in 1891 under the protection and banner of Santa Barbara (or Shango the African Orisha-king) (53).21 We can, perhaps, assume that in the New World as in Africa a particular cult would house a cluster of subgroups of related Orisha, so that not only Shango but other related Orisha would have been worshipped within Cabildo Africano Lucumí as well as other earlier cabildos. Brown describes the visit of Fredika Bremer to various Afro-Cuban cabildos in Havana in 1853 (62–64). Based on her description, he identifies two dancers who are probably under the influence of spirit possession. One, who is fully described, he identifies as Shango himself while the other, whom Bremer describes as dressed in "all kinds of handkerchiefs

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20Lévi-Strauss describes a similar reconstruction of a cultural system in Australia in the early 1930's. In that case survivors of some thirty Australian tribes were gathered together into a Government Settlement. Under the most unlikely of circumstances they were able to adopt a common terminology and rules of correspondences for harmonizing their tribal structures in their new environment. Although the distribution of totems and moieties was not uniform, the survivors were able to systematically (re)construct a society for themselves (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 157).

21Saints and Orisha however belong to different religious categories. Saints are persons who act in accordance with the wishes of another (God); Orisha act in accordance with their own will. Like gods the Orisha are owners of power, they are powers. However, unlike saints or gods they are morally ambiguous—they can use their powers for good or ill (Alice Wood, personal communication). Dr. Wood's "Chains of Virtue: Seventeenth-Century Saints in Spanish Colonial Lima" provides a nuanced view of Spanish saintliness in seventeenth century Spanish colonies (Wood 1997).
and a hat,” he suggests was some sort of male spirit. The presence of two
dancers in different costumes suggests that there were already multiple
Orisha and their priests represented in the cabildos at the time of Bremer’s
visit.

Babalawo, The Father of Mysteries

In addition to the worship of the various Orisha in Africa another,
parallel priesthood permeated the area, that is the priesthood of Orunmila,
the diviner. The stories of the Orisha say that during the earliest times when
there was no barrier between heaven and earth, Orunmila was often
summoned by Olodumare, the Yoruba supreme god, to use his wisdom to
help solve problems. One day Orunmila, annoyed at an insult given him by
one of his children, decided to remain in heaven. However, in his absence,
earth was thrown into a great confusion, neither crops nor women
reproduced, famine and pestilence raged. The people of the earth sent the
children of Orunmila to beg him to return. He refused but gave his children
sixteen palm nuts and taught them his style of divination so that they could
communicate with him. Because it is believed that Orunmila was present at
the creation of the world and is present at the creation of each individual, he
knows each person’s past, present and future and can tell one what is
necessary to achieve money, wives, children, houses, clothes—that is,
everything necessary for a good life (Abimbola 1997, 4–8). The spiritual
descendants of Orunmila’s children are the priests of Ifa, the babalawo. The
Yoruba word babalawo means “father of mysteries,” a description of the
diviner’s art. However in both the African and New World Yoruba religious
system the babalawo is often described as the “high priest” of the religion

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22 Although it could be Oya, one of Shango’s wives, who dresses in a skirt of nine colors, carries a sword and fights alongside her husband. Symbols of Oya are often found on African altars for Shango so her presence in his American locale would be natural.
(Brandon 1983, 77, Karade 1994, 6, Murphy 1993, 175). Murphy suggests that the preservation of Oriṣa religion can be credited to the wisdom of the babalawo whose memories contained the entire Ifa corpus, the “entire language of the Ôrîshàs,” the divination verses, prayers, songs, and praise names of the Orisha, as well as the knowledge to conduct every ritual, to organize the herbs, foods and sacrifices and to advise and prescribe in times of misfortune. And because of the extensive knowledge of the babalawo the Yoruba were able to reconstruct their religious traditions (Murphy 1993, 105–6, 62). Because only the babalawo would know the entire Ifa corpus only he would know and be able to deal with every aspect of the Yoruba cosmology (Brown 1989, 87–88).

Brown, citing Murphy, suggests that many scholars and priests assume that it was the babalawo who founded and disseminated the standard, canonical practice of Oriṣa religion in the New World; that all subsequent practice, faithful or divergent, pure or bastardized, right or wrong, come directly from that source (Brown 1989, 88). He says that the babalawos themselves believe that African and Cuban babalawos and their Ifa texts are “central to the strength and resilience of Lucumí tradition” (Brown 1989, 90). However, what he calls “variant practices” both among babalawos and within Santería/Lucumí tradition itself suggests a more dynamic developmental scheme (Brown 1989, 94). Two lines of research suggest alternative narrative possibilities.

The first is the historical record compiled by Apter. His study of African history shows that not only were there two political rivals for the “center” of

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23 Most of the research on Yoruba religion in the New World, particularly that describing its development in the United States, somehow has this story of babalawo primacy as a central theme. Could this be because in each case the primary informant is himself a babalawo?
Yoruba culture (Oyo and Ife) but also that there developed in pre-colonial Africa two rival priesthoods: one focused on divination and the daily life of the people (Ifa) and the other on the worship and propitiation of the various Orisha through ritual and spirit possession. Although everyone in Yorubaland used the services of the babalawo and the babalawo might recommend that one be initiated into a particular priesthood based on a divination sequence, I can not find any indication that the African babalawo directly participated in the worship of the Orisha. In the new world, babalawos have become intimately involved in Santería and the world of the Orisha, but their authority and participation is not the same in all Santería houses (communities).

Brown describes two opposing views which he calls the “oriaté-centered” house and the “Orula-centered” house. An oriaté (Yr. head of the divination mat) is a highly-trained diviner and ritual specialist who presides over the initiation of Orisha priests (as opposed to Ifa priests whose initiation is solely the responsibility of the community of babalawos). Since a babalawo cannot participate in some portions of the initiatory process, for example the birth of the Orisha and the actual placing of it on the head of the new Orisha priest, in babalawo-centered houses this part of the initiatory process must be presided over by an oriaté. In these houses a babalawo determines the guardian Orisha of the initiate, makes the initial set of warriors and performs the sacrifice that feeds the new Orisha. Oriaté-centered houses on the other hand, may not use a babalawo at all. In these cases it is the oriaté who not

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24 In order to keep the terms parallel I prefer to call this second group the “babalawo-centered” house. This distinction and the discussion that follows is important for my work because the Houston community on which it is based consists primarily of oriaté-centered houses, unlike the majority of other communities described in the literature.

25 This is the central ritual of the “crowning” ceremony.
only presides at the actual initiation but also at the preliminary rituals (determining the guardian Orisha and making the warriors) as well as at the matanza (Sp. sacrifice) afterward (Brown, 221–223, 248–250).\textsuperscript{26}

This brings us to the second and more troubling objection to the "babalawo as religious source" myth. Since African babalawos did not seem to participate in Orisha initiations and New World babalawos are strictly forbidden to enter the room while an Orisha is being "made"\textsuperscript{27} it is unlikely that they could have had "the knowledge to conduct every ritual." Indeed, admitting that in spite of their knowledge of myth and ritual the early Cuban babalawos "did not, and could not, do everything," Brown quotes Ernesto Pichardo who says that it was the Orisha-priests, who were the early custodians of the Orisha and their rituals. Thus it appears that olorichas (Yr. owner of the Orisha, that is the initiated Orisha priests) from a wide variety of traditions must have negotiated among themselves to create a way of continuing their various priesthoods in a new and alien environment.

I would suggest that this negotiation may have been one of the most stunning examples of religious hybridization in history. Behind closed doors where they could not been seen either by the eye of the colonial master nor of the historian, priests from a variety of rival African religious groups came

\textsuperscript{26}Brown also describes a third mixed option that uses a babalawo for some but not all of the functions described for a babalawo-centered ritual.

\textsuperscript{27}"The room" is the sacred space, the room of ocha where the crowning ceremony is performed. When a new priest is being initiated a babalawo must sit with the uninitiated outside awaiting for the actual initiation to be concluded so that he can proceed with the matanza. An exception is made if the babalawo was initiated to the Orisha before becoming a priest of Ifa. In that case he may be present in the room during the initiation ceremony but he can not participate in the initiation itself.

This description of the place of babalawos in the initiation process is based on the traditional, conservative stance observed in the Houston community. This does not mean that there are not babalawos who directly participate in Orisha initiations, even so far as to become the godparent of the new initiate, only that such participation is considered unorthodox by many practitioners.
together to create a new method of practice that enabled the continuation of the core of each of their religious systems. In the absence of the sacred geography (rivers, groves and the like) and without the support of the political system (lineages, townships, royalty) they reconstructed not a single “African” or “Yoruba” religion—for there was no such thing—but created a new religion using the universal elements of *ashé* (the energy and power of the universe), stories and mythology, sacred herbology, songs, dances, ritual elements (and perhaps the direct input from the Orisha themselves as they spoke through the medium of possession).\(^{28}\) Over time these practices were further standardized in the person of the *oriaté* who became the ritual specialist with the knowledge of how to “make,” initiate, all of the Orisha (Brown 1989, 94–95).\(^{29}\) Much of this ritual knowledge has subsequently been published (for example, Nicolas Angarica’s *Manual de Orihate: Religión Lucumí* (1955)).

**Northern Migration**

Although Cubans had been moving to the United States before then, the Cuban Revolution in 1959 resulted in a large immigration of Cubans first to Miami and later to other American cities.\(^{30}\) These people brought with

\(^{28}\) These orichchas must have also found a way to integrate the priesthood of Orunmila into this new religious system. That this integration is complete is pointed to by the ways the babalawo have organized their own houses to valorize their actions to the detriment of orichchas.

\(^{29}\) Although all initiated priests are allowed to perform cowry divination most people prefer to use the services of specialists. Since oriatés are the most highly trained of these specialists they often perform divinations outside the initiation context. When Brandon says that the role of oriaté was created “because of the scarcity [sic] of babalawos” (Brandon 1983, 525) he is probably referring to this function rather than the oriaté’s role as ritual specialist. This same suggestions of a scarcity of babalawos in Cuba also speaks against the hypothesis that they were the source of Santería ritual practice.

\(^{30}\) Boswell identifies seven distinct immigration phases: a trickle begun in the 1880’s, the large-scale movement between 1959 and 1962 in the wake of the Revolution, the third phase was a hiatus between 1962 and 1965 due to the Cuban Missile Crisis. This was followed by the Freedom Flights between 1973 and 1980. The fifth phase was another interlude until the
them not only their music, food and language but also their religions. A second major wave of immigrants came in the early 1980's with the "Mariel boat lift".31 Today the majority of santeros have Caribbean backgrounds; however the religion has spread into both the African-American and European-American communities so that one can attend a Santería celebration and find not only Cubans and people from other Caribbean countries but also people with African, Asian and European heritage.32

Most members of the Houston community trace their religious family back to a small group of gay men who came here as part of the boat lift.33 After settling in Houston, they began to initiate godchildren. Since each new initiate has two "godparents" these men and their initiates have formed a loosely connected group of religious households. Because no single individual has been able to develop the strong centralized authority equivalent to the heads of religious families described by other scholars, (Brown 1989, Curry 1997, Murphy 1993) the local community can be described as a loose association of independent houses rather than a single united ile (Yr. religious household). Because houses have connections to practitioners in other cities and because for a variety of reasons a priest may prefer to use

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31These two groups of immigrants represent different demographics. While the immigrants of the 60s were predominantly white upper- and middle-class professionals and entrepreneurs, those of the 1980s more closely matched Cuba's population composition. This later set of immigrants were more likely to be poorer, darker and more unconventional since Castro forced many imprisoned Cubans to leave the country (Boswell and Curtis 1984, 1, 2, 4, Dominguez 1993, 100, 119).

32Today it is estimated that 60 to 70 percent of 11 million Cubans still on the island practice Santería at some level while 40 percent of the population are baptized Catholics. Of these 4.7 million Cuban Catholics only about 150,000 attend Sunday mass (Larmer 1998, Masland, 1998 #162, Woodward, 1998 #163). The Pope's recent visit to the island was partially an effort to change these statistics.

33Afolabi, himself a gay priest, estimates that nationally over 30% of the Santería initiates are gay (Afolabi (Clayton D. Keck September 21, 1997).
certain specialists from these outside groups, the local community may be more exposed to outside influences than more closely controlled groups.

Because Yoruba traditional religion and its New World descendant Santería is focused on the manifestation of an individual’s personal destiny there seems to be a higher tolerance for a variety of personal choices and lifestyles. Since the local community was founded by gay men and continues to include many gay men and lesbians among its elders, issues of sexuality seem not to have the scrutiny that they do in other religious groups. Priests are selected and confirmed by the Orisha and are generally not denied initiation because of race, gender, nationality or sexual orientation. This is not to suggest that these issues of cultural import do not find their way into the religion in the same way they do in other religious or social groups, only that they seem to not have the type of hold they have within other groups, especially within other religious groups.

Theology

Many scholars have tried to classify this religion. Like Hinduism it has a complete and varied pantheon so an argument can be made that it is polytheistic. On the other hand, Òdòwú, who focuses his gaze on the place of Olodumare, suggests that it is monotheistic at the core because Olodumare is not one among the Orisha but “wholly other” (Ódòwú 1994, 203). However he cannot ignore the place of the Orisha and amends his view, calling the religion of the Yoruba a “diffused monotheism,” that is a religion with a supreme God as well as other deities (Ódòwú 1994, 204). Others have suggested

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34These range from personality conflicts to a desire to provide English-speaking oriatés for initiates that are not fluent in Spanish.

35The single exception is that women and gay men are excluded from becoming babalawos, which is an exclusively male cult. This exclusion of gay men from Ifa probably accounts for the scarcity of babalawos in the local community.
that this religious view is not focused on gods and deities as much as on the power of ashé (McKenzie, 191). This might lead one to classify Yoruba religion as pantheistic since every natural and manufactured element is filled with ashé and associated with some deity or god-force.\(^{36}\)

However, each of these explanations has to ignore or dismiss certain portions of the belief systems of the people in order to make the classification system work. In the African environment, religious practice is henotheistic. A worshipper may be devoted to a single deity within the pantheon to the exclusion of all others, believing that that single deity is unique, powerful and complete (McKenzie 1976, 198, Olupona 1998, cites a contemporary appellation of Oshun, Olodumaremi, which means “my supreme god”). Based on the research quoted by McKenzie, it is likely that that deity will not be Olodumare. Or a worshipper may recognize a group of deities but ignore the remaining portions of the pantheon. Some may exclude or minimize Olodumare as an overarching Supreme Being. As the religion evolved in the New World, each priest is dedicated to a single deity, the Orisha of the head, while maintaining shrines and worshipping a number of other Orisha.\(^{37}\)

In spite of the excellent work of Ìdòwú, and other scholars, a study of Yoruba theological systems exposes the principal problem presented to the Yoruba theologian—there is no single, unified Yoruba religion. Each region, each city and each town quarter may hold one or more related, and sometimes antagonistic, religious groups. Each of these groups may view

\(^{36}\)Lucas suggests that the Yoruba are mainly animistic because the “mysterious, the uncanny, the unfamiliar as well as the great powers of nature, are regarded as being indwelt by spirits” (Lucas 1948, 33). However Lucas’ primary thesis, that the Yoruba culture is a degenerative form of Egyptian religion, suffers from a virulent case of primitivism. He says that the character of Qórun (Olodumare) is “far too noble, far too abstract and refined to have originated from the thought of a primitive people” (Lucas 1948, 34).

\(^{37}\)Many santeros “own” upwards of 20 Orisha; in New York I met a priest who had over 130. There is no theoretical limit to the number of Orisha a single priest might have.
their titular head as the supreme being—while acknowledging the legitimacy of the other groups, a form of henotheism. There may be 201, 401 or even 2001 Orisha, but most Orisha worshippers are devotees of either a single Orisha or a small set of related Orisha. Even devotees of the same Orisha from different areas may define the deity differently, include different Orisha in the pantheon, and attribute a different set of characteristics to those Orisha.  

In addition, the Yoruba people have developed an extremely complex and sophisticated view of the nature of the holy. Instead of trying to fit the Yoruba world view into a pre-existing category I will take the same track as the modern physicists who suggest that atoms sometimes exhibit the characteristics of waves and sometimes those of particles. I will suggest that Yoruba religions can profitably be described sometimes by the processes and movements of ashé and sometimes by focusing on the individual beings that personify that ashé. I will suggest that Yoruba religious thought can sometimes be profitably described as a type of monotheism and sometimes as a polytheism without limiting it to either of those positions. Each of these theories has a partial truth but neither holds the whole truth.

**Ashé as the Focus of the Religion**

In the beginning was Ashé. When Ashé began to think, Ashé became Olodumare. When Olodumare acted, He became Olofi, and it was Olofi who, out of a part of himself, created Obatalá.  

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38Herskovits discusses the readiness of West Africans to incorporate new deities into their religious pantheon. He suggests that this not only made for a wide-spread diffusion of deities in the African context but also explains the ease with which European “deities” were incorporated into African religious systems especially in the New World context (Herskovits 1990 [1941], 71–72). Scher provides another view of this easy incorporation of new deities when he describes the inclusion of Hindu deities in Orisha religion in Trinidad (Scher 1997 [1989]) #304, 321.

Joseph Murphy suggests that the world of the santero is a world constituted of and held together by *ashé*. He describes *ashé* as the movement of the cosmos toward completeness and divinity (Murphy 1993, 130). It is “all mystery, all secret power, all divinity.” It is without beginning and end, can not be enumerated or exhausted. It is not a particular power but Power itself (Murphy 1993, 147 quoting Pierre Verger). While *ashé* is the absolute ground of reality it is also absolute movement and thus no ground at all (Murphy 1993, 130). *Ashé* can be understood as the energy of the universe. Modern physics teaches us that everything is merely energy moving at different rates of speed. Although the total energy in the universe can not be changed, one can change portions of the universe by adding and removing energy from that portion. By understanding these principles of energy one has the power to control one’s environment. We can understand portions of Santería practice as the movement of *ashé*, the energy of the universe, between the visible and invisible worlds.

Raul J. Canizares suggests that *ashé*, the energy of the universe, consists of order and balance. As a consequence order and balance were present before the appearance of God, Olodumare. When order and balance are absent one experiences a dysfunctional emotional, physical or economic state. Thus there is no absolute “good” and “evil” but rather more or less balance in one’s life and the world at large (Canizares 1991, 370–71).

Santería worship considers drumming and dancing as essential to religious ritual. Santería is a danced religion because dancing expresses the fundamental dynamism of *ashé*. That the meaning of the world is in constant movement is expressed in sacred dance (Murphy 1993, 131). By dancing the practitioner expresses the *ashé* of the universe, calls into presence the *ashé* of the Orisha, and moves more surely into his or her personal destiny, his or
her personal ashé. In the same way that one can change the world by an understanding and manipulation of physics, by understanding the principles of ashé one can dance one’s true destiny. Through prayers, rhythms, offerings and taboos an initiate of Santería is “lifted out of the self-absorption and frustration of ordinary life into the world of power where everything is easy because all is ashé, all is destiny” (Murphy 1993, 131). When the universe came into existence this ashé, this energy was expressed in a wide variety of beings. Everything visible and invisible consists of ashé and part of one’s religious practice is learning to use this energy for the benefit of oneself, one’s community and the universe as a whole.

At the highest, most powerful level, one must understand ashé, the ground of being, as something rather than nothing. We can call this something Olodumare, the owner of Heaven, the Owner of all Destinies. “Olódumári is the object of ashé, the ultimate harmony and direction of all forces” (Murphy 1993, 130). He⁴⁰ is seen as the chief source of power and is often referred to as a “high god”, a being beyond human comprehension. He is the most remote of beings, and in the world of worship, he is never approached directly, no shrines are erected in his name, no rituals are directed toward him and no sacrifices are made to him. However he is not otherworldly, rather it is Olodumare who sustains all the rest of the universe. His name is invoked within every ritual, he is present in all shrines, he partakes of all sacrifices. He is the owner of heaven in the metaphysical sense of owning a secret or being the Source of a Mystery. His is the power that guides the evolution of the cosmos and thus is present everywhere. Olodumare is the personification of ashé. Because he includes all that is and

⁴⁰Olódumári, of course, is beyond all categories including gender. It is only the limitation of language that forces this use of gendered pronouns.
all that is not, he is beyond human comprehension, he is the God behind the
gods. In this way he fulfills the description of a transcendant or “high” god;
because it is his breath that maintains life in all living things and his energy
that sustains the whole of the universe he is ultimately immanent, present in
the butterfly, the earthworm, the new-born child.

Orisha as the Focus of the Religion

The ashé of the universe is not homogeneous, it collects and forms
into nodes of power we recognize as forces of nature (wind, ocean, thunder)
as well as aspects of human life (our roles as mothers, kings, warriors). These
forces and roles can also be identified and personified in order that they might
be understood and incorporated into human existence. When forces and roles
become identified with particular Orishas their stories tell us how the world
came to be the way it is (why thunder and wind are often found together) and
how to live a good life (sometimes you can persuade better with honey than
with a sword).

The universe of Santería is inhabited by beings who have
responsibilities toward one another (Canizares 1991, 370). It is possible to
understand this universe by seeing it as organized around beings located at
five different levels of power: Olodumare, the Orisha, human beings, the
ancestors, and the lowest group that includes plants and animals as well as
natural and manufactured items. At the highest, most powerful level is
Olodumare, the personification of ashé. He controls the Forces of Nature, the
wind, lightning, and the ocean. In the African traditions these forces have
been anthropomorphized and mythologized into a group of beings or
demigods called the Orisha. The Orisha are multi-dimensional beings
(Fatunmbi 1992, 20) who represent the forces of nature, act as Jungian
archetypes and function as sacred patrons or "guardian angels". As knowable aspects of Olodumare, they represent a level of power that is approachable though ritual action and so provide one very important focus for Yoruba religion (Lawson 1984, 57). They have attributes and stories similar to the stories and attributes used to describe the ancient Greek and Roman pantheons. However, unlike the Greek gods, the Orisha are not remote deities living high on a mountain peak, rather they are living beings present in the everyday life of their followers. It is around the Orisha that most Santería religious activity focuses.

It was the Orisha Obatala who first created the earth as we know it. The name Obatala means Chief of the White Cloth. In this case white cloth is understood to represent the substance that forms the physical universe, the light energy that is transformed through the process of evolution into a planetary environment. Obatala is understood as the essence of this light. After Obatala created the earth with its oceans and forests he invited the other Orisha to join him in living there. Most of the Yoruba mythology tells of the time when the Orisha lived upon the earth.

It was during this time that Olodumare commissioned Obatala to make the bodies of human beings that he might breath the breath of life into them. In this way a new type of being entered into the universe. When the Orisha

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41Jung presents a view of the human psyche that includes certain universal and a priori primordial images that manifested in emotions and drive impulses (Jung 1969a [1959]) #172; Jung, 1969b [1959] #325; Jung, 1973 [1964] #174. These images, commonly called archetypes, are composed of a mythological core and a personalized shell. The core is the universal pattern that is inherent in each of us (Whitmont 1991, 68) while the shell is the surface that "presents itself as the peculiar reaction pattern" dependent on each person's personal nature and experience (65). Commonly recognized archetypes are the Woman (Anima), Man (Animus), Mother, and Father. Jean Bolen has used the idea of archetypes to provide a detailed framework for understanding certain male and female personality differences (Bolen 1984, Bolen 1989). Rita Segato's Santos e Demainones provides an excellent introduction to the ways in which these Jungian concepts can be used to analyze the Orisha and their followers (Segato 1995). My own analysis of the ways in which the Orisha act as archetypes is the focus of a future project.
returned to heaven it became the responsibility of these human children of the Orisha to continue the ceremonies and sacrifices they began. Although the Orisha are powerful beings they are not all-powerful and depend on their followers, their children, to continue their existence by continuing their worship. Like all beings, the Orisha require continued nourishment. This is provided by the santeros through the sacrifice of plants and animals. “A Yorùbá proverb says that, without human beings, there would be no Òrishà. The Òrishà need the sacrifice and praise of human beings in order to be effective” (Murphy 1993, 135).

As people live out their natural life spans, they die and become the Egun, the ancestors. The ancestors exist at another, different level of power from either the Orisha or humans. Although they no longer exist in the visible world they continue to manifest an interest in the affairs of their descendants. Within the family, the ancestors assume an important place in religious activity.42 In Africa, while it is the Orisha who are concerned with the destinies of individual practitioners, it is the ancestors, the Egun, who watch over the moral and social order of the society and one’s adherence to public norms (Brandon 1993, 15). In Africa, the dead are often buried within the family compound and reincarnation is considered a positive experience instead of a punishment for past lives. In such a culture the dead are always part of the family and may be seen to return in the faces and mannerism of their descendants. That relationship with the dead continues to permeate Afro-Cuban religions.

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42 Hallgren’s linguistic analysis suggests that the Yoruba words ẹsìn or isìn (religion) are related to the words sìn (to bury) and isǐnkú (burial, funeral arrangements). So that among the Yoruba religion is first and foremost concerned with the funeral rituals required to properly honor the dead (Hallgren 1988, 18–19 fn. 7).
The most elevated of the dead may become Orisha, others will be reborn, still others, those who are not properly elevated, run the risk of remaining earth-bound as spirits. Although ritualized respect for the Egun is an important part of both Yoruba and Santería religious practice, not all ancestors are accorded special ritual attention. Those who were evil or cruel and those who died young, unable to fulfill their destinies, may be remembered and may even be the recipients of rituals to “elevate” their spirits, but they would not be honored as Egun.

At the lowest level of power, but still of vital importance to the cosmos are animals, plants and what we call “inanimate” objects like rocks, the wind, dirt, water, honey and manufactured items like iron, food and the like. All of these contain levels of ashé that can be used by human beings for the benefit of the visible and invisible worlds.

**Spiritism**

In the Yoruba cosmology there is no other world, only this world that contains both visible and invisible elements, that is those which are seen and those which are not seen. Visible elements include living people, plants, animals, rocks, stars, rain, ocean, everything that can be perceived with the basic senses. The invisible elements include the dead, the Orisha and Olodumare. Sometimes the visible world is called *Aye*, earth, and the invisible world *Orun*, sky or heaven, but with the understanding that earth and sky are of a single world, not two separate worlds as is commonly believed in Christian European cultures. In Yoruba religion there is an interface between the visible and invisible worlds so that it is possible for people to form a channel between these two. This channel can be opened by prayer and other types of rituals. In respect to the dead, the ancestors, offerings were made on a regular basis and the ancestors were consulted about
important decisions within the family. In addition to private rituals, members of the village or town, the egungun society, staged regular ceremonies in which the lineage ancestors visited their descendants. During the egungun celebrations masked dancers representing not only individual ancestors but also lineage and other groups moved through the towns blessing their descendants and commenting on the general social fabric of the community.

Yoruba slaves taken to the islands of the Caribbean carried their religious ideas with them. However the rigors of the Middle Passage and the horrors of slavery made it difficult or impossible for them to honor their ancestors in the old way. Families were separated both in the African and the New World slave markets, many died and were buried at sea without the appropriate funeral rites and often without the knowledge of their families. The Egungun societies were broken up and their paraphernalia lost or left behind. Although the freed slaves in Cuba were able to reconstitute many elements of their religious systems major portions of their ancestor worship were not reconstituted. Although organized celebrations were lost the respect for the dead remained (Mason 1985, 31).43

In the meantime, in the mid-1800’s the phenomenon of “table turning” was gaining the attention of middle-class Europeans. One of those was a young teacher of chemistry, physics, comparative anatomy and astronomy named Léon Dénizarth Hippolyte Rivail (Kardec 1972, 9f). About 1850 he began his own research into this phenomenon. Working with a pair of young girls who were spirit mediums he began a systematic investigation. He was soon told by the spirits that he had an important religious mission to

43Some egungun rituals remained however (Bastide 1971, 94).
fulfill (Kardec 1972, 11). Based on the responses he received to his questioning he felt that

It is a most curious thing! My conversation with the invisible intelligences have completely revolutionized my ideas and convictions. The instructions thus transmitted constitute an entirely new theory of human life, duty, and destiny, that appears to me to be perfectly rational and coherent, admirably lucid and consoling, and intensely interesting. I have a great mind to publish these conversations in a book; for it seems to me that what interests me so deeply might very likely prove interesting to others (Kardec 1972, 12).

Based on his communication with spirits the young man changed his name to Allan Kardec and wrote a series of books including *The Spirit's Book* (Kardec 1972) and *The Book of Mediums* (Kardec 1970). These books detail the spiritual information he received and laid out a plan for the training and use of mediums to communicate with spirits. Kardec himself was never a medium, all of his communications with the spirit world was through the mediumship of others.

The spiritism developed by Allan Kardec used human mediums to communicate with various types of spirits. This "scientific" spiritism opened a channel between the visible and invisible world for middle-class Europeans. Here was a more direct way to not only communicate with the invisible world but also to receive direct communication in return. Kardec's spiritism was different in many ways from the spiritualism practiced in the United States. Among other things the spirits encountered in a Kardeccian session were normally highly evolved spirits who had chosen to communicate with the visible world in order to raise the spiritual level of their human companions rather than the spirits of the recent dead as was more common in the US. One was more likely to go to a spiritist session to increase one's own spiritual awareness than to talk to one's dead family members.

When this form of spiritism was brought to the Caribbean it developed into a form of seance called a white table spiritual mass. During a spiritual
mass trained mediums sitting around a table covered with a white cloth conveyed messages from the spirit world, performed healing rituals and provided general aid to those in attendance. During a typical session, those requiring assistance and other participants sit in rows behind the mediums (Pérez y Mena 1991). Over time Kardec’s form of spiritism was incorporated into the existing African-based traditions of ancestor worship, so that many santeros are also espiritismas, spiritualists. In one way spiritism fill a void left by the loss of Egungun societies, in another way it simply provided another means of communicating with the dead who were an essential part of the Yoruba cosmos. However, spiritism and Santería were not combined into a single system, rather they are two different religious systems that are practiced by the same people at different times and in different places. Within the Santería community the various rituals associated with the Orisha are kept completely separated from those of the dead, so much so that as a general rule one can not have Orisha altars in the same room or area as the altars set up for the dead and the spirits. Rituals for the dead usually happen at a different time and place from rituals for the Orisha. In addition there are rituals for the dead that invoke African rather than Kardecian precedents, that are completely separated from spiritualist practices.

In many Santería communities, as one becomes involved in the religion, one is introduced to the contemporary manifestation of spirit worship that includes elements from both African ancestor veneration and Kardecian spiritist practice. One might be encouraged to set up altars for both ancestors (egun) and spirit guides and will probably be invited to participate in a spiritist ceremony call a *misa blanca* (Sp. white mass), a form of the spiritist white table seance. Every person is believed surrounded by one or more spirit guides who have chosen to help them along their spiritual
journey. A typical spiritist altar in honor of the named and unnamed dead includes a number of glasses of water, white candles as well as a rosary or cross. No longer is mediumship reserved for trained individuals, no longer is theirs a performance with an audience. Instead the table becomes more like an altar pushed to one end of the room with the participants arranged in a semicircle around it. Everyone is considered to be a potential medium and everyone is encouraged to speak if moved by a spirit. Spirits are believed to have power to help and hinder the actions of humans. Individuals may have one or more of these protector spirits. During the seance the group may sing, dance, and pray to invoke the presence of spirits. Normally they do not invoke ancestors, particularly the recent dead, but rather spirit guides. A spirit might show itself to some of the people at the misa, it may speak to someone, or through trance possession it might enter into the visible world and give messages to individuals or the group as a whole. Participation in spiritual masses and communication with the dead are often used as an introduction into the Santería family and ritual life and may serve as a stepping stone toward full initiation.44

**Destiny and Divination**

An individual's place in the circle of family and community and his or her life path is determined by the agreement his ori makes before birth with Olodumare. Although the Yoruba word ori is usually translated "head" it actually encompasses a wider concept that include consciousness, physical characteristics and mental disposition, all the visible and invisible properties of the individual. The mythology says that before the individual is born the

44 Many scholars have discussed the relationship between the African propensity for possession trance and North American "spirit-filled" religious expression (Genovese 1975, 209f, Murphy 1994, esp. Chatper 6, Pitts 1993, Sobel 1987, esp. Chapter 14) .
ori kneels before Olodumare and chooses the destiny for this particular life (Murphy 1993, 10). During the birth process this choice is forgotten so that the major task in one's life is to discover and live in harmony with that chosen destiny (Fatunmbi 1992, 17). This understanding that each person has a unique destiny to fulfill is encapsulated in the Yoruba adage “concede to each person his or her own character” (Drewal 1992, 173).

Since this destiny is represented by a specific energy pattern one can discover it through divination. Among the Yoruba and their Santería descendants each individual's destiny can be represented by one of the 256 Odu or sacred “letters” that contain the oral scriptures of Ifa. These scriptures are contained in a set of verses telling the stories of the Orisha and are used to guide practitioners. By knowing one’s birth Odu one can begin to remember the agreement between one’s ori and Olodumare and to make the life choices that are in harmony with that agreement. At the same time, each destiny is associated with an Orisha. Each Orisha represents a particular energy pattern, a particular force of nature. These energy patterns might be thought of in terms of Jungian archetypes. Although each of us manifests the energy of several archetypes one predominates. This dominant archetype can be personified as a particular Orisha. In Santería it is said that this is the Orisha who “owns one’s head”. In order to manifest this archetypal energy and live in harmony with one’s destiny this Orisha becomes the focus of one’s

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45Herskovits makes the interesting observation that this belief in fate coupled with a belief in the ability to mitigate the effects of an unfortunate destiny “gives insight into deep-rooted patterns of thought under which [the New World Negro] refuses to accept any situation as inescapable” and refuses to accept the decrees of Fate itself as final (Herskovits 1990 (1941), 71).

46Divination is the practice of foretelling one’s future. Commonly called “fortune-telling”, divination can serve as a way to not only describe future events but also to communicate with the invisible world. As will be described in Chapter 4, santeros use a variety of divination techniques.
worship (Fatuunmbi 1992, 19). We might think of this Orisha as the expression of one’s higher, truer consciousness (Murphy 1993, 132). And just as one exhibits certain characteristics inherited from one’s natural parents, it is believed that one exhibits the characteristics—both positive and negative—associated with one’s personal Orisha (Canizares 1991, 372).

Santeros understand that as one moves through life one makes choices that enhance certain inherent skills and abilities while neglecting others. In a contemporary context, choosing a particular school may require that one move to a new town far away from family and friends; time spent studying can’t be spent perfecting one’s free throw. Divination, as well as familiarity with one’s guardian deity, is used to determine whether these choices are consistent with one’s destiny and in harmony with one’s inner balance. Divination provides ways to return to the path chosen by one’s ori so that one can live in harmony with one’s self, one’s family, the community and ultimately the world (Fatuunmbi 1992, 21).

Divination also provides a method for communication between the invisible and the visible worlds. Many people come to Santería in an effort to solve some personal or familial problem. In Hispanic communities it is common to combine western-style medical treatment with spiritual baths and other treatments recommended by various types of divination, and even non-believers will visit a botanica47 for a consultation when they encounter serious situations that appear insoluble by other methods. The simplest form of divination is the use of coconut pieces to get answers to yes/no types of questions and to confirm actions. More complicated problems might be addressed through cards of various types. Questions or problems addressed

47Botanica refers to a herbal pharmacy but also a shop selling a variety of religious supplies for a variety of Hispanic religious practices including Santería. Also available in most botanicas are one or more practitioners of divination who help clients solve personal problems.
directly to a particular Orisha use a set of cowry shells dedicated to that Orisha. The most difficult problems and questions not remedied by simpler forms of divination must be brought to a babalawo for resolution.

Coconut divination uses four pieces of coconut meat that have not had the dark outside rind removed. When the coconut pieces are dropped on the ground they fall in one of five dark/light patterns (all white, one, two, three or four dark sides showing). Each combination is read as yes, no or throw again. By asking a series of yes/no questions a person can determine the will and pleasure of the Orisha or egun consulted and discern a plan of action. Coconut divination is used at strategic points in ritual to determine whether the invisible world is happy and satisfied with the ritual to that point and, if not, what needs to be done. It can also be used to get quick answers from the egun or the Orisha. However, if one is having severe problems or if one’s needs require a more detailed answer then more complex divination systems are employed.

Many santeros use one of the European divination systems when dealing with clients. They may read cards, use a crystal ball or gaze into a candle. However when they want to speak directly to an Orisha they use a set of cowry shells. Each time a person is initiated to an Orisha he or she is given a set of shells that are the divination set for that Orisha. These shells have a natural “mouth” on one side while the back of the shell is removed so that it will lay flat. Sixteen of the shells are cast onto a reed mat and the resulting number or series of numbers are interpreted according to the client’s problem and the Orisha whose shells are being read. Since each throw produces a set of two numbers between 0 (no shells mouth up) and 16 (all shells mouth up), there are 256 possible combinations the diviner must be able to interpret. Although shell divination, known as dilogun, is of African origin it is less
popular in contemporary Nigeria than in the New World (Bascom 1980, 3). Any santero who has learned the verses and stories associated with the various combination of throws can "read the shells", however they do not normally interpret falls with 13, 14, 15, or 16 shells up. It is believed that those throws require recourse to a still higher level of divination that only babalawos, who are especially trained, can perform.\(^{48}\)

Using the divining chain (the *opele*), or kola nuts, babalawos speak the will of God through the mouth of Orula, their patron Orisha. Mythology tells us that Orula, the sacred diviner, is present when each ori chooses its destiny and therefore knows each person's past, present and future. Through Ifa divination, Orula indicates one of 256 possible odu or letters. Each letter is associated with a set of poems. Although the odu are similar to the numbers generated by the *dilogun* they use a different set of sayings and poems. Santeros believe that the solution to their problem, the secret of their destiny, is contained in these poems. It is the responsibility of the babalawo to know and be able to interpret the poem or poems associated with the odu and recommend a course of action to the client.

**Focus of the Religion**

In 1948 William Bascom told the American Anthropological Association that the foundation of Santería was "the stones, the blood, and the herbs" (Bascom 1950, 65). During the same talk he said that his Cuban informants consider the chromolithographs and statues of Catholic saints displayed on their altars to be "empty ornaments or decorations, which may

\(^{48}\)At one level, the separation between shell divination and that performed by the babalawo is not as strict as this discussion implies since both use similar proverbs and stories—in some cases, the same proverbs and stories are associated with a shell *odu* and an *odu* obtained by the babalawo. The primary difference between these systems is the Orisha speaking: Orula only speaks through the babalawo while all the other Orisha speak to santeros through sets of shells devoted to them individually.
be dispensed with" while the real power of the shrines resided in the stones "hidden behind a curtain in the lower part of the altar" (65). Asking himself whether the emphasis on stones, blood and herbs was derived from the African portion of this Afro-Cuban religion he says that he had found in his research among the Yoruba in African that the "mythology or theology of the gods, the prayers and the verbal formulae, and the rituals themselves seem of equal, if not greater importance" (67). Why then did these elements become the focus of the religion in the New World? He suggests that cultural contact in Cuba with Catholicism resulted not in the "coalescence of beliefs" but in the focus on those "distinctive features of African religion...which set Santería apart from the ritual of the Church" (68).

This talk, published two years later in the Southwestern Journal of Anthropology, is important in the history of the scholarship of Santería. Bascom’s characterization of the religion as based on stones, blood and herbs is quoted regularly. However his suggestion that the religion was developed in opposition to rather than association with Catholic beliefs and practices has never been fully explored. The practitioners, particularly priests, understand the difference between the Orisha who "eat" and the saints who do not at a deep level, in spite of confusing investigators by referring to the Orisha as santos. For this reason, as described by Curry, Black Americans can use Yoruba

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49I would suggest that Bascom’s subsequent research into the religious practices of Yoruba people showed the prominence of stones, blood, herbs in African practice as well. In his 1969 classic The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria Bascom says that the carvings found on Yoruba altars are merely aesthetic contributions to the shrines they adorn, that what is indispensable for worship "are the symbols through which the deities are fed: the 16 palm nuts of Ifa, the river-worn pebbles of Yemọja, Erin- and Qshun, and the thunderstones of Shango and Qya (Bascom 1969, 112). What the Orisha are "fed" is the blood of sacrificial animals. Thus blood and stones are the essential elements of African as well as Cuban worship.

However, this does not detract from Bascom’s basic thesis that these objects set Santería apart from the rituals of the Catholic church regardless of the presence of Catholic decorations on the Cuban altars.
or Lucumí terms, exile statues from their altars and otherwise expunge Spanish and Catholic elements from their religious practices without penalty (Curry 1997 119–121). As Bascom found, various cultural elements including saints can be dispensed with. However, calling these elements "empty ornamentation," as Bascom does, is also an overstatement. As will be detailed in Chapter 4, nothing on Santería altars is completely empty of meaning. Although these Catholic elements can be eliminated from displays (as they often are), their continued presence in the larger Santería context attests to their continued signification for some practitioners.

The stones that Bascom refers to are a portion of the living presence of the Orisha present on every Santería altar. It is through the stones that the Orisha manifest in this world. Like the consecrated host that Catholics believe is the actual body of Christ, these stones are the Orisha. But a host of other items represent the Orisha. Just as Catholics have crucifixes in their homes and churches to remind them of Jesus, santeros use a variety of anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic objects to remind them of the Orisha. Each Orisha is associated with one or more colors, with particular animals, with certain fruit and other types of food, with goods of various types as well as with one or more Catholic saints. I would suggest that the concept of the Orisha is so broad as to include every element of the visible world, everything that exists or can be imagined can be given an Orisha correspondence by a knowledgeable practitioner. We will come back to this concept when we begin to look in detail at the construction of sacred space in Chapters 3 and 4.

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50 Many of the changes Curry described can also be found in the practices of non-Hispanic white practitioners for whom Spanish and Catholic culture is also foreign.
Orisha and Their Stories

In Africa there are an innumerable number of Orisha: 201, 401, 2001—as many as you can think of—plus one more. Since they represent the forces of the universe and are elements of Olodumare, every natural and manufactured thing represents or is associated with an Orisha. These include an individual's head or destiny, rivers, hills, the forest, the ocean, the crossroads, love, children, wealth, occupations like blacksmith, farmer and hunter, as well as phenomenon like thunder and lightning, wind and rain. In the New World some parts of this pantheon have maintained or gained prominence while others have become more obscure. Prominent Orisha include the warriors Eleggua, Ogun and Ochosi; the King of the White Cloth Obatala; the mother of the Orisha Yemaya; Shango, the legendary fourth king of the city-state of Oyo; Oya, the whirlwind and the owner of the cemetery; Obba, the first or legitimate wife of Shango; Oshun the youngest of the Orisha who is the guardian of love, wealth and children; and the diviner Orula.

All ceremonies and rituals begin with an invocation to Eleggua, who is also called Eshu. He is the messenger between the gods and men, the owner of the cross-roads who must open the way for communication between the visible and invisible worlds. Eleggua is one of the most complex of the Yoruba deities. Christian missionaries, in their early encounters with Yoruba religion, tended to equate him with the concept of the Devil, but this is most unfortunate and distorts his nature (Lawson 1984, 60). Eleggua is a trickster, a mischief maker, the one who punishes and rewards, a source of wisdom and knowledge, as well as the one who confuses situations (60-61). The Yoruba cosmology does not contain the duality of radically opposing forces, such as good and evil, so Eleggua appears ambiguous. His actions may appear evil
because they test people's character as well as punish their misconduct. At the same time it is Eleggua who rewards good character and correct conduct.

Living at the boundary between town and bush is Ogun, the blacksmith, ironworker and patron of all metals. Like Eleggua Ogun is ambiguous since he is associated not only with surgeons, policemen, soldiers, automobiles, and railroads but also all acts of violence and war, especially those cause by metal implements (arrows, guns, cannon). Ogun represents the triumph of technology over raw nature. According to one story when the Orisha first came to earth they were unable to pass through the dense thicket until Ogun opened the way using his trademark machete. For this reason he is often invoked to clear the way or remove heavy obstacles.

Ochosi, together with Eleggua and Ogun, is one of the warrior Orisha. He is the patron of hunters and is often represented by the tools of the hunter, particularly a bow and arrow, or prey animals like deer. In the new world he is also associated with judicial and administrative powers and is often invoked by those who find themselves in trouble with the law or facing a trial. However, Ochosi's justice can be cruel. One story tells of a time when he had killed a brace of pheasants as a gift for another Orisha. Leaving the birds in his house he returned to the woods to continue to hunt. While he was gone his mother visited his house, saw the beautiful birds and decided to take one home thinking that her son would not mind. When he returned home, Ochosi, angry at the loss of one of his birds, shot an arrow into the air commanding it to kill the thief. The arrow, impelled by Ochosi's curse, pierced his mother's breast and killed her. Thus it is said that Ochosi's justice is so true that he does not even spare his own mother.

The stories of other Orisha also serve as warnings to their human children. Obatala, the symbol of wisdom, intelligence and purity, was sent by
Olodumare to create the solid ground that became the earth as we know it. He was also instructed by Olodumare to mold the bodies of men and women so that Olodumare could breathe the breath of life into them. Unfortunately while he was working he became thirsty and began to drink palm wine. As the liquor took effect his hands became clumsy so some of the figures he produced were twisted and malformed.\textsuperscript{51} When Obatala's intoxication wore off and he saw what he had done, he swore never to touch liquor again. So to this day, priests of this most holy of Orisha avoid not only strong drink but all mind-altering substances (Murphy 1993, 90).

Shango was the fourth Alaafin or king of the city of Oyo in what is now Nigeria. One of the stories says that he inadvertently caused a thunder storm that killed his wives and children. Full of sorrow and remorse he abdicated his throne and hanged himself.\textsuperscript{52} That act of contrition caused him to be raised to the level of Orisha. As an Orisha he is associated with thunder and lightning as well as with the power that can be unleashed against both others and oneself. To be able to control such power is power itself. Shango is also seen as the essence of male sexuality, the power of the male to create new life.

The female Orisha Yemaya and Oshun are said to be sisters, they represent the complementary forces of female sexuality and maternal love and protection. The stories tell us that in addition to her own children, Yemaya often raised the children of others especially those of her sister Oshun who as the goddess of love was more interested in the begetting of

\textsuperscript{51}As a consequence of his clumsiness children born with birth defects. Among the Yoruba in Africa, for example albinos, hunchbacks, dwarfs, the deaf, etc., are considered sacred to him and are marked by their birth as his worshippers. Children born in a caul or with their umbilical cord wrapped around their necks are also sacred to him. (Bascom 1969, 81).

\textsuperscript{52}In another story he was dethroned and expelled because of his abuses of power (Johnson 1960 (1921), 34). Bascom describes the manner in which the Oni (king) of Ife could be dethroned and either forced to commit suicide or executed by members of the Oro cult (Bascom 1969, 31).
children than the raising of them. But Yemaya can be a stern mother. In some stories Yemaya is the real mother of Shango while in others she is his adoptive mother. In one, as his adoptive mother, they are separated for a very long time, so long that the great womanizer Shango does not recognize her when they meet at a drumming. Struck by her beauty and not realizing she was his adoptive mother, he suggested that they go off alone together. So the queen of the ocean took the embodiment of fire on a little boat out in the middle of the water. When she caused a storm to rock the tiny boat the great king, who did not know how to swim and was deathly afraid of water, was terrified. He was only saved from her anger when he recognized Yemaya, repented of his incestuous desires and promised to respect both the mother who bore him and the one who raised him.

Oshun, Yemaya’s sister, is the divinity associated in the New World with the river and fresh water. She controls all that makes life worth living including love, marriage, children, money and pleasure and is the essence of female sexuality. Unlike the warrior Orisha Oshun uses the good things in life to win her battles. In one story, the women of the world had separated themselves from the men and formed their own town. The king called upon the Orisha to capture the town of women for him. Each of the warriors tries and fails. Shango fails, Sopona fails. Egungun fails. Ogun fails. Even Oya, the woman warrior fails. Finally Oshun tries. But instead of attacking with sword and spear she takes a gourd and string and makes a shékere (a type of musical instrument that has beads or shells woven around the outside of the gourd as noisemakers). Beating on the shékere she dances into town singing “Oshun is coming to play, Oshun does not know how to fight”. Soon all the

53 That is death by lightning, death by plague, the judgment of the ancestors, death by the sword, death by the whirlwind.
women join in the dance and follow her back to where their men are waiting (Bascom 1980, 413–419).

Oya, the third major female Orisha, is the embodiment of the winds and the tempest. As the wife of Shango she learned to spout fire and lightning as he does. She is a warrior Orisha and can be very aggressive in her behavior. We can see her power in the winds and lightning of the thunderstorm where she is fighting along side her husband. She is also the owner of the cemetery and as such controls the iku, the dead. One story tells of her revenge on Shango for his dalliance with Oshun. Because of his fear of the dead she is able to imprison him in her home by stationing a battalion of iku around its perimeter.

Each of these stories, and the myriad of others, describe the Orisha and their interaction among themselves and between themselves and their human children. Some explain the forces of nature while others are morality tales designed to instruct and educate. We will find references to these and others encoded on the altars of practitioners as well as in their clothing and jewelry, in their prayers and songs and in their explanations of the behavior of themselves and others. Since the Orisha and their stories and correspondences form the core of Chapter 4 we will defer an extended discussion until then.

**Initiation, Iyawoage and Practice**

Everyone who is involved in Santería enters the religion under the protection of a santero who is already involved in the religion. In Africa the religion is often passed from parent or grandparent to child and many of the priestly orders remain within a family lineage. The Middle Passage and slavery obliterated the families that could pass along these traditions. With the rise of the cabildos there also developed a new type of family relationship.
These fictive families were formed not by blood but by initiation. One was “born” into a religious family through the initiations provided by the more senior members of the family. Only those with enough knowledge and ashé can give birth to their own godchildren. And only through such an initiation can one become a fully adult member of the religion. This means that instead of a church in which people may have only causal relationships with each other, everyone in an ile, a Santería family, is related through a complex hierarchy of initiation.

When one receives preliminary initiations one not only forms a relationship with the priest from whom one receives the initiation, who is known as one’s padrino (Sp. godfather) or madrina (Sp. godmother), but also with all the other members of that person’s religious family including those who are older in the religion than your godparent and all those your godparent has initiated. You instantly acquire brothers-, sisters-, cousins-, aunts-, uncles- and grandparents-in-the-religion back several generations. And just as in a more traditional family one has certain responsibilities and obligations to one’s parents and siblings, so also in one’s spiritual family one has responsibilities and obligations toward one’s new religious family. In traditional families youth respects and honors age, so also in this religious family one’s duties depend upon one’s spiritual age. Those who are newer to the religion—regardless of their physical age—honor and obey those who have been involved longer. Thus an older man who is newly initiated will defer to a younger woman who has many years in the religion. Everyone defers to someone else in the hierarchy. The most obvious sign of this respect

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54 In Spanish societies the godmother and godfather not only participate in the child’s baptism but also serve as the witnesses at his or her marriage. In the Spanish colonies, members of the lower classes often asked their betters (bosses, masters, etc.) to serve this function thus creating ties of ritual kinship between the two families (Lockhart and Schwartz 1983, 15).
is the custom of prostration. Once one is fully initiated, or crowned, one is expected to prostrate oneself as a sign of greeting at the feet of all those who are older in the religion. One may also show one’s respect in other small ways: by listening respectfully, by fetching food or drinks, and by providing other small, or large, service to one’s elders.

Although one may become involved in the religion in a variety of ways, the first formal commitment is a set of initiations called “Warriors and Necklaces.” Although one may receive a single necklace as a protection, the initiation of necklaces implies a deeper involvement in the religion. Normally the initiate receives the necklaces associated with the five or seven major Orisha (Eleggua, Obatala, Yemaya, Oshun, Shango, and perhaps Ogun and Ochosi) although there are people who have received as few as three necklaces. The number depends on the traditions of the particular ile or spiritual household.

The warrior Orisha, Eleggua, Ogun and Ochosi, are embodied in a set of objects often given during the same ritual. Eleggua, the messenger, generally is given in the form of a small cone of concrete with a face made of cowry shells, Ogun, the blacksmith, lives in an iron cauldron with iron tools, Ochosi the hunter is an iron bow and arrow. These objects are blessed, fed with sacrificial blood, and placed behind the front door to protect the household from outside forces. They are considered the embodiment of the Orisha they represent and require certain ritual attention on the part of the practitioner. Although one may receive just necklaces or just warriors, it is the practice in many iles to present both during the same ritual.

One receives these initiations through a fully-crowned santero, the priest who becomes one’s godparent, one’s padrino or madrina. These initiations brings one into the religion as a practitioner. With these
initiations one can participate in certain types of rituals and one incurs responsibilities toward one's spiritual family. Godchildren are the basic laborers of the household, they perform much of the work for the various rituals of the household. One can stay at this level of involvement for years, even a lifetime, participating in many functions but excluded from the most profound parts of the religion. Many, however, choose the deepest commitment and become a priest dedicated to a particular Orisha in a ceremony called asiento or "crowning."

Part of the genius of the Yoruba religions was the widely disseminated institution of priesthood. One of the reasons the Cuban slaves and freedmen could reconstruct their religion in the new world was that in their African homeland they developed different levels of ritual action. One level involved the home where the family head provided the focus of ritual action. A second level was that of the town where the office of the oba or chief included certain ritual responsibilities. Without an oba certain types of rituals could not be performed. At a higher level the king and the priests of Ife, the religious center of the Yoruba, were responsible for certain rituals. Interwoven with all these hierarchies were the priests and priestesses associated with the various shrines throughout Yorubaland.\textsuperscript{55} This means that in any village a large portion of the population were ritual specialists (Lawson 1984, 55). This diffusion of ritual specialists throughout the Yoruba people worked to their advantage when they joined together in the Cuban cabildos to reconstruct their ancestral religion. Today that diffusion is evident in the Santería ile or religious household. Each ile is headed by a fully crowned, that is fully initiated, priest. Many of the godchildren of a

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\textsuperscript{55}For a nuanced account of these ritual relationships see Olupona's \textit{Kingship, Religion and Rituals in a Nigerian Community} (Olupona 1991).
household may also be crowned priests. At most major religious events one half to two-thirds of the participants are priests.

Movement from initiate to priest involves a week-long initiation ritual followed by a 12-month liminal period. During the ritual the initiate is dedicated to a particular Orisha, becomes intimately associated with that deity and receives the fundamentos, or tools of a group of Orisha. This ritual is also called "making" the saint, (Sp. hacer el santo), because it is only through this ritual that the religion is continued and the Orisha become manifest in this visible world. During the crowning ritual the Orisha are made manifest in two ways: the initiate's primary Orisha is "seated" in the head of the initiate so that the new priest becomes for the community the embodiment of that Orisha. It is after this initiation that the new priest can manifest his or her guardian Orisha through trance possession. Secondly, a group of Orisha are "seated" in the individual sopera\textsuperscript{56} designated for them. It is only through this ritual that the Orisha can continue to manifest in the visible world. In the Santería world-view the Orisha can only be "made" by human action. This means, among other things, that an Orisha is unable to call new children, that is, accept new devotees, without a community to initiate them. Without human cooperation there would be no Orisha either in their presentations or in their devotees. The continued life of a spirit depends on the service of its devotees. Orisha whose priests were not carried to the new world in sufficient number have disappeared from the Caribbean pantheon and in at least one case an Orisha common in the Americas has virtually disappeared from Africa because the majority of his African followers were killed or enslaved so no one was left to initiate new practitioners.

\textsuperscript{56}Sopera\textsuperscript{s} (Sp.) are large soup tureens which are used to hold the elements embodying each Orisha along with the tools associated with the Orisha. Each Orisha "lives" in their own sopera.
Newly "crowned" or initiated priests are called iyawo or bride of the Orisha. During the year-long novitiate period iyawos are subject to a range of restrictions and requirements designed to protect their fragile new being, solidify their relationship with their titular heads, and begin teaching them their position in the religion. In Chapter 4 we will look more deeply into this sacred and liminal time.
Chapter 3

Sacred Space as Palimpsest:
A Dialogic of Santería Altars

But by sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred.¹

Religious altars and shrines form an important part of the religion of Santería and the traditions from which it springs. Although several definitions of altar will be used in this section, at its most basic an altar is sacred space used for communication between the human and spiritual worlds. In many traditions altars are used as the site of sacrifice, the place where physical goods are offered on behalf of the individual or the community to the unseen forces of the cosmos. Such offerings may include the first fruits of harvest, gifts of fabricated goods, animals or even human beings. Although some offerings are destroyed as part of the sacrificial ritual others are given back to the community after being sanctified by the time spent in the presence of divinity.

This section looks at the types of altars, shrines and other sacred space constructed in West Africa among the Yoruba and in Southern Europe

¹(Durkheim 1915, 52).
particularly in Spain. We will look at the ways these traditions influenced construction of Santería sacred spaces in colonial Cuba and later in the contemporary United States. Several different theoretical constructs will serve our interpretation of these spaces including Mircea Eliade’s understanding of sacred and profane space and M. M. Bakhtin’s concepts of heterological and hybridized language.

Issues of hiding and showing, and visibility and invisibility will particularly frame our discussion of African and Afro-Caribbean altars and shrines. When we look at Santería altars we see a vast array of objects representing the various Orisha. While these items present a visual panoply, they often hide the containers holding the presence of the Orisha themselves—because the Orisha (with a few exceptions) are never displayed to the uninitiated. The *fundamentos* (Sp. basis, foundation; the object or set of objects serving as the embodiment of an Orisha) of each Orisha are hidden away in a pot or other container and it is the hidden contents of that container that is considered the actual presence of the Orisha itself. Thus the Orisha is hidden from view, surrounded by representations but never displayed directly. Unlike Catholic altars which generally display an image of the sacred being enshrined in the altar, African altars seldom contain anthropomorphic representations of divine beings. Generally the representations seen on African altars portray devotees in the act of worship (Drewal, et al. 1989, 26, Thompson 1993, 17, Thompson 1993, 147). These things are only objects created or acquired for the enjoyment of the deities and

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2Eleggua and Ogun principally. I will discuss particular Orisha in Chapter 4 below.
3Although a representation of the donor is often included in Catholic artwork, particularly in paintings commissioned by an individual, they are seldom the focus of the work.
the edification of their followers. What is the object of worship is hidden beneath, within, behind the array of brightly colored goods. It is this dichotomy between what is visible and what is invisible that confounds those who describe the religion as syncretistic. For the visible elements reflect a wide variety of sources ranging from ancient African representations to colonial Spanish items to twentieth-century American consumer goods. But the Orisha themselves are not manifested in these items. Their presence is hidden away in containers, shielded from the human gaze. And it is in the hidden environment of the container as well as in the secret rituals, the elders tell us, that the least amount of syncretization has taken place.\(^4\)

**Sacred Space**

Mircea Eliade, using Rudolf Otto's concept of *ganz andere*, calls the sacred that which is of "a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world" (Eliade 1987, 11 citing Otto's The Idea of the Holy). This wholly other manifests itself in objects that become *something else* while continuing to be *themselves*. A sacred stone continues to be a stone, or at least appears as such from the profane point of view, while from another point of view, it is transformed into a manifestation of the sacred. He suggests that in archaic societies\(^5\) the sacred is seen as equivalent to power and to reality itself since the "sacred is saturated with *being*." Thus "religious man\(^6\) deeply desires to *be*, to participate in *reality*, to be saturated with power." What is outside the aura of the sacred, the powerful, reality, is unreal or pseudoreal (Eliade 1987,

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\(^4\)Personal communication, Changó Ladé and Olumidé, December 1997.

\(^5\)See my critique of the use of such terms as "archaic" in reference to these societies in Chapter 1.

\(^6\)With Eliade, and writers whose works pre-date contemporary feminist influence, we must assume that the masculine includes the female unless otherwise specified. Here again I will not attempt to "correct" the usage of these authors.
Profane space is homogeneous and neutral with no difference from one point to another; sacred space on the other hand is unique, exceptional, it provides a fixed point, a center, that provides structure and a basis for action (Eliade 1987, 20-24). Religious man can only live in a sacred world because only in such a world does he experience being (Eliade 1987, 64).

The threshold that separates this sacred space from the surrounding profane world is “the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds” so that communication between them is possible (Eliade 1987, 25). Thus sacred space, churches for example, serve as “doors of the gods,” passages between one world and the other (Eliade 1987, 26-27). The creation and consecration of sacred space allows and ensures communication with the world of the gods. According to Eliade, the ceremony that creates this sacred space reproduces creation on a microcosmic scale. Undifferentiated chaos becomes, through human action, transformed into cosmos. By establishing a particular place, organizing it and inhabiting it, communities re-enact the work of the gods (Durkheim 1915, chapter 1 also discusses the sacred in archaic religions, Eliade 1987, 30–34).

**Looking Ahead**

I will begin this chapter by looking at the way contemporary Houstonians celebrate the anniversary of a santero’s initiation. The centerpiece of this birthday celebration is an elaborate display constructed to honor and house the Orisha during the week-long ritual. This presentation of the Orisha is alternatively called the birthday trono (Sp. throne) or altar. It partakes of a variety of metaphoric traditions including African altars and sacred groves, Spanish home altars and sacred shrines, and nineteenth century French and Spanish royal displays. David Hilary Brown has provided the bulk of the research done on Orisha thrones, so I will begin by looking in
detail at his descriptions of these displays. Although he presents convincing research on the impact of royal presentations on these displays, I want to suggest that religious shrines from both European and African traditions also strongly shaped them. Thus I will look more closely at the religious traditions that have informed the development of these displays as altars rather than thrones. In looking backward toward African and Spanish religious traditions I will trace some of the threads that have been woven together to form this uniquely new world ritual form, and the sign-systems that they embody.

Altars have always been sacred space, the threshold between the visible and the invisible, the sacred and the mundane, the human and the divine. Although birthday altars are not the only such threshold in Santería they are the most comprehensive and provide the key to understanding other types of displays. After considering the sacred forms brought to Cuba by both Africans and Spaniards I will look at the ways these forms are being reinterpreted today. Along the way I will look more closely at basic differences between African and New World worship traditions and the pantheons associated with each.

Like the many communities cited by Eliade, these communities re-enact the work of the gods by recreating the cosmos on a personal and communal level. They seek to represent their view of the invisible world through the construction of visible structures. By recreating sacred space far from the mythological center, practitioners rebuild the world in a sacred manner that then allows them to live in the type of sacralized world Eliade suggests is typical of "archaic" societies.
Description of a Birthday Altar

We hung a panel of cloth on the wall for each of the Orisha. (Plate 1) The blue and silver brocade in the center for Yemaya, full width at the top gathered below the level of the cabinet on which she will sit. When everything is set up it will look as though the blue is radiating from her pot. On her right, Oshun’s cloth, the same design in yellow and gold; and on her left white-on-white brocade for Obatala. Where the goddesses’ panels look like flowers caught in cloth, his looks like abstract scallop shells piled row on row. To the left of Obatala’s cloth hangs a red and gold striped cloth imprinted with images of African weapons, spears and shields to represent the great warriorking, Shango. Continuing to the left we hung a purple and gold cloth for Ochosi. Although he is usually represented as a hunter and woodsman, this cloth proclaims his royal heritage. Finally the swooping red and black cloth of Eleggua, the guardian and trickster, marks one end of the sacred space.

Opposite Eleggua’s cloth, marking the other edge of the throne hangs the plain green and black of Ogun’s cloth. The cloth hanging next to it is a brown and green abstract design that recalls the hunter, woodsman and fisherman Inle. In the corner, hangs a black cloth with dark blue flowers. We can feel the depth of the ocean and of Olokun’s mysteries that are hidden there. Overhead a fishnet seems to float in billowy white clouds or ocean waves. The fish mobile and individual fish give us the experience of being under the water in the realm of Yemaya, mother of the fishes and queen of the oceans.

The Birthday Celebration

A major event in the lives of Santería priests is the yearly birthday party celebrating the anniversary of their initiation. Although the birthday celebration encompasses an entire seven-day period, the event generally is
celebrated on the date of the initiation and thus is on the same date each year. Because they are personal festivals these parties are generally held in the home of the celebrant, the priest whose initiation is being commemorated. In preparation for this event the priest, often with the help of his or her godparents, godchildren and friends, builds an elaborate altar for the Orisha.

Generally a spare bedroom or other room is dedicated to this event. The Orisha throne that a santera\(^7\) builds as part of her birthday celebration can be as simple or elaborate as her taste and pocketbook allow. Altars may be slipped into the corner of a room or may expand to fill an entire room so that visitors can only stand at the doorway. The ceiling and walls of the designated space are covered with panels of fabric. Although the floor is usually covered with a mat, fabric can also be used to complete the space. In the style of eighteenth century royal Spanish apartments, the cloths form walls and a canopy that encloses the entire area.\(^8\) Two styles are used within the Houston community. One style, sometimes considered more Cuban, hangs a panel of fabric to represent each of the Orisha enshrined in the space (see Plate 1); the other style uses only the colors of the primary Orisha. In the latter case, small

\(^7\)Because so much of the information in this chapter is focused on the altar building of women, this section will prefer the female. Because both men and women engage in these altar-building activities, the reader must remember that the male is included within the female.

\(^8\)Similarities between these altars and the Kalabari tradition of decorating funeral beds and funeral rooms needs further research. The Kalabari are neighbors of the Yoruba who during pre-colonial times were concentrated in the eastern delta of the Niger River on the Atlantic coast of what is now Nigeria. Their funeral rooms, like Santería birthday displays, are formed by hanging textiles on the ceiling and walls. In addition they artistically arrange a selection of cloths on a funeral bed for a seven-day period. A variety of African, European and Indian textiles are used in these displays. The number, style and age of these cloths were limited only by the resources of the family (Eicher and Erekosima 1989). Since the Kalabari/Calibali were pivotal in the west African-European trade, including the slave trade, as well as providing between 16% (late period, 1850–70) and 30% (early period, 1760–69) of the African slaves to Cuba (Brandon 1993, 58) their influence on altar-building traditions deserves more research.
splashes of color are incorporated into the pedestals and stands holding the pots and accouterments of the Orisha so each deity is represented by a cloth (Plate 2). In either case, on the floor in front of the enthroned Orisha a "plaza"\(^9\) of food, fruit, candles and other offerings along with a mat that will be used by the santero-guests to prostrate themselves before the deities completes the display. Each Orisha is associated with particular fruit and the sweet deserts are believed to keep them "cool"\(^{10}\) and happy. Once the altar has been constructed and the Orisha installed, the throne area becomes sacred space. Only those who have been initiated can stand on the mat or beneath the canopy (Flores-Peña and Evanchuk 1994, 29).\(^{11}\)

The entire space is a riot of color enclosing a carefully orchestrated presentation of deities. The Orisha who are the mother and father of the celebrant (that is the Orisha who owns her head and another Orisha of the opposite sex) have prominent positions elevated in the center of the room, while the Warriors (Eleggua, Ogun and Ochosi) are placed closest to the floor toward the front where they can act as sentinels guarding their fellow Orisha. Obatala, as father of the Orisha and the symbol of spiritual elevation generally has the most elevated position. Other Orisha whose stories suggest that they are friends or lovers may be placed close together while those who are often at odds with each other may be placed at opposite ends of the throne area. In addition to the colored cloths and their soperas, each Orisha is surrounded by

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\(^9\)The term plaza refers to the spread of sweet deserts, fruit and other offerings at the foot of the altar but also refers back to the open-air markets that are the sources of these gifts (Brown 1993, 51).

\(^{10}\)See Robert Ferris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit* as well as Chapter 5 below for a discussion of "coolness" within Yoruba cosmology.

\(^{11}\)Some priests do not allow uninitiated persons into the space at any time during its construction and dismantlement (Personal communication, Changó Ladé, August 20, 1997).
their particular tools and symbols: the queens have crowns and fans, Shango may have a horse (red and white carousel horses are popular), the warriors may be surrounded by machetes, Yemaya may have seashells or oars. Each santera, in consultation with her elders, is free to add the items she feels is most appropriate to her own display.

On the first day of the celebration, the anniversary of her initiation, the santera welcomes her religious family to her home. Each guest first greets the Orisha by prostrating herself on the mat placed in front of the throne area specifically for that purpose. Godchildren of the hostess generally leave the ritually prescribed gift of a plate with coconuts, candles and money, others will leave offerings of money or other goods. Entertainment may include live drumming or recorded music of special Orisha melodies depending on the resources of the hostess. Each guest will be served dinner as well as encouraged to share in the various desserts that have been prepared and presented to the Orisha. At the end of the evening everyone will receive a bag of the fruit from the plaza and perhaps additional samples of the sweets, thus sharing in the ashé of the celebration. Members of the religious family who are unable to attend the main celebration will find time during the week to drop in, pay their respects to the Orisha and congratulate the santera on another year en ocha.

**Altar Types and Descriptions**

Throughout this chapter, the religious spaces of Santería described are variously described as altars and thrones. This is consistent with the practice of practitioners who use both terms to describe these displays. Brown probably has the best analysis of the ways in which these spaces incorporate colonial models from French and Spanish royal thrones and other spaces (Brown 1989, especially chapter seven) while Robert Farris Thompson shows how African
conceptions of sacred space are reinterpreted to a Western idiom (Thompson 1993). Each of these analyses provides insights into the form of the contemporary altar/throne.

Brown describes an Orisha throne as a “huge, stunning altar-installation” (Brown 1989, 377). He says that early initiation thrones combined the European-derived canopy structures that traditionally enthroned the kings and queens of the cabildos with African import goods supplied by Canary Islanders specifically to practitioners of African-derived religions. The addition of African elements such as cowry shells, bead necklaces, animal skins, teeth, horns and calabashes was “remarkably creative, even surreal” (Brown 1989, 378), while elements of the altars, particularly the “dрапing of cloth and the symmetrical comically-soaring architecture and gold-gilt ornamentation” draws on Catholic visual forms (Brown 1989, 378-79).

Brown describes three types of Orisha thrones: the initiation throne (Sp. trono del asiento), the birthday throne (Sp. trono del cumpleaños) and the thrones constructed for drumnings (Sp. trono del tambor) and suggests that the initiation, or coronation, throne serves as the prototype of the other two (Brown 1989, 381). Each of these thrones consists of three basic

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12 Brown has also presented the information summarized in this chapter in an article in African Arts, “Thrones of the Orichas” (Brown 1993) and “Toward an Ethnoaesthetics of Santería Ritual Arts: The Practice of Altar-Making and Gift Exchange” in Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art (Brown 1996). These sources will not be referenced except where the later works include information not contained in the dissertation.

13 I disagree with this basic premise. Although the initiation altar forms the initiates first impressions of the self as bride, priest, and child of the Orisha, I would suggest that both in terms of analysis and in terms of introduction to the religion, the birthday altars form the basis of the other display designs. These are often the first altars non-initiates encounter. In addition, because they enthrone a group of Orisha they contain a more complete window into the semiotic system.
elements: draped cloth forming the ceiling and walls of the space, some way of elevating the focus of the display and a reed floor mat. The cloths are used to form a canopy overhead, a backdrop behind and a set of open curtains on either side of the space. Small colored squares of cloth, called paños (Sp. cloth) may be attached to the walls of the throne area, draped over the Orisha container or otherwise scattered about the display. In the case of the initiation throne the only furniture is a the cloth-covered pilón (Sp. mortar, Yr. ado, an inverted African-style mortar) (Brown 1989, 383-84, Brown 1993, 46). For other displays a pilón along with a variety of pedestals, cabinets and other items hold the Orisha and their accruements. In the case of an initiation, the canopy and walls of the space as well as the cloth covering the pilón evoke the colors associated with the primary Orisha of the initiate, while the paños represent the other Orisha he or she receives as part of the initiation. Thus the throne of an Oshun initiate will be yellow and/or gold with splashes of white, blue, and red. Drumming thrones follow a similar scheme emphasizing the colors of the Orisha to whom the drumming is dedicated (Brown 1989, 470, Brown 1993, 50).

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14Brown also suggests that the curtains draw on Western theatrical/performance traditions “to evoke an extended moment of unveiling, freshness and renewed authority before an audience of followers” (Brown 1989, 395). We might also suggest with Eliade that the whole represents the cosmos with the canopy representing the sky, the mat floor the earth and the walls the directions of cosmic space (Eliade 1987, 42–53).

15In addition to this altar space initiates of the warrior Orisha, that is Eleggua, Ogun and Ochosi, also have an outdoor throne constructed of green leaves and other forest elements and furnished with a large stone instead of a pilón (Brown 1989, 397).

16A fuller discussion of the colors associated with each Orisha is included in Chapter 4.

17Because few drummings are presented in the local community, this project will have little to say about these particular altars. However, much that is said about birthday altars should be applicable to these displays.
may highlight the color of the primary Orisha or it may include panels of cloth for each Orisha enthroned there (Brown 1989, 415-19).

The space delimited by the canopy, walls and mat-floor is sacred space. Because the initiation ceremony calls on metaphors of marriage, royalty, and birth, this space functions as marriage bed, royal throne and cradle for the new-born priest. As a liminal threshold the outer edges of the canopy and the mat form a floor-to-ceiling plane neither the iyawo (the newly initiated priest) nor uninitiated visitors can violate (Brown 1989, 391). The design of the birthday altar contrasts with the coronation throne in that it is the Orisha, rather than the iyawo, who are enthroned beneath the cloth canopy (Brown 1989, 414). This altar structures a dialog between the visible and invisible worlds and witnesses the exchange of gifts between the Orisha and their followers (Brown 1989, 414).

Brown compares the birthday throne to the presentation of an African king. Like the Orisha, a king is usually presented as elevated above his companions, dressed with a crown. He carries beaded attributes of his authority, and is surrounded by attendants (Brown 1989, 439-40). However it is the echoes of European, rather than African, royalty that Brown suggests show through more strongly. He says that eighteenth century European styles became distinctively Afro-Cuban during the cabildo period\(^{19}\) (Brown 1989, 447). The authority and splendor of the cabildo officers were symbols of authority borrowed from Spanish and colonial Cuban iconography. The

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\(^{18}\)Chapter 5 will discuss in more detail the iyawo and the initiation periods.

\(^{19}\)Brandon describes the development and later restrictions of the cabildo period. He says that although the cabildos were encouraged by the Cuban authorities in the mid-eighteenth century, they were driven underground by increasingly repressive legislation just before the turn of the twentieth century (Brandon 1993, 69-74). So we can name the period from the early eighteenth to late nineteenth century the cabildo period.
European aristocratic styles that were endlessly copied and revised in colonial Cuba were invested by the cabildo with new significance as royal settings for initiatory and ceremonial practice (Brown 1993, 55). Throne styles were derived both from the Louis XV style of Carlos III of Spain (1759–1788) which includes layering, draping and tying of expensive satins, velvets and laces, and from nineteenth century royal residences and wealthy homes (Brown 1989, 453–55). Thus Yoruba ritual patterns were maintained through a conscious borrowing, copying and appropriation of presentation systems. With Brown, I will suggest that this cultural borrowing does not represent a dilution, a loss or a corruption of the original concepts as much as a creative and practical process of adaptation (Brown 1993, 55).

In addition to these dramatic altars a fourth type of presentation space not highlighted by Brown will be included in the following discussion. This is the domestic shrine, the everyday home of the Orisha. In Cuba and in the Cuban-American community the Orisha, hidden within their covered vessels, are often confined to a set of shelves or a closed cabinet called a canastillero. Within this cabinet the soperas, beaded attributes, accumulated gifts and often an ebo (Yr. sacrifice) are stored (Brown 1993, 50). In the local community, this display is often set up on open shelves in a bedroom or other private space that can be sheltered from the gaze of strangers.²⁰ While the birthday display is a yearly week-long presentation, for fifty-one weeks a year the Orisha continue to inhabit the santera’s home, displayed in this less dynamic form.

²⁰Thus among those who place their Orisha behind closed doors, “showing” them becomes a rite of passage for new friends. When these friends are trusted they are often introduced to the religion by way of these domestic altar displays.
European Background

Domestic altars and shrines have a long history in southern Europe. Not only are home altars commonly found in Greek and Roman archeological sites, contemporary observation finds them maintained by Greek, Italian and Spanish women (James 1965, Orr 1980, Turner and Seriff 1987, Turner 1982, 317). In the New World, “Altars have been seen in the home of families in Mexico, Guatemala, ... Texas, New Mexico, California, New Jersey, and New York City” (McDannell 1995, 17–38, Turner 1982, 317).21

The first Christian congregations met for consultation, prayer and worship in the homes of prominent members. When practical, early Christians may have set aside an apartment in their homes for devotional use. As congregations grew and the religion gained respectability, buildings were constructed solely for ritual use and the main focus of religious practice moved from domestic to public space (James 1965, 321–22). However, the use of domestic space for devotional practice was never completely abandoned.

The standard (European) view describes an altar as a place “designated by custom or tradition for the presentation of sacrifices or other offerings to superhuman beings (Gods, ancestors, etc.), which reveals and guarantees communication with the other world.” There are four reasons for altar construction: as a place of divine presence and communication, as a representation of the cosmos, as a place of re-creation and consecration, and as the center of ritual action (Bolle 1967, 343). Although the focus of research has been on church architecture, many non-ecclesiastical shrines and domestic altars meet these same criteria.

21Kay Turner’s dissertation on Mexican American home altars, researched in Austin, Texas, provides the best contemporary analysis of personal altar-building in an Hispanic context.
From its earliest beginnings Christianity has tried to balance the propensity to create images of sacred and venerated beings with prohibitions against idolatry. Catholic theological thought separates the worship due to the godhead and veneration allowed to holy persons. At the same time it suggests that the worship or veneration given to an image reaches through that image and terminates in the person represented. Thus images can be used to inflame the soul with love for the sacred.\textsuperscript{22} Theologians suggested that by contemplating images one could “ascend from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the referent.” Because these images invoke an emotional response they are believed to inspire devotional behavior that leads to a better life, more devout prayer or healing (McDannell 1995, 25). Although this is more obvious in a Catholic context, Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, have used images and other material objects for teaching and admonition particularly in the home, “to acknowledge commitments, delineate differences, express affection, or socialize children” (McDannell 1995, 26, 57). However, as Colleen McDannell suggests, devotees often let the object stand in for the subject, fusing sign and referent to a point “perilously close to idolatry.” In addition, other meanings often supersede the “official” theological meanings of objects. Thus objects can blur theological and denominational boundaries (McDannell 1995, 65).

Stanley Payne says that local religion in Spain is based on “centuries of development of local cults, shrines, regional saints and special liturgical

\textsuperscript{22}There has been an ongoing discussion on the use of images in Christian practice. From the second council of Nicaea in 787 to contemporary times there has been a constant struggle for the appropriate use of images by Christians. McDannell provides an excellent discussion of the use of images in both Catholic and Protestant homes (Chapter 2) and the assault on Christian “kitsch” in the mid-twentieth century (Chapter 6). (McDannell 1995). Morgan’s \textit{Visual Piety} analyses the uses of art, in particular the head of Christ, in Protestant homes (Morgan 1998).
features” (Payne 1984, 48). Christian's work provides an insight into the way these practices worked in the early modern period. He maintains that Spanish religious shrines and the images they enclose work as a kind of transformer that converts “sentiments of love, veneration, and penance into mental and physical relief, reassurance, and progress toward salvation” (Christian 1977, 72). Significantly, shrines perform this transformation essentially in the absence of priests or other religious representatives. It is the image itself that is the focus of veneration and the image that is believed to provide practical help to its devotees (Christian 1972, 101, Christian 1977, 73). In the communities he studied, the shrine images were considered to be people, special people, the most honored members of the community, “who have chosen to share in, to dwell with the rest of the community” (Christian 1977, 73). It is at the shrine, in contact with the image, that villagers experience their most intimate contact with the world of eternity, with heaven, the reality behind the reality of their everyday world. The shrine provides a place where villagers can go when their lives are threatened by events beyond their control: plagues, wars, death and destruction as well as personal illness, or the loss of a loved one (Christian 1977, 74). The images and the saints they represent come to be considered important family members. Female images especially are treated with affectionate love; often they are referred to with diminutives like those the villagers create for their

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23 Christian's work provides the most comprehensive view into late medieval and early modern Spanish religious practice. Sources used for this section include God and Person in a Spanish Valley (Christian 1972), “The Spanish Shrine” (Christian 1977), Local Religion in Sixteenth Century Spain (Christian 1981), and Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain (Christian 1981). Apparitions focuses on rural Castile and Catalonia in the fifteenth century; Person and God on the province of Santander in northern Spain including the village of San Sebastian de Garabandal in the Nansa Valley and neighboring villages.
peers (Christian 1977, 76). Thus “devotion to specific, local divine figures may be the oldest surviving form of religion in Spain” (Christian 1977, 77).

European altars and shrines present an opening to the divine through the intercession of these intermediaries. Devotees visit shrines, build extravagant displays and pray at domestic altars in order to communicate their needs and proffer their thanksgiving. Characteristically these altars contain an image of the spiritual being invoked and a space for offerings. Many altars, especially those in private spaces, include additional images and other items the builder finds appropriate to her devotional activities. The organization and uses of these objects represents a language of devotion brought to sacred spaces, both public and domestic, by Europeans.

The African Experience

In describing Afro-Atlantic\textsuperscript{24} altars Robert Ferris Thompson says that an altar is a place of sacrifice, prayer and devotion. In the languages of the Yoruba and related groups (Fon, Igbo, Edo and Ijew) traditional altars are the “face,” “countenance,” or “forehead” of the gods, “the threshold for communication with the other world” (Thompson 1993, 29-30).

But this “face” is often hidden deep within the compounds of the devotees (Thompson 1993, 146). Africans encoded the rank and sanctity of the gods by the way they organized their sacred space. Thompson describes sacred space that included a public courtyard, an inner court for initiates where with music and dance “persons turned into gods” and the innermost chamber where the “essential stones and other emblems rest upon an elevated dais.” In a like manner a West African king, particularly when he was acting in his

\textsuperscript{24}This terminology incorporates west African, Caribbean and Brazilian culture into a single inclusive term.
capacities as king, did not expose his face. Because he was one of the most powerful of sacred objects, his face was hidden behind a veil of beading.\textsuperscript{25} As part of his description of one such beaded veil, Drewal says, "Concealment constituted heightened spirituality. It is a way of conveying the ineffable qualities and boundless powers of the divine person of the \textit{oba} (king)." (Drewal, et al. 1989, 39). Rosalind I. J. Hackett describes the same phenomenon when she says that "what is small, hidden, unelaborate or even unattractive may be the most spiritually empowering" (Hackett 1996, 2). African religious objects were generally kept hidden away in dark shrines, covered with cloth, visible only to a select few (Hackett 1996, 5). Thus concealment, rather than exposure and decoration, was used to express religious devotion.

In the sacred rooms the altar, usually about 12 to 18 inches high and made of smoothed and shaped clay, elevates the sacred objects above the level of the everyday. The most important objects on the altar are further elevated by being placed on cylindrical stands or other objects (for example, mortars, piles of calabashes or calabashes on top of pottery) (Thompson 1993, 146). Calabashes and pots hold the essential objects associated with the deities so enthroned. Along with these sacred calabashes and pots, African altars contained other objects emblematic of the \textit{ashé} or special power of the deities. These objects include "pots, cowry shells, pieces of iron, gourd bowls, stones, tree limbs, and branches. These things would be selected because of their symbolic association with the deity or function they were to serve" (Brandon 1993, 12). Thus an altar to Shango may also include a mortar holding his "thunder stones" along with his double-headed ax or a dance wand.

\textsuperscript{25} Beaded crowns were also indicators of lineage. Only kings who could trace descent from Oduduwa the mythical founder of Ile-Ife have the right to wear beaded crowns (Apter 1992, 232 fn. 2).
Anthropomorphic images on these altars generally represent not the Orisha but the devotees. These images exhibit the appropriate acts and gestures one should assume in the proximity of the divine. Images present a “school of being,” spatial and iconic instructions on the “proper way to stand and kneel before the gods” (Drewal, et al. 1989, 26, Thompson 1993, 17, Thompson 1993, 147). These objects are not essential for worship, they merely contribute to the aesthetic quality of the shrines (Bascom 1969, 112). Often these images are women in various postures. For example, the most common motif on the oshé, the double-headed ax of Shango the thunder god, is the form of a woman. Lawal says that “the female principle is believed to have a positive, pacifying, and assuasive influence in the ritual process.” Where the male signifies hardness and hotness, the female represents softness and coolness. Women kneeling, offering their breasts, or feeding their children not only represent those qualities but also indicate the “love, tenderness, generosity, nurture, and protection” one hopes to obtain from the Orisha (Lawal 1996, 25–26). Hackett also suggests that the preponderance of female imagery signifies the role that women have as the nurturers of the gods.27 Among contemporary Nigerians the female is seen as soft, cool and tranquil while the male is the opposite. A Nigerian New Year wish is that “‘it be a female born’ (ọdun a yabo), thus signifying peacefulness and a year free from disturbance and turmoil” (Olupọna 1991, 119). Another use of female imagery

26 Bascom also says “no woodcarvings or recent brasscastings represent the deities. Rather, they represent their worshippers and often the individual who gave them as votive offerings” (Bascom 1969, 111).

27 Yoruba couples do not usually resume sexual relations until after their child is weaned, which may be up to three years after its birth. Since menstruation is suppressed and the couple is practicing sexual abstinence a nursing woman is assumed to be in a state of ritual purity, that is neither sexual or menstrual (Herbert 1993, 79). Drewal suggests that this may be one reason that nursing women are so often depicted in Yoruba art (Drewal 1992, 188).
is to represent the relationship between different levels of beings. All Orisha 
priests are called iyawo orisha (Yr. wife of the Orisha) because of the 
relationship between the Orisha and their devotees (Lawal 1996, 25).28

Thus we find a different type of iconography on African altars. Along 
with other objects representing attributes of the divinity, Ogun's iron or 
Shango's mortar for example, we find pots and calabashes hiding the essential 
elements of the deity itself. Rather than representing that which cannot be 
represented (the sacred) images illustrate the appropriate human response 
when one finds oneself in the sacred presence. Like altars everywhere, these 
altars have space on or in front of the paraphernalia for various types of 
offerings. Water, blood and various liquids may be poured directly on or into 
the sacred containers while food and other offerings are set on the altar itself 
or on the floor in front of it (Lawal 1996, 20).

Descriptions of altars from art and anthropological sources do not 
always specify which level of worship they are describing. However looking at 
these sources can give us an indication of the general organization of sacred 
space. Based on photos taken throughout Yorubaland we can see the way that 
altars were generally constructed: a raised platform in the rear or corner of a 
room or free-standing building. Terra-cotta pots and calabashes share space 
with various paraphernalia and ritual offerings. Knowledge of Orisha 
iconography can help the observer to identify the major and minor deities 
represented on a particular altar. In his section on the Oyo Empire in Yoruba: 
Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought Pemberton presents three altars. 
The oldest is based on photographs taken by Leo Frobenius in Ibaden in 1910 
(Pemberton 1989, figure 171, page 156). These photographs are among the

28The role of iyawo as wife of the deity will be discussed more fully in Chapter 5.
earliest visual documentation of Yoruba Shango shrines (Pemberton 1989, 156). Although the photograph of the shrine is too small to make out details, Pemberton presents us with a detailed description of its contents:

The central portion of the shrine is the irubọ (place of sacrifice). It contains a beautifully carved, inverted mortar known as odo Sango. There is also a large wooden bowl filled with edan ara (the cults of the thunder god). To the right there are carvings of a kneeling female Sango devotee and another of Sango's dog. There is also a small, figurated terracotta pot. To the left of the odo Sango is a calabash containing rams' horns, usually associated with orisha Oya, and a pair of carvings for ibeji (deceased twins). In a large calabash, which rests on top of this accumulation, there are prayer rattles known as sere Sango, and a striped cloth. Further to the right there are three terracotta pots, each with distinctive embossed designs or incised patterns. One has been painted with efun, a chalky substance, and may contain the cool, medicinal waters of orisha Osun [Oshun] or orisha Obatala. Each of the pots supports a calabash. The open calabashes contain what appears to be cults, cloths, and other unidentifiable objects. Another figurated terracotta pot rests in a depression on the raised portion of the shrine. Two earthen jars, probably for orisha Esu, the guardian of the ritual process, are situated on the floor in front of the odo Sango, focusing the viewer's attention on the place of power and sacrifice. Seven laba Sango hang at the back of the shrine, providing in their sharply contrasting colors and bold, energetic designs expressions of the god's power. For it is in the laba Sango that the cults hurled by the god upon defenseless mortals are retrieved by Sango priests and brought to the shrine” (Pemberton 1989, 166).

In another photograph taken by Pemberton himself in Idofin, Igbana he identifies an arugba Sango holding a calabash along with an assortment of pots and bowls. Rams horns again suggest the presence of Oya, while white calabashes suggest Obatala and cowry crowns Banyami (Pemberton 1989, 153, Figure 167). A portion of a shrine in Oke Orundun, Ijebu includes a black terracotta pot for Erinle and a large pot painted in red and white patterns for Sango. Sango’s pot is topped with the crown of Banyami while Ibeji (twin figures) stand in front of the shrine (Pemberton 1989, 161 Figure 176).

In his article about a master potter in Oke-Odan, Nigeria Thompson describes her personal altar for Erinle, the hunter Orisha. This altar contains a variety of iconographic representations of deities including Erinle (the central deity), Shango, Obatala, Ogun, Eshu Elegba, Oshun, the ibẹfọ (twins), Sonponna, Osanyin. This altar includes not only the iconographic
representations of these deities but also their "vessels and other tokens of divine presence" (Thompson 1969, 176–178, plate 94).

And not all altars were placed in secret rooms. Anywhere the objects representing a deity were brought together became a shrine to that deity. Thus, "there were shrines in the marketplaces, at the boundaries of towns, along roads, at the riverside, and in fields....in the rooms and yards of compounds...in front of houses,...as charms and protective devices over doorways" (Brandon 1993, 12). Like other shrines in secular contexts these public altars may have only objects representing the deities and not those presenting the deity itself. However laterite Eshu rocks can be found in the most public areas\(^{29}\) as can the groups of iron objects that are considered to be the embodiment of Ogun.

Thompson says that Afro-Atlantic altars are "inherently open and ecumenical...‘additive, eclectic, non-exclusive’" (Thompson 1993, 20 quoting Richard Price in Alabi’s World). In his discussion of the worship of Mami Wata Henry John Drewal says that west and central African belief systems "have the capacity to respond to, to shape, and to incorporate new elements in building on existing concepts and practices. (Drewal 1988, 132).\(^{30}\) African belief systems rather than being closed, rigid and conservative are open,

\(^{29}\)Barbot describes Elegguà-like "fetishes" in various African communities along the coast of Africa. Although the editors only identify one of these as Legba (Elegguà) the other descriptions refer to similar "idols" (Hair, et al. 1992, 580 and illustration on facing page, 586–87 fn 18, 638, 649 fn 13, Hair, et al. 1992, 228–29 fn 11, 275).

\(^{30}\)The Mami Wata cult is informative in this discussion because it illustrates how foreign elements are incorporated into African religious systems. Even though it appears after the end of the slave trade and thus has no impact on the development of African religions in the New World, it highlights the open, flexible and incorporative nature of west African culture. Scher’s description of the use of Hindu iconography in the Orisha religion of Trinidad provides another illustration of this tendency toward incorporation in the absence of coercive factors (Scher 1997 [1989]) #304).
flexible and incorporative (Drewal 1988, 132). I am suggesting that like the Mami Wata worship, Santería has also been constructed from disparate elements. Because the Africans that were brought to the New World (and their descendants) came from an open, flexible and incorporative belief system they were able to re-construct and re-create a religious system that remained true to the African Orisha while incorporating some Western elements.

African sources brought a different language of the sacred to colonial Cuba. In the African view, what is most sacred is what is most hidden; the ineffable isn’t displayed through the human form although appropriate human behavior is; height indicates power and presence, kings sit on stools, deities are perched on towers of calabashes set on raised platforms; a variety of sacred personages can share sacred space and serve as attendants for each other; Orisha can be represented by a hierarchy of priests or enacted by individuals in their private quarters; different people worship different sets of deities based on their own personal and familial history; deities can be easily incorporated into or banished from personal or group pantheons.

**Orisha Worship Communities**

Three hundred years ago each village in Yorubaland had its own divinity or Orisha that it worshipped (i.e. Elegba was worshipped in Iworo, Obalufun in Erin, Shango in Koso, Orisha Oko in Irawo, Shopona in Egun, Egungun in Oje, etc.). When slavers raided a village, most if not all of the captured villagers as a community, worshipped one Orisha. (Maugê)\(^{31}\)

The received wisdom is that in Africa initiates received only one or two Orisha while in the New World each individual receives multiple

\(^{31}(Maugê 1993,4).\)
Orisha. There have been a variety of statements made concerning the organization of worship in the African situation. Murphy states that “in Yorubaland each deity would have a separate worship community” while in the New World, including Cuba and Brazil “all the deities came to be worshipped by one community” (Murphy 1993, 113). Brandon says that each deity had a separated temple supported by a separated priesthood but that the majority of worship took place in homes performed by the laity (Brandon 1993, 12). Eades says that although one might participate in the rituals of his or her parents’ Orisha, one was not initiated unless called to the Orisha. However, a child born through the intervention of an Orisha worshipped that Orisha as an adult (Eades 1980, 120). Bastide distinguished New World worship as a “lumping” together of all the Orisha which previously had been worshipped separately (Bastide 1971, 115–116). Morton-Williams distinguished those who support a cult from those who worship the Orisha and observe its taboos. He cites several ways in which one may come to the worship of an Orisha (birth, divination, possession by the Orisha or a call) and says that while one may worship several Orisha usually only one commands a person’s attention to such an extent that he or she undergoes the training toward the priesthood (Morton-Williams July 1964, 252). Based on the work of Bastide, Marks, and Weaver, Curry says that in Yorubaland people generally only worshipped a single Orisha. She makes exceptions for “important people,” including kings, and suggests the proliferation of Orisha in the New World was based on the identification of priests with kings (Curry 1997, 124–25).

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32Today it is common for a santero to receive five to seven Orisha as part of his or her initial initiation. In addition it is expected that additional Orisha will be received throughout one’s life as required by life events and divination.
Brandon describes four levels of priests in the African village. According to his analysis, at the lowest level the head of a household or compound offered worship to the household or compound gods; temple priests organized in an internal hierarchy served the town or section. All of the temple priesthoods were under the authority of a village or town priest who, in turn, was responsible to the national or royal cults (Brandon 1993, 12–13).

My own reading into these sources and others suggests a much more complex religious environment among the Yoruba. Both nineteenth and twentieth century research points to worship of multiple Orisha in the African environment.33 Bastide (and most of the scholars cited above) base their conclusions on a reading of Leo Frobenius’s, Die atlantisch Götterlehre; and William Bascom’s, The Sociological Role of the Yoruba Cult Group (Bascom 1944). However Bascom, who’s research centered on the Nigerian city of Ile-Ife, never says that an individual, let alone a family or community, was limited to the worship of a single Orisha. Exactly the opposite was the case. At the household level, various members of a compound may worship a variety of gods. Each household had one or more lineage deities accepted as “belonging” to that compound. Although a woman marrying into the household may adopt the Orisha of her husband, she may also continue the worship of her own deities—or both (Bascom 1944, 41).34 A child may inherit

33Contra the scholars identified above, Brown also acknowledges the worship of clusters of Orisha throughout Nigeria (Brown 1989, 76).

34The Yoruba are exogenous, the women coming from another lineage, perhaps another village. Although a woman may choose to abandon the Orisha of her birth family upon marriage it is not necessary that she do so (Bascom 1944, 41). Strangers, that is people living in a compound who are not a part of the lineage may also introduce new Orisha into the worship pattern of the compound (Bascom 1944, 44–45).
the worship of an Orisha from one or both of his parents after their deaths or he may be “called” to the worship of an ancestral Orisha. Parents (who may themselves worship different Orisha) may select one or more of their children to continue the worship of their deity, training that child in the worship procedures, taking him to festivals, making sacrifices for him and the like. When old enough the child would begin to worship the Orisha independently. (Understood in this description is that not all children were trained in such a way, nor was every child trained in the worship even of the lineage deity.) If a woman sacrifices to an Orisha in an attempt to bear a child that child is considered to have been given to her by the Orisha and is said to have come from heaven worshipping that Orisha. (This Orisha may or may not be in her personal pantheon. A desperate woman may have sacrificed to several Orisha before becoming pregnant.) Also children are said to belong to an Orisha because of unusual circumstances surrounding their birth (certain abnormalities might be associated with an Orisha, albinos, for example, are associated with Obatala). Again the mother would aid such children in their worship until they were old enough to worship on their own. Finally, a person may discover that he or she “belongs” to an Orisha later in life when illness, economic loss or a series of deaths in the family prompt him (or her) to seek the services of a diviner who suggests the worship of a hitherto neglected Orisha. Thus an individual may worship several Orisha, obtained under different circumstances. In fact, most Yoruba worshipped a group of five or six deities drawn from these sources. (Bascom 1969, 77–78, Bascom 1944, 23–24, 43–44, Farrow 1996 [1926]) #227, 85]. At the same time, groups and individuals may abandon the worship of one or more Orisha. Thus over time worship patterns evolved. However, regardless of how one came to the worship of an Orisha, he or she was eligible to become a priest of that Orisha
(Bascom 1944, 44–45). This suggests that the worship of several Orisha either simultaneously or serially was common in the African environment.

Peter McKenzie’s reading of missionary reports from the mid-nineteenth century (approximately the same period during which the majority of slaves of Yoruba descent were taken to Cuba and about 100 years earlier than Bascom’s research) reveals that oloṣoṣa (Yr. owners of Orisha) who converted to Christianity and handed over their deities to the missionary or catechist had between two and fifteen Orisha, with one person who worshipped as many as 120 (McKenzie 1997, 477). Like Bascom, McKenzie says this clustering of Orisha came about through 1) the apportioning of family deities to different family members, 2) the petitioning of different Orisha for a child and 3) the handing down of Orisha from generation to generation (479). Other sources also suggest that the worship of multiple Orisha is common among the Yoruba (Apter 1992, 61–63, McKenzie 1997, 477–487, 552, Morton-Williams July 1964, 245–46, 253, passim, Pemberton 1989, 89, figure 171, page 156).

Outside of the household or compound the matter is also more complicated than Brandon’s description indicates. Although the ruling elements of each town, the king and his court, may be under the protection of a particular Orisha or group of Orisha, other deities might be also be represented with local shrines, priesthoods, religious celebrations and rituals. The history of the town might tell how the fortunes of war installed new rulers, with new deities (Apter 1992, 22–23); refugees from other towns might continue their own natal worship patterns (Apter 1992, 38, Bascom 1944, 37); or a foreign deity might gain adherents for a variety of social, political or economic reasons (Drewal 1988). Cults associated with wide-ranging political groups generally had a hierarchy of priests who were under the authority of
national or royal priests. This seems particularly true of the cults of Ifa centered in Ile-Ife and Shango centered in Oyo. In addition refugee communities might organize their worship differently in their new location than they had in their hometown (Bascom 1944, 37).

Andrew Apter, cited earlier, gives us an example of how this might happen at the town level. In the town of Ayede, in the first half of the nineteenth century, a king named Eshubiyi was initiated to the Yemoja cult in order to legitimize his ruling dynasty. Through a series of marriages to priestesses of other cults the worship of Oshun and Shango were added to the Yemoja cult. Still other Orisha added to the Yemoja cult included the subcults of Orisha Oko, Ogun, and Oya “each with its priestesses, sacrifices, drum rhythms, and devotees.” In the past this cult also included worshippers of Orishanla, Osanyin, Olokun, Oke, Kinkofo, Erinle and Bayoni. These Orisha are related to each other in the local mythology through idioms of kinship and affinity. These relationships express the relationships between shrines, priestesses and devotees of the various cults. The priestesses of these subcults officiated for their devotees within the Yemoja cult as well as holding the cult offices associated with their deities. The priestesses of all these cults sacrifice together before a single altar in their town shrine while sacrificing separately

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35Eshubiyi also inherited the Orisha Ojuna through his natural father. The devotees of this Orisha worships a different pantheon from the Yemoja cult (except for Ogun who is worshipped by both cults) (Apter 1992, 56–57). A third cult, that of Orisha Iyagba, is associated with a military chief who altered the distribution of political and ritual power in Ayede (Apter 1992, 65–68). Although Apter is describing the contemporary situation in Ayede, many of the rituals and mythology date to a time period which is concurrent with the exportation of slaves from Africa to the Caribbean (Apter 1992, 9).

36In a similar fashion Matory describes a situation where the Shango priests are not only present at the public rites of other Orisha but also their private rituals. He says “the Shango cult itself has possession priests of Oya (Goddess of Wind, Storm and the River Niger) and of Yemoja” (Matory 1993, 74).
at the bush shrine. In addition there were links between these priestesses and the priestesses of their Orisha in subordinate towns in the area (Apter 1992, 61–65). Although all Orisha have “official” biographies encoded in the Ifa divination stories, they also have political histories tied to the migration and marriage patterns of their devotees. Apter suggests that the incorporation of multiple traditions into Orisha cults tells the history of Ayede and shows how the old order was reorganized into a centralized military kingdom (Apter 1992, 68). The ritual organization covaried with the political organization so that one can “read” the political history in the ritual structure (Apter 1992, 21).

The majority of Bascom’s research was done in the city of Ile-Ife. In an interesting side note he describes a group of refugees from the city of Oyo living in Ile-Ife. They worshipped a group of Orisha who correspond to those worshipped within Santería37 (the other Orisha he described are unknown or uncommon in the New World). He says that these Oyos “have no priests and no sacred groves, but ... each worshipper acts as his own priest, casting his own kolas and making his own sacrifices at the small shrine which he sets up in his own room” (Bascom 1944, 37). This suggests two interesting possibilities in respect to New World developments. One is that, at least among the Oyo, the role of priest could be performed by all worshipers when they were separated from their ancestral “homeland” and that generalized statements made about the organization of the cults in Africa were subject to variation even within Ile-Ife, the center of Orisha worship.38

37This is important for our discussion since the Orisha he identifies as worshipped by the Oyo (Eṣù, Ọṣọ̀na, Ọ̀̀ọ̀gọ́, Ọjá, Ọ̀ba, Yemọjá, Bàyànní, Ọṣọ̀si, Óriṣà Oko and Eyínlé) are those whose worship predominates in the Americas.

38In many ways Ile-Ife functions for Orisha worshippers as Jerusalem does for Jews or Mecca for Moslems. That is, as a sacred city, the foundation and center of the religious world.
Reviewing Bascom, McKenzie and Apter we can suggest that in Africa the worship of the Orisha was combined into clusters or families of cults led by the priest of the dominant Orisha. My reading of Apter suggests the flexibility of Orisha worshipers to renew and re-configure themselves in response to changing social and political situations. This is to say, many of the statements about the forms of worship in Africa are overly simplistic in their suggestions that in Africa the Orisha are worshipped in unitary communities. Rather it was probably more true that the worship communities formed themselves in a variety of ways that provided models for the re-configuration of the religion in the New World as a single group rather than one or more sets of related groups. Several Orisha and their priests may worship together in both the African and Cuban situations but with a critical difference. In Africa the sacred shrine “belonged” to a particular Orisha while the remaining deities and their priests were subordinate. In the New World, the various cultic groupings were not necessarily so easily defined. Each priest may have come from a village where their Orisha was dominant. Whereas in Ayede Orisha Oko is married to Yemoja and Shango and Ògún are her two most important sons (Apter 1992, 61), in another town it may be Shango or Ògún who is the primary deity, Yemoja who is subordinate, while the worship of Orisha Oko may be unknown. Even though there may have been several cultic groups in the town, as Apter describes in the Ayede example, they may not have worshipped together, their shrines may have been kept separate and the priests of one sacred lineage may not have participated in the mysteries of the other. In Cuba these differences could not be maintained. Priests from a variety of cultic groups and towns were thrown together in the cabildos. It is unlikely that the chief priest of Shango from one town would be willing to accept a secondary status merely because Shango’s worship was
subordinate in another town. In addition, it is unlikely that there would be enough priests of a particular Orisha in a cabildo to perform initiations without the help of others (particularly if you consider that the mysteries of an Orisha like Yemoja whose worship was not centralized may have been different in different towns). No one know how these differences were negotiated but we can see the end result in the organization of Santería households.

According to Bascom’s informants in Ile-Ife although one may have several Orisha generally a person only became the “priest” of a single deity (Bascom 1944, 4445). It is unclear from McKenzie’s account whether any of the people described were considered priests of any of these Orisha. (He does cite particular individuals as priests in other portions of his work but does not make that distinction in those sections where he discusses the numbers of Orisha owned by devotees.) McKenzie uses the term olóroṣà (Yr. owner of Orisha) throughout his text as the name for followers of traditional Yoruba religion. Among contemporary santeros, this term is reserved for those who have been initiated into the priesthood through the asiento ceremony. Again this throws the question of “priest” as opposed to “worshipper” in this context into question.

It is also unclear in the work of these various scholars what is included in the term “worship”. In the New World the priesthood generally is associated with the ownership of the fundamentos of the Orisha. Our review of African altars suggests that like their ritual descendants, Africans owned the fundamentos of more than one Orisha. Although it is not clear what level of organization each altar represents, at least one personal altar, Àbá tàn’a’s shrine for Erinle, shows evidence of a wide range of Orisha present on the altar (along with Erinle, Thompson names Shango, Obatala, Ogun,
Eshu Elegba, Oshun, the *ibéjí*, Sonponna, and Osanyin are represented (Thompson 1969, 176–178, plate 94). This suggests that although she is the priest of Erinle, she also worshipped and owned the *fundamentos* of several other Orisha.

Brown says that “[v]irtually all writings on Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Cuban, and Afro-Haitian religions emphasize the encounter of African and Catholic systems as the central dynamic and point of tension in their formation during the colonial period and present state” (14). Like Murphy, quoted at the beginning of this paper, Brown and others see the interaction between African and European cultural elements as creative borrowing that uses Catholic discourse—belief, ritual, and iconography—as a defense to mask African belief and practice (Brown 1989, 14, 15). Yet as we have seen in Ayede, creative interaction between opposing religious and political systems was not a uniquely New World phenomenon and I would suggest that the hyperglossia exhibited by the *olorichas* (that is the priests of the religion) who found a way to combine a diverse and antagonistic set of cults and subcults into a single religious system was a greater achievement and of greater significance to the religion itself.

In describing the modern Orisha cults in Ayede Apter says that membership “is established by initiation. Initiation requires payment of fees; rituals of seclusion involving defilement, hair cutting, and treatment with *jújú* medicines; and rituals of “rebirth” and incorporation into the cult.... Different membership categories within the cult represent specialized ritual functions and orders of seniority” (Apter 1992, 55). This description of

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39 A fuller critique of the ways this encounter between African and European religious systems is presented in the literature will be presented in Chapter 5 after we consider the place of Christian iconography on Santería displays.
membership seems cognate with the priesthood of Santería. Again it is not completely clear if this initiation is for priests only or if other worshippers also participate in some types of initiation ceremonies. Apter certainly says that there are different membership categories so that it is possible to suggest that one might be considered more or less “priestly” depending on one’s membership category. Apter does suggest that one can join the cult and “ascend to titled office” within it (Apter 1992, 64). In an interesting side note, Bascom tells us that Ife refugees from Oyo acted as their own priests (Bascom 1944, 37). Apter’s and Bascom’s work suggests that Yoruba cults were flexible and incorporative in the absence of the New World conditions, specifically slavery and persecution.

Today within Santería there are no dominant or subordinate cults. Each priest is initiated into the mysteries of a single Orisha but as part of that initiation he receives a cluster of Orisha similar to the cultic clusters Apter describes in Africa. Santería priests are considered to be full-fledged priests of their head Orisha but also priests of the other Orisha in their pantheon. Each priest is qualified to participate in the rituals of all the Orisha he “owns” (has been initiated into), not just those of his primary deity. They may participate in the rituals of any of those additional Orisha and may initiate a godchild into the priesthood of any of those Orisha. One may give any of

40I discuss Santería initiation more fully in Chapter 5 below.

41Within Santería the particular cluster depends on the main Orisha received. In addition to the warriors (Eleggua, Ogún, Ochosi and Osun) and Olokun who are usually received in preliminary rituals, a priest of Yemaya (Yemoja) receives Obatala, Shango and Oshun.

42There are individual exceptions to this general statement. Some priests are prevented from initiating any godchildren; dedication to certain head Orisha prevents one from initiating certain other Orisha. For example, a Shango priest can not crown an Oshun godchild.
these Orisha to another—thus one need not be a priest of Yemaya to initiate another into her priesthood. This was probably a New World innovation based on these African models.

Although no Orisha or group of Orisha could be associated with the government of Cuba, as Apter describes in Ayede, cults could be reformed and redefined into a system that put those Orisha whose priests survived the Middle Passage into relationship with one another. Distinctions between the "leading" Orisha and "subordinate" Orisha would have fallen away. Thus a single cult developed that subsumed all of the surviving cults. Based in large part on the royal cult of Shango, this super-cult defined a central core of Orisha but allowed the incorporation of all surviving cults into its practice. At the same time the place of each Orisha within the cult hierarchy was fixed such that they could be invoked in a standardized order (Bastide 1971, 115–116, Brown 1989, 78).

However Brown may be overstating the case when he says that the Orisha were reshaped into a "rule-bound and unchanging" hierarchical pantheon (Brown 1989, 78). My experience has been that although there is an acknowledged order of Orisha for ritual work,43 each santero develops a unique relationship with those members of the pantheon he or she has received. For each priest, the Orisha of the head and the second parent Orisha are the "chief" Orisha regardless of their position in the overall hierarchy. Different Orisha are invoked for different religious work and this organization is subject to revision when new Orisha are added to the personal pantheon. One often hears priests naming an Orisha (who may or may not be their head Orisha) as the "king/queen" of their households. These are the

43John Mason identifies this hierarchy as it related to ritual song cycles (Mason 1992).
Orisha with whom they have developed a special relationship. Thus at the personal level the hierarchy remains fluid and flexible. On the community level there is a form of homogeneity. Instead of embodying conflicting political realities, as the cults of Ayede did, the new world religion formed a single united front in opposition to the hegemony of Spanish, Catholic colonial power. Separated by an ocean from their individual homelands, the Africans and their descendants preserved their traditions by extending their natural propensity to combine compatible traditions and incorporate the surrounding environment.

**Dialogic Incorporation in the Cabildo Period**

The symbol systems of the Spanish colonists were the dominant systems of nineteenth-century Cuba. Africans needed to find ways of incorporating their own cultural concepts into this foreign environment. Bakhtin counsels us to look for two major strategies: hybridization (speaking two social languages simultaneously) and heteroglossia (speaking to another in their own language). In this context we can look for instances of hybridization in the juxtaposition of African and European elements in a single environment while examples of heteroglossia would be the use of European signs to refer to African signifieds.

Bakhtin suggests that each individual’s discourse is constructed gradually and slowly from the words of others that have been acknowledged and assimilated so that the boundaries of the two become imperceptible. Each person’s ideological development is an on-going struggle “for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values.” According to him, this struggle is open as each new context, each new ideology moves into the discourse (Bakhtin 1981, 345, 346). All social language is heteroglot because languages sits at the intersection
between a variety of potential and actual dialects that interact and intersect with each other in a multitude of ways, always in the process of development. Within a particular language team future and former languages that will be/have been "more or less successful depending on their degree of social scope and on the ideological area in which they are employed" (357).

Bakhtin's ideas are extremely important as we begin to explore the chains of signifiers surrounding the various altars, thrones and shrines. Both hybridized and heteroglossic dialogs are present in these constructions and we need to be aware of both. Bakhtin says that each person's ideological development is an on-going struggle for hegemony among a variety of ideological points of view (345). The same may be said for the ideological development of communities. Thus the dialog within the religion and between the religion and the outside community will continue as long as there are new contexts, new voices and new ideologies moving into the discourse. We can suggest that hegemony is impossible, that the language of Santería will continue to be heteroglot because it always moves in the intersection between a variety of religious dialects. That these dialects themselves are hybridizations of earlier discourses means that the dialog cannot be fully integrated, can not be synthesized but must always be open to the possibility of new discourses with new dialog partners. Birthday and domestic altar displays are an important part of this process for it is at the foot of these displays that many are introduced to the religion. It is in conjunction with them that many begin to learn the heteroglot language of the religion. And it is in the construction of their own altar displays that practitioners express their personal understandings of the religion.

The cabildo itself functioned as a site for the production of heteroglossic and hybridized speech. The word cabildo refers not only to a chapter house
associated with a church but also the colonial city council. The Afro-Cuban cabildo functioned not only as a social club and religious society but also as a sub-governmental unit responsible to the larger city government for the actions of its members. Within the cabildo itself, slaves and gente de color created their own society framed by African ideas of civil organization.\textsuperscript{44} These cabildos were ruled by representatives who were selected by the members. These functionaries mediated between the cabildo and the larger society. They were responsible for problems occurring at the cabildo and could be personally fined if the cabildo was found in violation of city ordinances (Brandon 1993, 71). In the 1820s one of these societies had de facto control over the oldest quarter of Havana (Brandon 1993, 69, quoting Hugh Thomas, Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom 1971 (New York: Harper and Row)). Since they functioned like the heads of various Yoruba lineages and town sections the leaders of these organizations were often given the title of king or queen\textsuperscript{45} and dressed, not as African royalty, but in the style of the Spanish elite.

\textsuperscript{44} Apter describes how the survivors of the nineteenth-century wars in Africa regrouped into quarters in refugee kingdoms. Within these quarters they reproduced, on a smaller scale, the social, political and ritual structures of their devastated towns. Although separated from their ancestral towns, these groups remembered their distinctive dialects, praises, marriage and burial practices and above all the Orisha of the forebears (Apter 1992, 38). One could suggest that within the cabildos Africans and Afro-Cubans performed a similar type of reconstruction and preserved similar memories.

\textsuperscript{45} It is probably significant that leaders of various groups in Africa are described as "kings". For example, the àwọn àrẹ or high priest of the Orisha Ojuna cult studied by Apter is described as the "king" of the devotees (Apter 1992, 58). Lineage chiefs were given titles that combined the prefix oba (king) to the lineage name, so that Obasákan was the head of the Osakan lineage and Obalési that of the Ilesi lineage (Apter 1992, 39). This usage enlarges the concept of "king" to make the inclusion of leaders of groups like the cabildos reasonable. This usage was not, however, universally true. Some cabildo officers were styled "president", "vice-president", "matron", etc. Brown suggest that these titles progressed from royal forms early in the cabildo period and republican titles later (Brown 1989, 58). It is also interesting to note in Brown’s quote from Bremer, who visited cabildos in Havana in the mid-nineteenth century, that some cabildos were "governed by queens, one or two, who decide upon the amusements, give tone to the society, and determine its extension. They possess the right of electing a king, who manages the pecuniary affairs of the society..." (Brandon 1993, 54).
Although many observers\textsuperscript{46} of eighteenth and nineteenth century cabildo courtly hierarchies present the incorporation of Spanish royal and military dress and adornments as grotesque and humorous imitations of Spanish colonial models Brown suggests another interpretation. We might suggest that this costuming was not so much in imitation of Spanish style as a statement of the place of these functionaries within the cabildo. A statement made not to the members of the cabildo itself but more importantly to the surrounding society. Thus African social organization is recreated within Spanish society using a combination of African and Spanish symbol-systems. Brown compares this incorporation of Spanish elements into Afro-Cuban life to the formation of a new system of signs. This is similar to the new common language of the Afro-Cubans that used a pidgin grammar and a number of different African languages as well as the language of the colonizer (Brown 1993, 55). Africans from a variety of ethnicities and regional groups constructed a new Afro-Cuban culture in conjunction with the dominant Spanish-Cuban system of signs. Using Bakhtin’s terminology, we can suggest that this new language is a hybridization that incorporated African elements into a Spanish context. The cabildo kings and queens whose roles were creolizations of African authorities and centers of power were presented through a Spanish symbol system.

At the same time, cabildos were religious centers. Their religious nature could be seen from the “fetishes” members carried during public

processions. The cabildos "were a gathering of the believers and worshippers of a particular santo ('saint') or idol...africanizing some personage of the Catholic Saint calendar, or catholocizing some of the fetishistic and forest divinities" (Brown 1989, 50-51 quoting Ortiz, "Los Cabildos Afro-Cubanos." Revista Bimestre Cubans, Vol 16, No. 1 (January–February 1921): 5–39.). Reports of the cabildo events almost always included descriptions of actors dressed in more African or Africanized dress: J.G.F Wurdemann's report of an 1844 street procession includes not only a king and queen "dressed in the extreme of the fashion" but also "an athletic negro, with a fantastic straw helmet, an immensely thick girdle of strips of palm-leaves around his waist, and other uncouth articles of dress" who was "the chief object in the group" (Brandon 1993, 73 quoting J.G.F. Wurdeman (1844) Notes on Cuba, 83–84); likewise at the cabildo visited by Fredicka Bremer there was not only a king and queen seated under a canopy but also a woman wearing "all kinds of handkerchiefs" and a hat, dancing under a canopy supported by four peoplem, and a man in a scarlet hat, with a "great number of glittering strings of beads round his neck" and a "scarlet skirt" (Brown 1989, 64). Because each of these individuals is the focus of ritual attention, I would suggest they represented the presence of Orisha Ogun (or Eleggua), Oya and Shango among the kings and queens of the cabildos.47 Thus African deities intermingled with cabildo functionaries. Kings and queens dressed in the height of Spanish fashion marking them as governmental bureaucrats while the Orisha wore

47Both Eleggua and Ogun are portrayed wearing a straw hat, but Ogun is more likely to be implied by a skirt of palm leaves. Brown suggests the man in the scarlet hat and skirt is Shango and that the woman may be wearing a hat because she is possessed by a male spirit (Brown 1989, 66). However, Oya is is often described as wearing a skirt of many colors as well as some male identified items.
more exotic clothes that incorporated palm-leaves and beads—marks of the sacred in the African vernacular.

The use of statues of Catholic saints provides another enlightening example of heteroglossia and hybridization. These images can simultaneously speak to African and European sensibilities as exhibiting the characteristics of devotion and sanctity. At the same time altars festooned with saints’ images suggests to European observers that this is a holy place, an opening into the world of the divine.\(^{48}\) Both Africans and Europeans use statues of women with babies to represent sacred concepts. As a consequence, madonnas of various types find their way to sacred sites and several Orisha became associated with women in general and virgins in particular.\(^{49}\)

The cabildos disappeared after the various restrictions of the late nineteenth century were implemented. Laws intended to prevent the development of an African subculture among the newly emancipated slaves forced the disappearance of what Brown called cabildo society. The mutual aid societies remained, the religious aspects went underground and the social, political and administrative functions were reduced to civic organizations that published newspapers and managed social-welfare and recreation

\(^{48}\)Although the image of Santería altars festooned with Catholic images permeated the literature, actual examples are difficult to find. Brandon has a photo of an Afro-Cuban altar in the home of a santero from Matanzas, Cuba taken the in 1930s (Brandon 1993, Plate 11) and Bascom says "... chromolithographs and plaster images of the Catholic saints are prominently displayed in the shrines and houses of the santeros..." (Bascom 1950, 65). However the majority of photographs of altars are devoid of Catholic figures or lithographs. Some theories about this phenomenon will be discussed in Chapter 4. The photograph published in Brandon is included among the Herskovits Papers of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Further research into this archive may provide information on the way statues of Catholic saints were integrated and then later banished from Santería altars.

\(^{49}\)However, I can find little use of the Christian concept of the virgin as a celibate, unmarried woman in African or Santería mythology. With a single exception, Yewa, all female Orisha have consorts and children. Yewa, as the exception deserves additional research.
programs but never again functioned as "mini-states" (Brandon 1993, 68-69). Public celebrations became private and eventually illegal. In 1884 a proclamation prohibited the gatherings of the cabildos and their processions through the streets (Brown 1989, 71). However, cabildos as religious houses of ocha (Lk. Orisha) continued to exist in Havana. Their names tell the story of the hybridization of the earlier period: Cabildo Shangó-Tebúm (also called the Cabildo of Santa Barbara), Cabildo de Yemayá, Cabildo de la Virgen de Regla, and Cabildo de Fermina Gomez (Brown 1989, 69–70). The first years of the twentieth century saw the marginalization and containment of Afro-Cuban religion. By the middle of the century the police were raiding private homes and throwing people's Orisha into the street (Brown 1989, 71–72). This began a time of fear and official repression.

This history suggests the religion had almost a hundred years of development in the New World before it was forced underground. Brown uses Ortiz's Los Negros Burjos to suggest that the full range of ritual practices central to Santería today were already embedded in ritual houses at the turn of the century (Brown 1989, 74). We can also suggest that a full range of European, Spanish, and Catholic elements had already been incorporated into the public (and probably the private) face of the religion so that holy people, royal dress and canopied altars could be used in conjunction with African concepts of the sacred. Although these elements were not originally appropriated to hide the religion they served that purpose during more repressive times. Today these and other elements can and are being used by practitioners to honor their Orisha.

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50Fermina (Ferminita) Gomez was a famous priest of Yemaya in the Cuban town of Matanzas (Mason 1996, 26, Fig. 19).
The Visible and the Hidden

Although in Africa the Orisha were generally displayed in open containers hidden deep in the family compound, it appears that in Cuba they moved from the back to the front of homes, although generally concealed in their soperas hidden within canastilleros (Sp. cabinet with wooden doors). In the United States they may be becoming even more public as Americans of both European and African descent express their respect for the holy and their commitment to the religion by displaying their Orisha openly. Several local practitioners exhibit their Orisha in open shelves rather than closed cabinets. In the local community the Orisha are generally given a room of their own, in some homes, however, they live in open shelving in the public areas of the house. Although often there are practical reasons for these choices (the home is too small to devote an entire room to the Orisha, for example) often the devotee will suggest that he is proud of his religion and doesn’t want to “hide” it. However, even as they are moved from back rooms to public arenas, the fundamentos of the Orisha which may be kept in open containers in Africa are concealed in covered pots and containers of various sorts in the New World.

Contemporary practitioners, particularly those not imbued with Catholic symbolics, find saints statues meaningless, exotic (Brandon 1983, 187), even repugnant. They see them as remnants from a period when the religion hid behind Catholic imagery. Black practitioners are less likely to hide their religion and they refuse to “keep christian [sic] artifacts in [their]

51 Canizares suggests that one of the consequences of increased participation in the religion by non-Hispanics is the calling into question of the “Santeria code of silence.” He suggests that “people who have grown with the belief that religious freedom is an inalienable right do not see a reason for hiding their adherence to an ancient religion...” (Canizares 1994).
shrines as disguises" (Brown 1989, 15, Curry 1997, 121 citing Lloyd Weaver, "Notes on Òrìà Worship in an Urban Setting: The New York Example," paper read at The 3rd International Conference on Òrìà Tradition(A) July 1–6, 1986, University of Ife Ile Ife, Nigeria, 1986, 23). Both black and white practitioners may refuse to include Catholic images on their altars; but in some cases these statues have been replaced with other images including African sculptures, Native American images, even Asian statues. However, as we have seen, although hiding and veiling of the powerful and sacred is a particularly African response to the holy, Europeans and Americans generally display their sacred artifacts.

Conclusion

This chapter has suggested, among other things, that the syncretic elements of Santería are really new ways of presenting existing African religious concepts. Because the culture is incorporative and flexible, the ways of presenting the Orisha and their religion can change without changing the nature of the religion itself. Essential religious concepts such as respect for the sacred, appropriate ritual behavior, and the development of good character, were brought from Africa to Cuba and then into the United States. The ways these concepts were expressed changed as the environment of the practitioners changed. Because these changes occurred during a relatively short period of time\(^{52}\) various symbolic languages have formed a palimpsest of images and signs, older symbols barely visible through the later additions to the symbolic language.

\(^{52}\) Although there seems to have been slaves on Columbus’s ships, the major influx of Yoruba people arrived around 1830, a little over 150 years ago. During that time the place of the religion in Cuban (and now American) society has fluctuated several times. Throughout its history it has endured several periods of repression as well as times of tolerance.
African altars tend to be relatively devoid of anthropomorphic images. Those images that are present generally are figures of women in several stereotypical positions: kneeling with child on her back or at her breast, offering a bowl, balancing a container on her head or wearing Shango's oshé in her hair. These postures represent the appropriate ways in which one presents oneself to the deity. They also represent a relationship between deity and practitioner as exemplified by the mother-child bond. Although these representations may have been described by Europeans as idols, in actuality they represented devotees rather than the deity.

Spanish altars and shrines, on the other hand, usually contained at least one human figure and generally contained several. These figures represented exceptional human beings and, except in the case of Jesus, were understood not to represent the godhead. Again worshippers were presented with examples of appropriate living. However in these cases the figures represented individuals who, it was believed, were capable of carrying messages to the godhead. This understanding comes dangerously close to idolatry. A perennial problem within Christianity is the distinction between the worship given to God and the veneration of the saints.

In Cuba it appears that a variety of elements from the new environment were incorporated into the worship of the Orisha. Thus we find jails associated with Ochosi and railroads with Ogun. In contemporary Nigeria Ogun is linked to technology and merged with Shango (lightning, electricity) by Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka (Barnes 1997 (1989), 7–8). In the cabildos a number of factors may have conspired to place the Catholic saints on Orisha shrines. One, of course, is the incorporative nature of the culture. If everything is associated with an Orisha, then each important Catholic saint would be associated with an Orisha. On the other hand, efforts at conversion
through guided syncretism led the Catholic clergy to place statues of virgins and saints in cabildos (Brandon 1993). Thus it appears that saints and the Orisha cohabited both public and private spaces early on.

When repression came, the saints and their images provided a veil behind which the Orisha could hide. However eye-witness statements like that quoted by Brown """"There was the violent knocking down and trampling of these poor old people, throwing their ochas\textsuperscript{53} into the street.'"" (Brown 1989, 72 quoting Nicolas Angarica, 1955) suggests that the veil was easily pierced—this citation suggests that the police threw out the Orisha \textit{fundamentos}, not the saints’ statues. When Cuban refugees brought their religion to the United States, they brought their Spanish-Catholic cultural elements as well. But as more non-Hispanics have been initiated into the religion it has begun another stage of evolution. Non-Catholic Americans, whether Black or White, bring an iconophobic mindset to their practice of the religion.\textsuperscript{54}

Religious statues, particularly Catholic statues, seem idolatrous to these new practitioners. In addition, the common belief that the saints were incorporated into Santería merely to hide it makes the rejection of them a doubly potent statement for these devotees. Thus explicitly human figures, particularly those of a religious nature, are removed from altar displays. However, other types of images have found their way onto these altars including Native Americans who represent Ochosi, mermaids for Yemaya, the Buddha for Obatala and a variety of African images who represent other Orisha. What is of interest to us is the movement through the chain of

\textsuperscript{53}That is their Orisha.

\textsuperscript{54}Although, as McDannell shows, Catholics are not alone in their use of religious figures (McDannell 1995, 42f).
signifiers from images that represent devotees to those that represent the deities themselves. In this chain, the Catholic saints define the transition point. They are not the Orisha, just as in Catholic theology they are not deities to be worshipped, but they are spoken of as if they were. Thus when they are rejected as unsuitable images for the Orisha they are replaced not with images of devotees (as would be true in Africa) but with a different set of images who do represent the Orisha themselves.

The creation of sacred space allows practitioners to rebuild the world in a sacred manner. However it is often assumed that the capacity to construct and live in a sacralized world, while typical of “archaic” societies, has been lost in the modern world (Eliade 1987, 13). The construction of home altars, both by Santería practitioners and others, suggests that this is not a completely lost art. One of the appeals of this religion for postmodern Americans may be the ability to reclaim that ancient ability. However, Santería practitioners and traditional Catholics are not the only ones who are building home altars. A recent article in the Houston Chronicle (McCraw 1987) describes a variety of personal sacred spaces constructed by devotees from a wide range of religions. Carol McCraw says that the “spiritual wares,” including icons, incense burners, religious photos, and polished stones, used to decorate these altars as well as the books and classes to teach one what to do with them are widely available. Although some religions forbid the use of “graven images,” the use of altars themselves “cuts across almost all traditions—Jewish, Buddhist, new age, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Episcopal, Baptist and other Christian denominations” (McCraw 1987, 10E). Santería altars may be unique among these altar-building traditions in that they represent not only a symbolic sacred spaces but the actual home of the deities. But the human desire to interpenetrate the ordinary with the sacred is not.
For each individual this incursion of the sacred into the mundane is different. The next chapter will look more closely at individual altar displays, the objects presented and their meaning in the lives of devotees as well as within the sacred cosmology. By looking at altars, both birthday thrones and domestic altars, we will attempt to deconstruct the ways in which the sacred has been brought into the urban American setting.
Chapter 4
The Secret Language of the Orisha

Introduction

The earliest fathers knew that all things, as such, are symbolic by their very being in nature, and all talk of something beyond themselves. Their meaning is not something we impose upon them, but a mystery we can discover in them, if we have but eyes to look. (Thomas Merton)\(^1\)

Santería birthday altars are often an outsiders' first introduction to the religion. It is common in Houston for santeros to invite not only members of their religious family and other santeros to their birthday celebrations but also friends that are not involved in the religion but may be interested or curious. Santeros may also bring outsiders to the birthday parties of others. Although much of this religion is secret, birthday celebrations are open to all comers. Anyone may attend, honor the host and his or her Orisha, and enjoy the food and festivities. At least once during the course of every birthday celebration you can find the host or another santero in front of the birthday throne pointing out the various Orisha displayed there and providing an introduction to their mythology. Even crowned santeros have learned something about the Orisha during these conversations. It was in front of these altars that I was introduced to the religion and I continue to be

\(^1\)Quoted by William A. Christian (Christian 1972, 186).
fascinated at the creativity exhibited by practitioners in the construction of these sacred spaces.²

But these altars are more than just artistic displays. Embedded in them are myriad associations between the Orisha and the visible world. They are constructed not only as acts of worship but also to tell the stories of the Orisha and their priests. Of course the Orisha themselves are believed to be present on these displays although they are hidden in their *soperas*. But their presence is also manifested explicitly in all the objects that surround and surmount those pots. This chapter suggests that when we decode the iconography found on these altars we can discover the Orisha themselves.³

Before looking directly at the symbolism surrounding the most common Orisha in the New World pantheon I will make a short detour into African and European concepts of color and color symbology. I believe that it is this color symbolism and together with the mythology embedded in the divination systems that provide with the most basic insights into Santería cosmology (second level signification). After this short excursion, I will look at the symbology surrounding specific Orisha as they are presented on altars and shrines in Houston and other locations. I will use this symbology to analyze the nature(s) of these Orisha as presented by a range of practitioners.

**An Infinite Chain of Signifiers**

Umberto Eco’s definition of a sign is something that can be “taken as significantly substituting for something else,” whether that something else

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²Roberta Evanchuk also describes her fascination with altar displays in the introduction to her portion of *Santería Altars and Garments* (Flores-Peña and Evanchuk 1994, 27).

³Although I am not going to focus on the creation of these altars and the objects embedded in them I am sensitive to the issues of personal artistic production raised by David Brown in his article “Toward an Ethnoaesthetics of Santería Ritual Arts: The Practice of Altar-Making and Gift Exchange” (Brown 1996).
actually exists or not (Eco 1976, 7). He says that “every time a human group decides to use and to recognize something as the vehicle of something else” a sign is present (17). Thus a message is the transmission of a sign-vehicle (signifier) in order to communicate its corresponding meaning (signified) (54). Signs are constructed by societies and are linked to the cultural order in which they arise so that rather than expressing some sort of eternal or ideal form they are conventions established by a group in order to communicate within that group. Thus for each sign we must define the referent (the signified) in terms of the cultural context in which we find it without resorting to any idea of a ‘real’ object of meaning.4 This relativism leads to a series of infinite regressions as each referent (signified) becomes the signifier of some other cultural unit (69). Thus, although we can discuss the referent for a particular sign-vehicle it is always possible to look behind that referent to another referent. There is implied an infinite chain of signifiers without any ultimate, final, absolute signified to which they refer. Within a semiotic system sign-vehicles can refer to each other and be, in a certain sense, self-referential. This fluidity between the signifiers and their signifieds is necessary because “culture continuously translates signs into other signs, and definitions into other definitions, words into icons, icons into ostensive signs, ostensive signs into new definitions, new definitions into prepositional functions, prepositional functions into exemplifying sentences and so on” (Eco 1976, 71).5

4Another way to look at these cultural units is as classificatory units that serve as conceptual tools. Claude Lévi-Strauss says that these tools can be described as either “concrete classifiers” (for example, animals, plants) or “abstract classifiers” (numbers, directions, cardinal points) (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 142). Using a structural approach one can construct a matrix of these units. By moving diachronically within the matrix one could construct a message using different types of elements without altering the message itself (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 149-50).

5Eco also says that as a discipline semiotics studies “everything which can be used in order to lie” (Eco 1976, 7). We will suggest below that after Catholic saints were incorporated
In terms of altar displays, semiology provides a useful tool for decoding the various items we find. I will suggest that some of these signs are more "significant" than others in that some are "closer" to the referent and thus can be deconstructed in a smaller number of steps. However we need to keep in mind Eco's warnings of cultural relativism and infinite regressions as they provide deeper understandings of how these chains of signifiers are formed. As an entering wedge into this system I will suggest that the Orisha themselves stand at the center of this web of signification. At one level the word orisha describes a constellation of religious, social and psychological concepts that can be used to organize and explain the world in which one finds oneself. One comes to the Orisha through their stories and through an understanding of various forces of nature. These are the primary signs in this symbolic system. The stories put a 'human' face on abstract and impersonal forces. They provide a nuanced account of the deities. In their stories the Orisha live human-like lives with loves and hates, desires and foibles. In addition many of the stories are teaching tales that describe the results of inappropriate behavior. The Orisha do not function as moral or ethical models in these stories; rather they show how the weaknesses of certain personality types are expressed and provide warnings for their followers.

At the same time the association of the Orisha with natural phenomena provides an intuitive and deep understanding of their natures. Memories of violent thunderstorms complete with jagged lightning, wild wind and pouring rain provides a 'feel' for the nature of Shango, the thunder god, that surpasses the most poetic of descriptions. Time spent on or by the

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into the chain of Santería signifiers they could be used to deflect interest in altars by "lying" about the actual object of worship embedded there. Since many Catholic elements are found separated from the Orisha altar, the use of Catholic iconography can also be used draw the observer's attention away from the focus of religious practice.
sea, listening to the continuous murmur of the waves, feeling the pull of the surf, perhaps sailing into the infinity of water and wind has spoken to the soul of humanity for eons. When I say that Yemaya is the ocean, one’s experience of the physical ocean provides a deeper understanding than pages of text.

Santería altars tell the story of the religious life of the santeros who commission them.\(^6\) Items are chosen for inclusion on altars and shrines for one of three reasons: 1) they exemplify the general iconography of an Orisha, 2) they exemplify the specific iconography of a particular Orisha advocacy (path), or 3) they are associated with a divination text. Orisha advocations or paths (Sp. caminos) are similar to the various versions of the Virgin Mary venerated by Catholics. The Church says that there is only one Mary but she is represented through a wide range of images associated either with her personal life (for example, the Immaculate Conception) and her saintly interaction with humans (Our Lady of Fatima). Each image of Mary is dressed differently and is recognizable by her dress and the other objects that surround her (Christian 1972, 57). Most of Kay Turner’s consultants, for example, were devoted to a particular one of these advocations of the Virgin as represented by a specific image. Not all Orisha have advocations or paths but for those that do the priest is informed which path his or her Orisha represents. This information finds its way back onto altars and shrines modifying or enhancing the generalized iconography of that Orisha. Thus, for example, a spot of red on Obatala’s display, knitting needles resting on Oshun’s crown or a Yemaya pot cracked in a basket of plates tells us more

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\(^6\)Although most of the santeros in the Houston community seems to prefer to design and construct their own altar displays, David Hilary Brown says that in the community he worked with specialists may be commissioned to build altars for others (Brown 1993). In either case the design of the altar is focused on the commissioning santero/a and his or her Orisha.
about the Orisha of the priest whose altar we are observing. In all cases, objects that find their way onto thrones and altars may be given as gifts to the Orisha either as votive offerings in thanksgiving for gifts received or in fulfillment of a promise to the Orisha. These gifts to the Orisha may come from the priest herself or from her godchildren and clients.

Divination presents another source of altar iconography. Often during a divination session the practitioner will be told to put an item on their altar or give an item to an Orisha. Although these requests can be idiosyncratic, many are embedded in the divination systems themselves and result in standardized iconography. Again finding one of these items among the icons of an Orisha tells us about the history of the altar-maker and their relationship to that Orisha. However, divination, particularly the divination received in conjunction with various initiations is considered extremely personal—it describes the deepest nature of the person. Often items prescribed by divination are not included on the birthday altars since they reveal this private information which the priest may not want to share with those attending the celebration. However, these items are often found on the domestic shrines maintained throughout the year.

Divination texts might also be used by particular priests in a more general way. For example a local priest celebrating the eleventh anniversary of her initiation (her eleventh birthday in the religion) cradled all of her Orisha in baskets in an allusion to the proverb associated with the divination number ofuani chobe (11), "Don't attempt to carry water in a basket."

One can find levels of signification within a chain of signifiers itself. In describing the use of religious statuary in the Mexican American community she studied, Kay Turner describes one way a religious symbol can move through the chain of signification. She says that the person of the Virgin
Mary is the first sign; her apparitional image, for example the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico is the second-order sign; the copy of that image in a church or other devotional space is a third-order sign and the image in a non-devotional space, for example a restaurant, is a fourth-order sign because it symbolizes the membership of the restaurant and its owner in the community of worshippers. However, all of these signs continue to carry the "significance" of the original, that is each is recognized as Mary in her image as the Virgin of Guadalupe (Turner 1990, 358). A similar chain of signification surrounds the Orisha. The Orisha themselves as well as the fundamentos (the stones and tools enclosed in the altar containers) are the ultimate signifieds in Santería. Each of these are considered by practitioners to be the actual embodiment of the sacred divinities. 7 These fundamentos and the natural forces associated with an Orisha are treated as the Orisha rather than as a representative of the Orisha. 8 The colors, numbers and divination texts might then be considered second order signifiers because they describe the natural attributes of the Orisha while all other associations could be described as third order signifiers because they gain their relationship only through the first order signs, that is they represent elements of the first order signifiers and are explicable through the second order signs. These signifiers may also be found in non-religious spaces and thus indicate a relationship between that space and the religion.

Eco counsels us that a chain of signifiers can become circular when certain signifieds becoming signifiers to their own signifiers. Although I will

7 This belief that the Orisha are actually present in their fundamentos is similar to the Catholic belief that Jesus Christ is actually present in the consecrated host, the communion wafer.

8 For example both the fundamentos and those natural forces that are readily available (rivers, the ocean, railroad tracks, etc.) are presented offerings directly and may be fed the blood of sacrificial animals.
generally present the Orisha as though they are absolute signifieds, we must understand that they are situated within a circular chain, that a certain amount of amplification and circumambulation is necessary. Thus Shango represents the thunder that is embodied in the "thunder celts" that become part of his own fundamentos; at the same time the term Shango can represent "masculine energy", "kingliness", "unbridled power" as much as each of these represents the Shango archetype. In his monograph on the Yoruba, Bascom says: "For each of the hundreds of deities there are appropriate songs, dances, rhythms, musical instruments, taboos, praise names, insignia, shrine carvings and other paraphernalia, leaves, sacrificial foods, and symbols through which they are fed. The Yoruba are explicit that it is not these material symbols which are being worshipped, but rather the deities they represent" (Bascom 1969, 97). The same can be said of the deities in America. Their worship involves the same range of material symbols. All of these represent the Orisha, all are signifiers of their presence and power.

However it often seems as though practitioners have confused investigators by not distinguishing between these signifiers and the signifieds, the deities behind them. As Peter McKenzie says, among the nineteenth century Yoruba there was no clear line between material objects and the "non-empirical spirit beings" they represent. Among the nineteenth century Yoruba the same word (oké) is used for the physical hill and the hill deity;

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9Amplification is a preferred method of explaining core Jungian concepts. Amplification in this context consists of "circumambulating a theme" through the use of suggestive, metaphorical language in order to circumvent the ego's need for precision and clarity. The use of amplification helps to maintain the "essence of the concepts" (Wehr 1987, 49). Since the Orisha, like archetypes and other Jungian concepts, can never be fully explained or understood rationally the use of amplification and circumambulation provides a method for gaining some access to them.

10Notice the similarity between his description of Orisha worship in Africa and in Cuba as cited above (Bascom 1950, 66, 67).
\textit{ibéjí} refers to human twins, the Orisha of twins, the doll created when a twin dies and the spirit of that twin (McKenzie 1997, 458). Among contemporary practitioners too the name of the Orisha is used both for the Orisha itself and for any number of material symbols associated with it. In terms of altar-building it is common to hear a santero say "hand me Ochosi" when what is meant is "hand me the cloth that contains Ochosi's colors and will be used as part of his display on this altar." The most common site for confusion between the Orisha and their signifiers is in the use of Catholic saints among their icons. I will discuss my own theories about the place of the saints in my concluding chapter.

For each deity there is an appropriate set of material symbols; for every object, concept and action there is a ruling Orisha. The signification of the Orisha can be approached from either side of these statements: one can choose an Orisha and attempt to determine all the material symbols associated with it, in the same vein one can establish a set of categories, William Bascom's "songs, dances, rhythms," etc. or Melville J. Herskovits's Catholic saints (Herskovits 1937, 635–36) and determine the symbols within that category associated with each Orisha. Or one can move through the physical and conceptual world and associate an Orisha with each object you find there. One can walk down the street or through the supermarket making correspondences with whatever comes before your eyes. Taking the last approach you will discover that there is an infinite set of correspondences—everything, every plant, animal, manufactured item, every idea, natural phenomenon, place and time can be associated with an Orisha.\footnote{In a discussion on OrishaList, an on-line mailing list for Orisha devotees, one person said that there were many Spanish and Mediterranean Catholic saints that did not have "official" Orisha correspondences. He then proceeded to list some of these and assign syncretizations.}
process, however, the investigator can become confused because the practitioner see the Orisha in all these signifiers, in many instances calls members of this infinite set of signifiers by the name of the Orisha he or she finds there, and often worships the Orisha through them. Thus not only is the railroad track (unknown among the pre-colonial Yoruba and thus a New World or post-colonial innovation) associated with Ogun, it may be called “Ogun” in conversation and even used as a site and object of worship. The signifier has become the signified in some profound way.

This confusion seems to have been a part of the interaction between western observers and Orisha worshippers from the beginning. McKenzie’s research brings to light some of the earliest interactions between the Yoruba and European missionaries.12 Here we find some of the earliest attempts to

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As part of a presentation on this material I spontaneously turned to my godfather and I asked which Orisha would be associated with “ah, a carrot”? He instantly replied “Orisha Oko, the farmer deity, because it comes from the earth.” I would propose that these are examples of the on-going signification of the world by Orisha devotees since none of these examples would be found on “official” lists of correspondences.

12McKenzie’s Hail Orisha! depicts Yoruba traditional religion at around the middle of the nineteenth century using material from missionaries and colonial agents stationed throughout Yorubaland (McKenzie 1997). This material comes primarily from snippets of information found in the diaries, journals and letters produced between 1840 and 1880 by missionaries, catechists and pastors. This is an important resource for the current project not only because it provides the earliest window into nineteenth century Yoruba culture but also because the time frame of these materials matches the time frame of the last wave of Yoruba slaves to Cuba. Thus the olórọsà (owners of Orisha, practitioners of traditional religion) who speak through McKenzie’s text are contemporaries of the Yoruba who were creating Santería in the cabildos of Cuba.

One major caveat must surround McKenzie’s work. All of the information presented is filtered through the eyes and language of English missionaries, even material from Yoruba-speaking catechists is in English. Thus even though the olórọsà often are heard speaking in this work, their words are always a translation. Nuances are lost in this translation process. A simple example will suffice to highlight the difficulty. The original texts often describes conversations in which a olórọsà refer to his or her Orisha as a “god” or “goddess” and McKenzie devotes a portion of his work analyzing the gender changes in various locals (490–96). However, the Yoruba language does not carry a marker for gender. There is no way to distinguish the statements “this is my god” and “this is my goddess” without further context. Since the missionaries appropriated Olorun (owner of heaven, one of the praise names for Olodumare, the so-called high God) as the name of their God, to say “this (Orisha) is my God (Olorun)” is an oxymoron since it refers to two separate categories of beings. The Yoruba would be unlikely to confuse one being (an Orisha) for another (Olorun). On the other hand, to say
explain Yoruba religious concepts using European categories and constructs. Those who have been exposed to Catholic Christianity could compare their use of images as similar to the Catholics' worship of the images of the saints (McKenzie 1997, 503). However, among the Yoruba in nineteenth-century Africa, the world was formed of living symbols which referred not only to the non-empirical world of invisible beings but also to the visible empirical world (McKenzie 1997, 457). That Yoruba symbols are fluid, incorporative and associative (Drewal 1988, 132) continues to confound observers.

I will suggest that within this cosmology certain signs are primal and can not be eliminated from the symbol system while others can be subjected to infinite substitution. Distinguishing between these two types of signs is a major challenge. However, I feel that the absence of such discrimination has hampered earlier works. For example, most contemporary works attempt to place the Catholic saints within the chain of signifiers. I will suggest that among a wide range of goods that can be associated with Orisha, the Catholic saints form not primary but secondary, substitutable, signs. By focusing scholarly attention on the relationship between saints and Orisha we have over-valORIZED one set of secondary signs while disregarding many which are more basic. Within Santería homes Catholic religious figures can be used as intended by the Church to invoke the saints, while at the same time they can be used as representations of the Orisha. It is the intention of the individual, not the object itself, that creates the significance of the figure. What isn't

"this (Orisha) is my god (Orisha)" (see p 463 for one instance where both Orisha and Olorun are translated as "god/God") is redundant and still does not answer the gender question. Thus we are left unsure of not only the meaning of the statement but the "real" statement itself.

Saints are secondary because they are substitutable. They can and have been eliminated from the practice of some individuals and groups without any perceived loss. See Mary Cuthell Curry's description of the elimination of saints and other elements in her African-American research community (Curry 1997, 40-41).
always apparent is the propensity among practitioners to find representations of the Orisha everywhere. I can put out a fruit basket and savvy santeros will recognize which Orisha I am choosing to honor. A grouping of candles may, by their colors alone, invoke a set of Orisha. Beaded necklaces, given as part of an initiation ritual, represent the Orisha solely by the colors and number distribution of the beads. The saints may seem more convenient because as human figures they more closely approximate our anthropomorphized visions but they are in no way closer to the Orisha they represent than fruit, candles, bolts of cloth, sets of beads or natural phenomena.

**The Language of Color**

One style of birthday throne creates the walls of the display by hanging a piece of cloth for each Orisha. (See Plate 1.) Although other items may be included along with each Orisha’s *soperas*, the major characteristic identifying the Orisha is the cloth itself. An alternative method of altar design focuses on the color of the primary Orisha being honored (See Plate 2). In either case cloth evokes and invokes the spiritual power of the Orisha (Brown 1993, 49). Colors and color combinations provide the primary signifiers on such altars.\(^\text{14}\)

In addition to altar displays, *elekes* and *mazos*\(^\text{15}\) provide a rich view into Orisha color iconography. One of the first initiations into the religion is the ritual reception of a set of color-coded necklaces. Different houses give

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\(^\text{14}\) Robert Ferris Thompson also says that we can find the irreducible essence of the Orisha in the colors associated with them, that these colors represent each one’s “particular quality of salvation” (Thompson 1993, 158).

\(^\text{15}\) *Elekes* (Yr. bead) are single strands of colored beads each of which represents an Orisha. *Mazos* (Sp. bunch, bundle) are a set of large and heavy ceremonial necklaces. Santeros generally receive their first set of *elekes* as part of the Necklaces initiation and a new set during the *asiento* ceremony. A set of *mazos* that correspond to the Orisha received is generally only worn as part of the initiation ceremony. At other times they are found draped over the *soperas* of the appropriate Orisha.
different sets but most receive at least the necklaces of Eleggua, Obatala, Shango, Oshun and Yemaya. If the godparent’s head is another Orisha, the godchild may receive the necklace of that Orisha also. Although there are basic designs for these necklaces based on the numbers and colors associated with the Orisha, the set presented by each santero will be slightly different based on the paths associated with the godparents deities. Each necklace represents the Orisha purely through its color and number symbolism.

J. E. Cirlot says that color symbolism is the most universal type of symbolism; that it is derived from either the inherent characteristics of the colors themselves, or from the relationship between colors and other signifiers (Cirlot 1962, 50). Within many west African societies, there are only three basic color terms (Buckley 1985, Hackett 1996, Jacobson-Widding 1979, Renne 1995, Thompson 1993). In the Yoruba language these are funfun (white), pupa (red) and dudú (black). The color funfun includes not only shades of white (ecru and light gray for example) but also transparent and liquid substances like milk, semen, saliva, urine and genital secretions. Because white implies wateriness, any watery material may be referred to as funfun including menstrual blood (Renne 1995, 24, Buckley, 1985 #101, 54). Pupa, red, includes not only the color we would characterize as red but yellows and browns; dudú, black, includes not only black but all dark colors such as dark brown and most shades of blue and green (Buckley 1985, 54–55).

Among the Yoruba white is the color generally associated with fine character, creativity, wisdom, and purity. (Thompson 1984, 11). Elisha P. Renne says that white is also associated with spirits and thus can be used to provide a bridge to the invisible world (Renne 1995, 25). Red, on the other hand, represents strength and emotional intensity. It is the color of blood and fire and represents both creative and destructive forces. Red is hot and
dangerous; it is a “distinctiveness and threatening power” (Renne 1995, 98). Red is the color of danger, evil and death (Abimbola 1997, 239 n. 25).\textsuperscript{16} It stands in opposition to the coolness represented by white. Thus these two colors represent a duality of forces: “hot and cool, red and white, dangerous and safe, violent and composed...” (Apter 1992, 84, Thompson 1971, 2/2). The color black represents what is deep and hidden, like the contents of an indigo dye pot,\textsuperscript{17} the bottom of the river or the ocean (Hackett 1996, 66, Thompson 1993, 163, 270); black is the color of night.\textsuperscript{18} John Pemberton III cites an Ifa verse that instructs the supplicant to “desire to be colored ‘black’”\textsuperscript{19} (dùùdùù), which means to be possessed of the deep knowledge, (owo)” (Pemberton 1989, 162). Black (and indigo) are also associated with fertility (Renne 1995, 66).

European thought is also rich in color symbolism. Six of these figure prominently in Santería displays: white, red, blue, yellow, black and green. White is generally associated with innocence, purity, wisdom and truth as well as simplicity, honesty and noninvolvement (Dreyfuss 1972, 237, 245); newly baptized Christians wear white robes and the souls of the just are depicted similarly dressed in artistic rendering of the Last Judgment (Biedermann 1992, 380). Red, on the other hand, is associated with blood, fire, passion, sentiment, valor, war, revolution and martyrdom as well as warm, extroverted, fiery and aggressive personalities. In Christian iconography it

\textsuperscript{16} Abimbola says, for example, that death’s garment is always red (Abimbola 1997, 190).

\textsuperscript{17} The range of colors from very light blue to green to black, all characterized as dùùdùù, is produced by repeated introductions of the thread into the indigo dye pot. Red, yellow and tan dyes are also used among the Yoruba (Bascom 1969, 101).

\textsuperscript{18} Wescott says that since among the Yoruba night is associated with evil, the association of black with night is also an indication of wickedness (Wescott 1962, 346). However, associating black only with evil misses many of the other ways it is used in Yoruba iconography.
represents the blood of Christ, charity and martyrdom as well as love, fervor, sin and hell (Biedermann 1992, 281–82, Dreyfuss 1972, 234, 239).

Blue is a calming color associated with the daytime sky, the calm sea, thinking, religious feeling and devotion, although dark blue connotes the night sky and stormy seas as well as doubt and discouragement. Blue is the color of the Virgin Mary as well as representing piety, peace, prudence and a serene conscience. (Dreyfuss 1972, 235, 243). It is often used to represent things of the spirit and the intellect (Biedermann 1992, 44). Yellow is often associated with the sun, light, illumination, intuition, the highest values and divinity as well as treachery and cowardice. It often represents a imaginative, contemplative, warm and joyful personality (Dreyfuss 1972, 234, 240). Reddish-yellow is often associated with gold which connotes majesty, riches, honor and wisdom (Dreyfuss 1972, 236) as well as perfection and the light of heaven (Biedermann 1992, 154). Green in a positive light is associated with vegetation, nature and fertility. It can also represent hope, life, immortality, youth and freshness (Dreyfuss 1972, 235); thus Christ’s cross and God’s throne are often represented as green (Biedermann 1992, 158). In a negative light green is connected with illness and death, envy, jealousy and madness (Dreyfuss 1972, 235). Although black can represent might, dignity and sophistication it is more often associated with nothingness, night, evil, sin, death and sickness. In terms of personality, black is associated with morbidity, despair and gloom (Dreyfuss 1972, 237, 246).

These two different sets of color connotations have come together and interacted in Santería iconography. In some cases they have combined into a rich stew of meaning, in others significations represented by one color in Africa have been replaced by a different color with similar significations in the European mind. And, as we shall see, in some cases, European
significations seem to have formed a palimpsest concealing the original African significations. Although the European color wheel contains seven colors (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet), not all were added directly to Orisha color symbolism in Cuba. The African basics, white (funfun) and red (pupa) remained, black was replaced by blue (aró)¹⁹ and yellow was added to the basic color group. These four form the “primary” colors of the Orisha.²⁰ Every Orisha is associated with one of these four colors but green, shades of violet, and pink, among others, are added along with combinations of colors to uniquely identify the Orisha. At the same time black (dúdú) as either deepest blue or red continues to be included. In certain contexts it follows closely upon white in seniority ranking.²¹ Mason says that white and black may be considered the “ideal, complementary pair” (Mason 1997, 110 quoting a personal correspondence from R. Abíôdún, 1994) replacing red and white as “opposites.”

The Orisha

The Orisha form the basis of Santería. As living beings their names and characteristics are attached to every aspect of the religion: priests are identified according to their primary Orisha, ritual activities are determined according to the Orisha being honored, altars and thrones are structured according to the Orisha found there. As we begin to look at the characteristics and signifiers associated with the Orisha we can use a variety of organizational methods to analyze what we find. We will first make a distinction between

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¹⁹Although aró refers to indigo, many of the blues used within the religion are the lighter blue of the primary color wheel.

²⁰Combinations of white, red, yellow and blue form the signatures of all the Orisha (Mason 1997, 110).

²¹John Mason talks about the four primary colors in terms of their rank. He says that white is the senior, followed by red and blue with yellow as the youngest (Drewal and Mason 1997 [1989], Mason 1997, 110) #276, 347.
those Orisha that were widely worshipped in Africa and those whose worshippers were centered on specific geographic areas.\textsuperscript{22}

The worship of Obatala (along with Orishanla, Oduduwa, etc.), Shango, and Orula (also known as Ifa or Orunmila) centered in the cities of Oyo and Ifa was dispersed throughout the Yoruba-speaking area of contemporary Nigeria; the presence of Eleggua (also known as Eshu) and Ogun is widely noted even in the earliest sources. On the other hand, the worship of Yemaya, Inle, Oshun, and Ochosi while widespread were based on the practices of local groups. Although we would expect that localized cults would be more stable, the lack of any centralized authority seems to have left the priests of each town freer to construct their religious practices. Thus we will discover that many of the characteristics associated with those Orisha whose worship was localized are more variable and fluid than those who were more widely known.

A second method of categorizing the Orisha is according to the place of their archetype in the society. The warrior Orisha, particularly Eleggua, Ogun and Ochosi, all of whom represent figures that dwell on the margins of society, are treated differently than the more refined royalty of the pantheon. Thus we find the warriors displayed in open containers and generally not surrounded by the fine cloth, lace and the like that characterize the accouterments of the royal deities.

\textsuperscript{22}Bascom says that there is no Orisha that is worshipped by all the Yoruba (Bascom 1944, 40). However he names Ifa, Ogun, Orishanla/Obatala/Oshala, Shango and Eshu as deities whose rituals and mythologies are wide-spread (Bascom 1944, 38). Idowu says that the “principal divinities” who are universally recognized and worshipped by the Yoruba are Orisanla (Obatala), Orunmila (Orula), Ogun, Eshu, Shango, and Shopona (Idowu 1994, 70). I have excluded Orunmila and Shopona from my list of universal Orisha. Because the direct worship of Orunmila is limited to babalawos, I have left his analysis to others. As the worship of Shopona (Babaluaive ) has come to the Americas it is more associated with the Fon people than the Yoruba. Although it cries out for scholarly attention, such an analysis is outside the scope of this project (Idowu 1994, 95f for a description of Shopona’s worship in Nigeria).
A third way of describing the Orisha focuses on separating those who were primarily Yoruba and those whose worship come from other, related groups (for example Olokun, Babaluaiye/Shopona). Several Orisha from these neighboring groups have been integrated into Santería, but not without a few rough edges.

In the rest of this chapter we will look at examples from the first two of these categories. The “royal” Orisha will be represented by the kings Obatala (and other “white” Orisha who are associated with him) and Shango, both of whom are widely recognized, and the queens Yemaya and Oshun, whose worship tends to be more localized. Comparing these two sets of Orisha will also allow us to discuss some of the ways gender and sexual differences are approached both within the mythology and within contemporary practice.

We will look at two of the “outside” Orisha: Eleggua and Ogun. These are two of the three Orisha normally presented in the initiation of Warriors (the third is Ochosi). Although the worship of these two Orisha is widespread throughout west Africa, they are generally not seen as royal but instead live on the margins of society. We will see the way this marginality is exhibited in their symbology and mythology.

We will limit our discussion of Orisha semiotics to these six examples. This is a practical decision to avoid extending this chapter unduly but it can also be justified on the basis of religious practice. Although there are an potentially infinite number of Orisha, everyone in the mainstream of this religion has been introduced to at least these six. The warriors ceremony invests the initiate with Eleggua and Ogun (as well as Ochosi). Although different houses give different necklaces as part of that ceremony, most

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23 The use of the title “queen” to describe these deities in no ways suggests that they are dependent upon others. They are royal in their own right without regard for any relationship with other members of the pantheon.
people receive the necklaces of Eleggua, Obatala, Shango, Yemaya and Oshun. A crowned priest receives at least these six Orisha. They are present on every birthday and domestic altar, everyone is familiar with their mythology and iconography. As a consequence there seems to be a wide degree of consensus about them and their attributes.

**Obatala: “King of the White Cloth”**

Looking at the photograph of Changó Ladé’s altar (Plate 3) we notice that the highest element is covered with a white and silver cloth. By its lofty position and white color we know that this is the *sopera* of Obatala.

Throughout Yorubaland Oshanla, whose name means “the great Orisha” is the pre-eminent “white” (funfun) Orisha of the pantheon. In some versions of the mythology it is Oshanla who climbs down the golden chain from heaven with a snail shell of dirt, a lizard and a chicken to place dry land in the middle of the waters; thus he is considered the founder of the center of Yoruba culture, Ife (Johnson 1960 (1921), 7-16). In other stories Oshanla is the wife of Obatala or Oduduwa, another white Orisha. In some myth cycles it is Oduduwa who founds (or conquers) the city of Ife and establishes Yoruba culture (Bascom 1969, 9, *Idwú* 1994, 23).

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24 The list of Orisha received by a new priest depends on their guardian Orisha. However these six form the minimum grouping. As will be discussed below, Ogun is received in a series of ceremonies including warriors, necklaces, shells and knife. Only a priest who has received cachillo (Sp. knife) has received a “complete” Ogun. Similarly Ochosi is received in two ceremonies: as part of the warriors and later in a “complete” initiation.

25 I want to extend my special thanks to those santeros who allowed me to use photographs of their altars for this analysis. This portion of my work would have been impossible without their cooperation. Thank you Abebe Ochun, Changó Ladé, Ewin Leti, Oba Dina, Ode Kan, Odun Aye, Olomidé, Omi Tinibu.

26 Bascom names this deity “Oshala” whose name means God of the White Cloth (Orisha ala). This may be a conflation of the names Oshanla (the great Orisha) and Obatala (the king of the white cloth) (Bascom 1969, 81).

27 As the founder of Ile-Ife Oduduwa is often credited as being its first king and the “father” of the Yoruba people (Mason 1996, 3). However in the Americas Oduduwa is often considered to be a female path of Obatala.
Oshanla and Oduduwa (sometimes called Oduwa) continue to be worshipped in the New World, it is Obatala, whose name means “the king of the white cloth,” who has become embedded in these stories as the preeminent “white” Orisha.\textsuperscript{28} He has taken on many aspects of these other deities and is considered to be the oldest of the Orisha and their king. He is the one who separated out the dry land from the water (Courlander 1973, 15–19, Ìdòwú 1994, 1920) and the one who forms babies in their mother’s wombs (Ìdòwú 1994, 21, 71–72). His fondamentos are given to every new initiate and thus he is present on every altar.

Everything white is associated with Obatala including the white chalk (Yr. efùn, Sp. cascaria), white birds (particularly doves),\textsuperscript{29} the white sky\textsuperscript{30}, and white cloth. As the essence of “whiteness” he embodies the concepts of coolness, purity, patience, creativity, the wisdom that comes with age (white hair) and spirituality.\textsuperscript{31} The elephant, who is gray (that is, “white”), long-lived and wise, is one of Obatala’s pre-eminent signifiers as are snails, monkeys, lizards\textsuperscript{32} and cats\textsuperscript{33} (Ewin Leti, personal communication, December

\textsuperscript{28}The Rev. Samuel Johnson lists the names of a variety of white Orisha worshipped throughout Yorubaland with similar stories and attributes (Johnson 1960 (1921), 27) E. Bólájí Ìdowu also lists a number of places that claim Orisha-nla (Obatala) as their titular deity and worship him under a variety of names (Ìdòwú 1994, 75). Bascom says that while the “white” Orisha form a major subdivision in the Yoruba pantheon it is sometimes difficult to tell if devotees are referring to separate deities or just different names and manifestations of a single deity (Bascom 1969, 82). In the New World these generally became caminos (Sp. paths) of Obatala.

\textsuperscript{29}The doves found on Obatala altars also show his association with the holy spirit of Christianity (Thompson 1993, 265).


\textsuperscript{31}His white cloth also indicates Obatala’s “great age, majestic authority and pristine character” (Mason 1996, 4).

\textsuperscript{32}The lizard seems to be a stand-in for Obatala’s messenger, the chameleon. In one story, Olókun, the deity of the ocean, challenges Obatala for primacy. They agree that who ever could dress in the finest clothes would be king. Obatala sent the chameleon as his messenger. Whatever wonderful dress Olókun put on, the chameleon matched. Thus Obatala won the match. If his messenger could equal Olokun how much finer must be the master (Mason
30, 1997). In Africa his temples are often whitewashed, especially on the inside, and his followers wear white robes and white beads (Idòwù 1994, 73).

In Western symbology "white represents purity, virginity and the transcendent" (Fontana 1993, 67). For these reasons it is often used to clothe the newborn at his baptism and the bride at her wedding. Although these two sets of representations (the Yoruba and the European) do not completely coincide their intersection provides a rich space of signification. Westerners generally associate white with youth and the purity of the very young but purity of action can be reclaimed in old age as the fires of one's youth burn themselves out. Thus in both cultures older people often serve as judges and rulers because they are considered less passionate, calmer and less temperamental. An analysis of all these associations leads to a description of Obatala as "wise, clever, kind but stern, peaceful, mystical, magnanimous, generous, idealistic" (Changó Ladé, personal communication, March 2, 1997). He is the judge of the pantheon and "owns" all heads. He represents ritual and ethical purity and thus is associated with the highest morality, holiness and purity (Idòwù 1994, 73). He is often perceived as an old man, the penultimate judge of human actions deferring only to Olodumare. Extending these associations leads us to many of the other items found on altar displays and associated with Obatala: pears, rice pudding, milk, cotton, meringue, eggs, snails (who's "blood" is white), silver bells and silver swords (for the warrior caminos). In making human associations with Obatala, santeros have looked

1996, 7)? Awo Fá'lokun Fatunmbi tells this story with Olodumare instead of Obatala as Olokun's opponent (Fatunmbi 1992, 8).

33Some people also associate the cat with Oshun (Abebe Ochun, personal communication, December 15, 1998).

34Idowu says that in Africa Orishna-la (Obatala) enjoins monogamy and is himself monogamist (Idòwù 1994, 73).
to Jesus Christ, the Virgin of Mercy (who is clothed completely in white) and even the Buddha.\footnote{Farrow says that Obatala represents the "nearest approach to the Jewish conception of the 'Word' (Farrow 1996 [1926]) #227, 44) however among santeros he is also associated with God the Father.}

Although any white or white and silver items may be associated with Obatala, other white deities may be enthroned on these altars, particularly Oshanla and Oduwu/Oduwa. In the lineage of the Houston community Oshanla is considered to be the wife of Obatala.\footnote{However, in some parts of west Africa Oshanla is considered to be male. Within Santería Oshanla is considered a road or aspect of Obatala. This does not preclude a santero from having both this female road and other aspects of Obatala within their personal pantheon.} She is often given to a santero whose Obatala has a male path, (for example, Ajaguna, the young warrior, or Obamoro, the mature king). Oshanla is considered an extremely "cool" Orisha who further cools and balances a warrior Obatala’s energies.

While Oshanla’s necklaces are pure "white": mother of pearl, white coral and silver (Changó Ladé, personal communication, March 2, 1997), some Obatala paths may include a spot of color. Children of the path of Obatala called Ajaguna may have a small number of red beads interspersed among the white and crystal ones; they may also place a red cloth so it peeks out from beneath a white lace cover. Since red, as we shall see below, is the hot color associated with war and blood it is an appropriate marker for this young warrior aspect of Obatala.

Obamoro, another common path of Obatala, represents a man at the height of his maturity—no longer young, not yet old. His story tells of the time when a king who had lived apart from his home for many years wanted to return to his original town. His nobles, who had ties to the current city and didn’t want to leave, sent a group of the misshapen—hunchbacks, albinos,
and the like to the old city so that those who were sent ahead by the king would report that the city was ruled by ghosts and thus was uninhabitable. Their plan however was thwarted by a servant who revealed their secret. The king sent his soldiers to capture the "ghosts" and returned them to join a banquet for his nobles. Thus he earned the name Oba mu Oro or the Ghostcatcher (Ifalade March 3, 1997). His dance is that of the twisted and lame. Because this makes him looks as if he is coming down from a cross, in Cuba he is associated with Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews (Personal communication, Ewin Leti, December 30, 1997). The spot of purple in his necklaces recalls this royal association.

As we shall see is true of all the Orisha, Obatala’s strengths are also his weaknesses. In one story he decides to visit the city of Shango, another Orisha-king. As is typical among the Yoruba, before beginning the journey he consulted Orula, the god of divination. The oracle said that it was not an auspicious time for a journey and that if he did not postpone his trip something bad would befall him. But Obatala was headstrong. He had planned his trip and was eager to begin. He told himself that he was Obatala, the king of the white cloth. Nothing would molest him since all recognized his signature clothing. Before he was half a day down the road he met a young man (Eleggua, the trickster) who asked if Obatala would help him load a pot of palm oil onto his head. Of course it slipped and Obatala’s brilliant

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37 Because of his role in the forming of the new child in its mother’s womb, people with these types of birth defects are generally associated with Obatala (Idëwú 1994, 71-72, Johnson 1960 (1921), 27).

38 Afolabi has says that the light purple found highlighting Obamoro’s necklaces is a "mistake" that refers to his association with Jesus of Nazareth, who is dressed in royal purple robes (Afolabi (Clayton D. Keck February 22, 1998). This is another example of heteroglossia. The king of the hunchbacks wears a spot of purple, not only the color of European royalty but also that associated with the robes worn by Christ. the King of the Jews, before his crucifixion (Dreyfuss 1972, 243).
white clothing was stained by the greasy red oil. Not being too far from home he returned to change into clean clothes. Later as he was walking along he met another young boy (again we are to understand this to be Eleggua, the trickster who challenges one’s decisions) who stood at one end of a log placed across a stream to serve as a footbridge. In helping the youngster cross the stream both slipped and fell into muddy water. Not being too far from Shango’s city Obatala decided rather than returning home again he would continue on his journey and borrow clean clothes from Shango when he got there. Just outside the city he saw a beautiful horse he recognized as Shango’s own. It apparently had escaped its grooms and was loose in the forest. (Another of Eleggua’s tricks?) Obatala caught the horse and, being a king himself and thus entitled, he rode the horse to the city. When he got to the gates of the city the guards, seeing only an old man dressed in filthy clothes riding the king’s horse, threw him into jail. It would be six months before Shango discovered that he had the father of the Orisha, the king of the white cloth, in his jail and releases him (Courlander 1973, 83–85).

This story is often cited as a parable of human action. It describes what happens when one ignores wise counsel, it suggests that a journey begun wrong can not be redeemed by good works, and it shows the role of the trickster in making things happen. And finally, it shows that even Obatala, the pre-eminent Orisha, can become proud, make bad decisions, and be “thrown into jail” as a consequence.

**Shango: Balanced Thunder**

Referring back to Shangó Ladé’s altar displays (Plates 3 and 4), our eye is drawn to the white column enfolded in red cloth and surmounted by a red crown. Beneath these layers of cloth are Shango’s *batea* (Sp. flat-bottomed boat or tray) and *pilon* (Sp. mortar). These are a covered wooden bowl,
containing Shango's fundamentos, and an inverted mortar/pedestal (a batea and pilon are also the focus of Plate 2). In many ways Shango is the opposite of Obatala. He is also a king, but whereas Obatala is the head of the heavenly pantheon, Shango was the historical fourth king of the city of Oyo (Johnson 1960 (1921), 34). Where Obatala is generally thought of as an elderly man, Shango is always imagined as a young man in the prime of his life. Where Obatala is associated with cool white, Shango is red—the hot fire, passion, blood, and creative and destructive forces in action.

In the African view, pure red is too hot, too dangerous, too violent; uncontrolled such powerful energy threatens to destroy society. The legends say that originally Shango's color was just red and throughout the mythological corpus stories tell of his use and misuse of power. In one he is a great warrior who, in a fit of envy, causes two of his best generals to fight to the death (Courlander 1973, 91–101); in another his experimentation with the magic of lightning kills his wives and children (Courlander 1973, 79–82). Thus, we are told that Obatala decides to share his white with Shango to "cool" his passion with wisdom (González-Wippler 1994, 93–94). Today we recognize his necklace by its alternating red and white bead design.39 This use of equal numbers of red and white elements speaks to the balance associated with Shango.

The other major symbol of Shango both in African and in the diaspora, also found on this display, is the oshé, the double-headed ax incorporated into a dance wand (Plate 4 and 5).40 As in our example, the oshé is often balanced

39 Notice the red and white pattern of the strings of beads cascading down from the crown as well as the design of the beaded baseball bat on the right side of the pedestal in Plate 4.

40 Notice also the echo of the oshé's form in the way the cloth covering Obatala's pot is formed into "wings" overshadowing the whole display.
on the head of a woman. Here balance is suggested by several sign-systems incorporated into a single object. The oshé itself is a symbol of balance, the two blades are perfect twins of each other. The woman, often naked with a baby at her breast or on her back, represents the cooling power of the feminine (Lawal 1996, 25–26) while her perfect calm balances the angles of the energy on her head. Thus when used in the setting of ritual possession the oshé both represents the balancing of sacred power and helps, through its own cooling imagery, to pacify the heat of this volatile divinity.

The baseball bat41 and the inverted mortar holding his container (See Plate 2; mortar covered by fabric in Changó Ladé’s 1989 and 1993 altars, Plates 3, 4 and 6) invokes another set of Shango’s images—his association with thunder and lightning and his attribution as “The Wrath” of Olodumare (Idowú 1994, 89). The crack of a pestle striking the wooden mortar brings to mind the crack of lightning during a thunder storm.42 The bat carries both the imagery of the war club and that of the pestle used by African women to process root crops. How Shango became associated with thunder and lightning is told in a group of stories. In one he is a great magician who travels to another kingdom to learn the secret of controlling these great natural forces; in another it is his followers who, after his ignominious death, learn the deadly secret and use it to punish those who dishonor his name (Johnson 1960 [1921], 34). Many stories say that he could eject fire from his mouth or fist (Farrow 1996 [1926]) #227, 48; González-Wippler, 1994 #177, 62,

41 Compare clubs on an Esango (Shango) altar in Benin City with baseball bats in the United States and Cuba (Thompson 1993, 241 Plate 250 and 251, 244 Plate 254). Brown says that the bat is also used by Shango instead of a more traditional whip to “enforce [his] justice and defend his children” (Brown 1993, 86 n. 37) although whips are also associated with him.

42 The mortar suggests a visual/verbal pun on Shango’s brashness and the force implicit in his relations to the world. In the Yoruba language when the word for “mortar”, adó, is spoken it can also mean “you fuck.” Thus its name and the action of the mortar also suggests Shango’s phallic character (Matory 1993, 73).
91, 190 passim]. Regardless, his worship was syncretized with an older thunder deity, Jàkûta, who was associated with "The flashing of lightning free/The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks" (Idowù 1994, 93). We see the jagged line of lightning again and again: in the bands of beads embellishing the baseball bat, in shape of the oshé and its echo in the shape of Obatala's covering, and the shimmer of the cloth forming the back wall of the display.

Finally, Shango's history as the king of Oyo finds it way onto altars in a variety of ways: the crown atop his pot\textsuperscript{44} and the beading that flows from it,\textsuperscript{45} the use of leopard skin fabric\textsuperscript{46} and the carousel horse (Plate 6). The horse points to the history of the city of Oyo whose empire was established and maintained by mounted troops. Established on the northern plains of what is now Nigeria, old Oyo was "uniquely situated to make cavalry a major instrument of conquest" (Matory 1994, 8). Bringing horses in from the north, Oyo conquered the surrounding cities until it reached the forest kingdoms of the south. The forest, home to various parasites and insect-borne diseases, particularly the tsetse fly (and the trypanosomiasis, sleeping sickness, it carried) was deadly to horses and proved to be an insurmountable barrier to permanent conquest (Law 1980, 76–77).

Throughout the range of the Oyo empire the cult of Shango traveled with the administrative bureaucracy of the empire (Apter 1992, 23). Messengers of the king, the \textit{ilari}, were the diplomatic observers, toll

\textsuperscript{43}Idowù also says there is a relationship between Orùmifè (a solar divinity of Ile-Ife), Jakùta and Shango (Idowù 1994, 94).

\textsuperscript{44}The crowns in Plates 3, 4, 6, and 7 are also invocative of this priest's religious name: Changó Ladé, the crown of Shango.

\textsuperscript{45}African kings are recognized by their crowns with beaded veils (Drewal 1997, Thompson 1993, 266).

\textsuperscript{46}Leopard skin alludes to another ancient African symbol of sovereignty and kingship (Thompson 1993, 263, see also 233–234).
collectors, messengers, cavaliers, royal guards, and priests of this empire. As part of their installation it seems that they were initiated by the royal priestess of Shango (Matory 1994, 11). As royal representatives they often exercised their duties throughout the kingdom while on horseback (Matory 1993, 11). Thus the cult of Shango, the historic king of Oyo, became entwined with royal soldiers and messengers on horseback.\textsuperscript{47}

In addition to their association with cavalry and warfare, horses carry several other significations. Throughout West Africa horses were also used as ceremonial and status objects. Horses were expensive to acquire and more expensive to maintain (especially in the tsetse-ridden south). Thus they became the visible symbol of wealth—"only a man of enormous wealth could afford to waste resources on the extravagant scale which horse-keeping required" (Law 1980, 164, 192, 196). Another unique aspect of the horse-culture in West Africa that survived the trip to the Americas is the use of a horse-tail as a symbol of status and authority. The horse-tail carried the status of horse ownership: having a horse-tail whisk suggests that at one time one was wealthy enough to own a horse (Law 1980, 168–69). In the Santería context, the Orisha are often presented with horse-tail fly-whisks. When possible, the tail color coordinates with the color associated with the Orisha (Obatala has a white horse-tail, for example) and often the handle is exquisitely beaded (Mason 1997, fig 193 113, fig 202, fig 261, 155, fig 276, 163).\textsuperscript{48} Thus horses

\textsuperscript{47}Understanding Shango’s signifiers helps us read some of the history of this time. Robin Law tells of a king of Allada (a city on the coast of what is now Nigeria) who invited Spanish missionaries to come to his kingdom in 1660 "so that in his kingdom there should be no thunder, lightning, thunderbolts, or wars," because 'he had been told that the priests of the whites had power against all these things' (Law 1991, 64). My guess that this king was looking for magical help against the minions of Shango was confirmed when I read that Allada was invaded by the Oyo Yoruba in 1680. "‘and these all being horded, a war-like nation, in a short time mastered half of the King of Ardra’s [Allada’s] territories’...” (Bascom 1969, 12, Newbury 1961, 21).

\textsuperscript{48}Interestingly, in spite of this relationship between the horse and Shango, the symbol carried by his priests is not a horsetail whisk but the oshé. Whisks are carried primarily by
(particularly those painted red and white) uniquely represent Shango while also representing generalized ideas of status, power and kingship.

The other signification implied in horse symbolism is that of animal sexuality. Matory suggests this chain of ideas when he describes the metaphors of marriage surrounding Shango initiates. The term "mount" (Yor. gun) which is used to describe the trance possession of the initiate by the Orisha is the same term used to describe the act of male animals in respect to females. Matory says that this term is not normally used to describe the sexual act of human beings and implies rape when used in human context. Thus the taking of his priest by the Orisha Shango participates in an animal aggression, violence and power associated with powerful animals like the horse (Matory 1994, 198–99, 270 n. 16).49

Andrew Apter says that Shango and Obatala represented two ritual fields in the historic Yoruba context. In his reading Obatala represented Ife, the founding city of the Yoruba people. It is this older center of Yoruba culture that is over-shadowed by the horse-based military of the upstart city of Oyo.50 The two kingdoms, the senior and the junior, shared power by proclaiming Ife the "spiritual capital" or "father kingdom" while recognizing Oyo's superior political control. Thus after Oyo's rise in the fifteenth century Ife exercised regional political influence of an "elder-statesmanly" character that provided some control over Oyo's growing hegemonic claims (Apter 1992, 27–34, McKenzie 1997, 377). We can see echoes of this theory in the

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49 Further discussion of the use of marriage/sexual metaphor in respect to initiation is included in Chapter 5.

50 Law's research indicates that horses only became known among the Yoruba after the decline of Ife and the rise of the kingdoms of Benin and Oyo in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Law 1980, 20–22).
relationship between these two divinities and their children in the New World context. Obatala is often referred to as “the old man.” As the owner of all heads he is believed to be the head of all of the Orisha. In some stories Shango, the son of Yemaya, is raised by Obatala, her husband but not his natural father; in others a female aspect of Obatala is his natural mother although he is raised by Yemaya. It is said that there are times when only Obatala can cool the fires of Shango.

Shango, on the other hand, is always the young, strong warrior. His nature is well represented in European sensibility by the horse, a large, powerful animal that represents not only “unbridled” sexuality (Biedermann 1992, 177–78), but also carries, in the United States, the mystic baggage of the Old West with its strong silent men, heroes and loners, cowboys and gunslingers, whose violent nature only enhanced their latent sexuality. Although I haven’t seen such images I wouldn’t be surprised to find The Duke or the Marlboro Man among the images of Shango in contemporary America.

Knowing Shango’s association with sexuality and by extension fertility we can begin to understand some of the foods that are included in his iconography. The most prominent of these are bananas, corn and okra. One doesn’t need to be a Freudian scholar to see the phallic connotations of each of these but there is also a quality of fertility associated with each. Both corn and okra contain a multitude of seeds, enough to multiply itself many times over (Abimbola 1997, 221); in both cases the seeds are associated with a milky, slimy liquid reminiscent of human semen. This is most obvious in the case of okra whose seeds float in a sticky slime, but the “milk” of fresh corn is also reminiscent of genital fluid. These point to clear images of human fertility. Although bananas don’t reproduce by seeds each individual fruit is a member
of a "bunch", a collection of fruit swaying together at the end of a flexible branch. New banana trees sprout from the roots of the mother plant, producing a perpetual source of fruit. In each of these cases a phallic fruit and a prolific source of new life represents Shango's associations not only with male sexuality but also with his reproductive prowess. He is not a "playboy" deity, sexuality for its own sake is not at the core of his iconography. Rather reproduction, the creation of new life, of children, stands at the heart of these images.

**Yemaya: Mother of the Waters, Owner of the Sea**

    Yemoja, mother of the fishes
    Mother of the waters of the earth.
    Nurture me, my mother
    Protect and guide me.
    Like the waves of the ocean,
    Wash away the trials that I bear.
    Grant me children.
    Grant me peace.
    Let not the witches devour me.
    Let not evil people destroy me.
    Yemoja, mother of all,
    Nurture me my mother (Traditional Orisha Prayer)\(^{51}\)

    Returning to Changó Ladé's 1993 throne (Plate 6) we notice three pots in the center of the photo between Shango's batea and the carousel horse, along with a fourth to the right of the batea. These represent the four major female Orisha: Oshun, Yemaya, Obba and Oya. They are associated with the four major rivers of the Yoruba: the Ògùn\(^ {52}\) River (Yemaya), the Obà River (Obba), the Ôṣùn River (Oshun) and the Niger River (Oya) (Awolalu 1996 [1979]) #222, 46-47]. In the mythology, three of these, Obba, Oshun and Oya, are

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\(^{51}\)(Karade 1994, 55).

\(^{52}\)The name of the Ògùn river should not be confused with the name of the Orisha Ògùn.
wives (or consorts)\textsuperscript{53} of Shango; the fourth, Yemaya, is either his mother or adopted mother. Although all of these Orisha are included in the mythology their worship rather than being widespread seems to be focused in the areas of their respective rivers.\textsuperscript{54} Recognizing the place of all four of these divinities in the Americas, we will focus our attention on the two most commonly known: Yemaya and Oshun.\textsuperscript{55} Like Obatala and Shango these deities are received by everyone as part of their initial pantheon, so we find both on every altar and throne.

In the Houston community and the United State sat large it is unusual to find Yemaya presented in a pure white pot as she is on Changó Ladé's altars.\textsuperscript{56} However, in Nigeria and Brazil her priests wear a necklace of clear crystal beads (Awolalu 1996 [1979], Mason 1997, 112) #222, 46; Ligièro, 1993 #225, 113] marking her as a \textit{funfun}, white, Orisha. Galembro’s photos of Iemanjá (Yemoja) shrines and priestesses from Brazil suggest to us that white, the "color" of water, is her color there as well (Galembo 1993, 164–169). As a riverine deity her crystal beads and other white accouterments represent the transparent nature of water (Bascom 1969, 88) as well as its cooling presence and tranquilizing sound. Stones and water contain the complete image of Yemaya. Her water is alive in sound and motion flowing over smooth,

\textsuperscript{53}In African where multiple wives are the norm these three are his wives. In the Americas where monogamy is the norm, Obba is considered to be his first, legitimate, wife while the other two are lovers.

\textsuperscript{54}It is interesting that Idowu does not include any female Orisha among his "ministers of Olodumare" (Idowu 1994); McKenzie mentions only a single Yemaya priestess from his sources. In Cuba, however, Yemaya is one of the principal Orisha, received by all new initiates. In Brazil she is the most popular Orixá and associated with the national patron. At the same time Oshun, in her manifestation as Virgen del Cobre, is the patron of Cuba, and Oya is also widely recognized.

\textsuperscript{55}For an excellent treatment of Oya in both Africa and the New World see Gleason’s \textit{Oya: In Praise of the Goddess} (Gleason 1987).

\textsuperscript{56}Yemaya’s pots are more commonly blue or blue and white.
polished stones. "The river is forever, as are the stones therein" (Thompson 1993, 270).

As we continue looking at Changó Ladé’s thrones, we notice on the 1989 throne (Plates 7 and 8) that Yemaya’s white pot is surrounded by blue lace while on the 1993 throne (Plate 6) she is backed by a blue fan, draped by a predominantly blue mazo and seated on a pedestal draped with a blue cloth. Blue, particularly light blue, is not a named color among the Yoruba. Blue, in Yoruba terms, is included among the colors called dudú, black. Among the Yoruba dudú, a purplish blue-black, produced through the repeated immersion of yarn and cloth into the indigo dye pot,\textsuperscript{57} stands between the extremes of hot (pupa) and cold (funfun), of red and white, to represent "cool/dark/warm" (Drewal 1997, 18). It is the color of deep knowledge (Pemberton 1989, 162) and fecundity (Renne 1995, 42-43, 66), and can represent the mediating influences of the Orisha who are neither "hot" or "cool" (Drewal 1997, 24). Among the Yoruba blue is "'cool and bright to see.' It has something to do with water, something to do with light from the sun, from heat. Radiant blue suggests controlled vitality, within cool" (Thompson 1971, 3/6-7). We find Yemaya contained in these images. She represents all that is female and "cool," subdued, peaceful, soft, the antithesis and the antidote to the "hot," volatile, violent, tough and destructive power of men (Apter 1992, 111). Since her water can cause the barren to bear, she incarnates female fertility.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{57}The Yoruba word for blue, aro, actually refers to the indigo dye used to produce this color. For more information about the dyeing process and the place of indigo dye in a Yoruba society, see Elisha P. Renne’s Cloth That Does Not Die: The Meaning of Cloth in Bini Social Life. William Bascom also has a short section on clothing, weaving, dyeing and embroidery (Bascom 1969, 100-101).

\textsuperscript{58}The central manifestation of Yemaya in McKenzie’s Hail Orisha! is a priestess of Yemaya who uses water from a stream near the Ogun river to cure “divers distemters” and “render all the barren females prolific” (McKenzie 1997, 396).
Although a riverine goddess among the Yoruba, in the Americas, this Orisha's presence is overwhelming found in the dark-blue of the ocean and river depths. Water to the Western eye is blue, thus in Western iconography her colors include a variety of shades of blue, the colors of water, ocean, and the heavens.\textsuperscript{59} As the ocean, Yemaya represents that which nurtures physical, psychological and spiritual growth; she is the soothing and comforting sense of the transcendent many people find at the ocean. She is beautiful, the "ocean of all women" (Apter 1992, 111). She offers "stability, preserves life, provides guidance and the means for social mobility, and holds the keys to the reservoir from which all human beings draw success." These characteristics are symbolized by the various tools found around her displays, including anchors, life-preservers, ship's wheels, oars and keys. Like the ocean she can receive, absorb and transform pain, sorrow and grief into hope and joy (Fatunmbi 1992, 11). As the maternal ocean, she represents the "oceanic feeling" that Freud associated with a regression into feelings of infantile helplessness (Freud 1961, 10–21) but others associate with mystical and religious energy (Rolland 1990, 86-87).\textsuperscript{60} One notable difference between a view of the ocean as the site of mystical union and these views of Yemaya is the understanding that one can get lost or captured by the actual ocean. One is warned not to cry too much or too long in front of Yemaya (the ocean) because in her attempt to share and soothe your grief Yemaya may pull you to

\textsuperscript{59}Yemaya is also associated with the sun, moon and stars (Mason 1996, 57)

\textsuperscript{60}See William B. Parson's "The Oceanic Feeling Revisited" for an analysis of correspondence between Sigmund Freud and Romain Rolland concerning mysticism and the "oceanic feeling" (Parsons 1998). Bernard McGinn also helps us see the place of ocean imagery in the West. He says that the image of the desert has a more continuous role in the development of Christian mysticism than that of the ocean. The ocean is more often viewed as the watery abyss of primeval chaos than as a symbol of divine character or mystical union (McGinn April 1994). This is an important difference between Yoruba and European symbology. Although there is an Orisha associated with the desert (Aganyu) there is little valorization of the desert within the mythology. Rather it is cooling water (Yr. omítitu) that holds the place of honor.
herself (causing you to drown in her depths). Although this is presented in terms of the physical ocean, it also could express a psycho-spiritual warning about the maintenance of individuality and psychological independence.

As the mother of the Orisha, Yemaya is the primal mother who not only births but protects her offspring and the children of others. Yemaya is the mother, adopted mother, or foster mother of almost all of the Orisha (Edwards and Mason 1985, 76, Mason 1997, 111). In some stories she produces life parthenogenically, eating and eating until fresh water, salt water and heavenly water, that is all the Orisha, burst forth from her stomach (Fatunmbi 1992, 5); in others she gives birth as the consort of Obatala; in still others she births the sun, moon and stars as the consort of Olofi, an aspect of Olodumare.

A story told of the Ibeji, the sacred twins, exemplifies both sides of her maternal aspect. The Ibeji are universally acknowledged to be the children of Shango, however the name of their mother is a mystery.\(^6\) They were found by Yemaya on her doorstep one morning with a note indicating their paternity. With Shango's permission Yemaya raised them as if they were her own, loving them fiercely, and spoiling them as one should spoil such special children.\(^2\) One day she gave a party in their honor, inviting all of the Orisha. However an argument ensued when Shango, who had been drinking, began to eat the bananas given to the children. Even though Shango was her natural son, Yemaya, defending the rights of the children against the greed of

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\(^6\)Both Oya and Oshun (consorts of Shango) have been named as possible mothers, but the twins primary associations are with Shango and Yemaya.

\(^2\)Among the Yoruba twins are considered to be "powerful spirits" who are capable of bringing riches to those who honor them and misfortune to those who don't (Bascom 1969, 74, Pemberton 1989, 170). Mothers of twins worship them every five days, that is once during each Yoruba week. They go to the market, dance in their honor and receive money for their dancing. This is one of the ways twins bring riches to their mothers (Thompson 1971, 13/2f).
their father, banishes him from the party and curses him in her anger (González-Wippler 1994, 145-151).

Here we see the ways in which Yemaya as mother both defends and disciplines her children. As youngsters the Ibeji must be protected and shielded from the behavior of adults; as a grown man Shango must be disciplined when his behavior is unacceptable, particularly when that unacceptable behavior is aimed at children. Thus we see that Yemaya is imagined to be both a beneficent and a stern mother. Like the ocean she can be both beautiful and terrible, blessing and punishing in turn.

In addition to her blue and white beads, Yemaya, whose name means “the mother whose children are fish” (Ligiéro 1993, 113), is also the owner of seashells, crockery (the ceramic vessels that mimic seashells) and kaolin, the white clay from the bottom of the river, which is also associated with crockery. All of these images typify overflowing wealth pouring from her body (she “peoples the earth with infants as she peoples the sea with fishes”), from foreign trade\(^\text{63}\) (embodied in ceramics) and from the depths itself (kaolin) (Thompson 1993, 272-73).

As the owner of the ocean (together with Olokun who is considered to own the bottom of the ocean),\(^\text{64}\) Yemaya is the owner of the wealth of the

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\(^{63}\) Western crockery may have arrived on the shores of West Africa are early as the late fifteenth century (Thompson 1993, 213).

\(^{64}\) Although Yemaya is sometimes conflated with Olokun in the literature (Neimark 1993, Chapter 12 for example), they are separate Orisha. In Nigeria Yemaya’s worship is found primarily along the Ogun river while Olokun is worshipped in Benin and Ile-Ife. Olokun is associated with the ocean while Yemaya is a riverine goddess (Fatunmbi 1992, 3). Among the Bini Olokun is the Owner of the Ocean and his cult is associated with fishing and trade; in Ife her cult (Olokun is female in Ife) was focused on the blue glass beads known as sègl. Mason’s Olóòkun describes the worship of this deity as it has developed in Cuba and the United States (Mason 1996). In the Americas the gender of this deity depends on whether the lineage originated among priests from Benin or Ile-Ife.
ocean often symbolized by the money cowry.\textsuperscript{65} The cowry was used as currency in the major markets of the Niger from the fourteenth, and perhaps from as early as the eleventh, century.\textsuperscript{66} Originating in the Indian Ocean some 3,000 miles away, these shells functioned as currency well into the colonial period (Hogendorn and Johnson 1986, 18).\textsuperscript{67} Vast numbers of cowries entered West Africa with the development of the slave trade.

Cowries are also used for divination in both Africa and the New World. The mythology says that they belonged first to Orula the divine seer who used them to determine the cause and solutions for the problems that beset both the Orisha and humans of the world. Through observation and intelligence, Yemaya, his wife, was able to learn the secret of the shells. Thus when Orula was away she began divining on her own. The mythology says that she read the shells with “consummate expertise” and was able to mark the \textit{ebô} (Yr. sacrifice) required to solve her clients’ problems. The long line awaiting their turn outside her door certainly attested to her skill with the shells. Orula, however, was enraged when he returned and discovered that she had appropriated his power. From that moment he eschewed the use of the shells and developed a different divination system that only men could read. However, Yemaya (or Oshun, who is named in many versions of this story as Orula’s wife) took the divination shells and shared this oracle with all of the other Orisha. Thus today all of the Orisha speak through the shells

\textsuperscript{65}Both indigo and cowries are associated with royalty and thus attest to Yemaya’s position as queen (Thompson 1971, P/3).

\textsuperscript{66}The cowry was the ideal commodity money because it was “long-lasting, durable, easy to handle, portable, hard to counterfeit, [the] right unit value for market needs, [had] adequate constraints on supply, and little leakage into other uses” (Hogendorn and Johnson 1986, 7).

\textsuperscript{67}As late as 1907 a British officer reported seeing items for sale in the market which were so inexpensive no existing coin would serve. At that time one cowry equaled one hundredth of a British penny. (Hogendorn and Johnson 1986, 150).
except Orula who speaks to his priests, the babalawos, through the Table of Ifa (González-Wippler 1994, 108–111).

Mermaids are often associated with both Yemaya and Olokun among both Santería and Candomblé practitioners. (Plate 1 shows a mermaid on the cloth surrounding Yemaya’s pedestal.) Mason makes the connection between Olokun, Mami Wata and the mermaid (Mason 1996, 53–56). In his analysis the mermaid represents the junior wife of Olokun, owner of the ocean. Although the cult of Mami Wata, the African water spirit who is believed to be of foreign origin, is spread throughout West Africa it is more likely that the association between Yemaya/Olokun and the mermaid is a New World innovation.68

In the New World, Yemaya, along with Olokun, holds a special place because of her connection with the Middle Passage, the horrific voyage of the slaves from Africa to the Americas. The African slave trade and the sugar production it supported were astonishingly profitable. Although approximately half of all potential slaves died on their way to the African coast (Segal 1956, 4), 30% died during the Middle Passage (Williams 1984, 139), and 5 to 10% died each year thereafter, the economies of the sugar trade meant that the work of a single person (carrying all this overhead plus the cost of his own maintenance) could cover his own purchase price in two or three years and after six years doubled his owner’s initial investment (Lockhart and Schwartz 1983, 218). Of course the slaves weren’t interested in the economics of the slave trade. For those who survived the Middle Passage, those weeks or months spent in the bowels of the slave ships were a time of rebirth, literally, from the womb of Yemaya. For many it was a tragic rebirth,

68Although as early as the fifteenth century West Africans associated the European explorers with water spirits (Drewal 1988, 103), Drewal only documents the presence of ship’s figureheads (prototypes of Mami Wata) among the Yoruba at the end of the nineteenth century.
but some survived to reconstruct and recreate an African-informed culture on the shores of Cuba, other Caribbean islands and South America. Those who survived their experience of Yemaya’s power raised her from regional deity to one of national primacy. While the rituals of other Orisha were combined or lost, hers was enlarged and strengthened.

**Oshun: Wealth, Fertility, and the Good Life**

Golden yellow, the color of honey, is the exclusive color of Oshun the river goddess whose African cult is focused in the town of Osogbo on the banks of the river that bears her name. Although yellow is not a named color among the Yoruba, in the form of honey it both represents and is the tool of this elegant deity. By extension other golden and yellow elements are associated with her including brass (Williams 1974, 18) (the precious metal of the Yoruba) and gold (that of the New World), pumpkins, oranges, and sunflowers. On both sides of the Atlantic she is usually considered to be light skinned with beautiful hair and breasts (Bascom 1969, 90, Edwards and Mason 1985, 76). In Cuba her light skin came to associate her with the *mulattas* who were both the product of interracial unions and the most desirable female partners in those unions (Martinez-Alier 1974, 57, 63, Mason 1996, 55). Like the bearded mother discussed below, the *mulatta* stands at the boundary between two worlds. Her position as beloved concubine, the gentleman’s mistress upon whom every extravagance was lavished (Murphy 1983, 196), gave her wealth without the restrictions of marriage. Her exotic beauty and

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69 Her beads are generally a transparent amber color although other colors are added to designate the particular path.

70 However, in *Oldūkun: Owner of Rivers and Seas* John Mason says that in Africa she is renowned for her “black velvet skin” (Mason 1996, 55).

71 As will be discussed in the next chapter, the scarcity of white women relative to white men in nineteenth century Cuba encouraged interracial unions if not interracial marriages (Martinez-Alier 1974, 57).
sexuality allows her an independence that is expressed in Oshun’s roles as pansaga\textsuperscript{72}, the prostitute, and iyalode, the titled market woman\textsuperscript{73} (Mason 1992, 294). As the craftswoman and trader, Oshun represents the political and economic power of some women in traditional as well as colonial society (Bádèjọ 1996, 165, Drewal 1992, 186, 188-90).

As the goddess of the flowing river Oshun exhibits its qualities. She is vivacious, fresh, quick, lively, the most beautiful of the Orisha (Murphy 1983, 194). Her lush figure and sensuous hips embody the divine spark of erotic life. Her name is related to the word for “source” and she is associated with basic concerns and the sources of life itself (Sanford 1998). As the beautiful woman who reveals the wisdom of pleasure, she is graced by her priests with rich gifts: silks and perfumes, sweet foods flavored with her own honey (and in the New World, sugar), jewelry, coral, amber and all the red metals (copper, brass and gold, although in the New World copper is usually associated with Oya) (Murphy 1983, 195). She is especially partial to champagne, the pale yellow drink that represents fine, even extravagant, living. She is the lithe young woman in the full bloom of her womanhood. Thus we find that in the New World, Oshun is considered to be the young, sexual woman juxtaposed to Yemaya’s more maternal form.

\textsuperscript{72}Some devotees find the association of Oshun with prostitution insulting to the Goddess. They say that Oshun only gives herself out of pure and simple love (OlaOshun June 2, 1998). However, associating her with the prostitute suggests her independence and ability to use her special abilities to her own advantage. The prostitute sells what other women give away. From another viewpoint, the mythology (not, of course, the reality) of prostitution associates the prostitute with the sensual, all social, psychological and physical pleasures. These pleasures are certainly the gifts of Oshun.

\textsuperscript{73}The title iyalode belongs to the head of the Yoruba market women. She is responsible for calling the meetings of women as well as supplying warriors with weapons and other supplies. This title alludes to Oshun’s role as a “wealthy market woman who demonstrates great business acumen” (Bádèjọ 1996, 8). Iyalode has also been translated as “mother of birds” (Murphy 1983, 197) alerting us to Oshun’s relationship to the aje, the witches (see below).
In some of the myths she is considered to be the youngest or one of the youngest Orisha. But even though she is young she is not without power. There is one story in which she is the only woman to accompany the first Orisha to the earth. When they were not telling her to get out of their way, the others, being male, ignored the young woman Olodumare had sent along with them. They felt that she was too concerned with trivialities, always bathing, combing her hair, and primping in front of the mirror. However, soon they noticed that none of their work was going well. What was built fell down, what was planted died, what was watered flooded. Finally a delegation was sent to heaven to ask Olodumare what was happening. "Father," they said, "all that we are trying to accomplish is coming to naught. What are we to do?" Olodumare questioned them. "And what of the woman, Oshun, I sent with you? Is she not helping?" The delegation was amazed. They never thought that such a young person, a woman who was in love with luxury, who pampered herself with fragrant oils and elegant clothing (Bádéo 1996, 1), could be helpful to them. They returned to the earth, begged Oshun's forgiveness for ignoring her, and began including her in their plans. Then they realized her power, the power to ease the way, the power to make work easy, like water flowing toward the sea. Although Ogun, whom we will consider below, is associated with technology, Oshun represents the work of civilization.

As the owner of gold Oshun is commonly invoked for wealth and all the good things that money can buy. Along with children and a long life, in Africa wealth is the mark of a life well lived. In the New World she is also invoked for magic related to wealth and children. Although all the Orisha can give their followers children, Oshun has primary responsibility within Santería for the conception and birthing of children. She is the queen of
female sexuality and its fruit. She is the wife or consort of a variety of deities including Shango, Ogun, Ochosi and Orula, but none can hold her to a permanent relationship. In her capacity as the wife of Orula she learned cowry divination and her female priests are considered the perfect mates for Orula’s babalawos (Gleason 1973, 237). Within Santería, this aspect of her mythology is embedded in her path as Ololodi. Santeros with Ololodi often set her sopera atop the table of Ifa and often include other implements of Ifa among her insignia.

Honey is not only the color of Oshun it is also her primary weapon. Several stories tell of her being able to conquer after all of the warrior Orisha have failed. Perhaps the most famous story of Oshun tells of her persuasion of Ogun. Fed up with city life, Ogun, the blacksmith, whose iconography we will explore more fully below, left the town to live in the forest. Without his services to make tools and weapons, life soon ground to a halt. Concerned, all the Orisha gathered. In turn each tried to persuade him to return. Some tried to talk him into returning, others tried to force him, but none were successful. Finally, Oshun, the youngest and weakest of the Orisha, asked permission to try to persuade Ogun to return. At first all of the Orisha laughed at her. How could she, a frail young woman, achieve what they could not? But finally in desperation they agreed to allow her to make the attempt.

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74 Her elder sister, Yemaya, the great mother, is seen as taking responsibility for children after their birth.

75 Badejo says that in Africa only priests of Oshun are qualified to read the cowry shells or what she characterizes as “assistant cowry” oracle (Bádejo 1996, 91). However this is not universally true even among the Yoruba, for example Bascom’s informant for his classic Sixteen Cowries was a priest of Obatala (Bascom 1980, 9).

76 Another aspect of Ololodi says that she is an elderly woman who lives at the bottom of the river and knits all day (Cabrera 1980, 171, 172). Often instead of the implements of Ifa we find knitting needles or a sewing kit on her shrines.
Oshun wrapped five golden handkerchiefs about her waist. Taking her calabash of sweet honey she headed into the woods. But instead of searching for Ogun she went to the river and began to bath. Singing gently to herself she carefully washed every curve of her luscious body. Ogun, hearing her song, began to spy on her. Conscious that she was being watched and taking her time, Oshun finished her bath and began to dance in the clearing. Entranced, Ogun crept closer and closer until he forgot to hide himself and stood watching from the edge of the clearing. Oshun danced over to him, reached into her calabash, then smeared his lips with her delicious honey. When she danced away he followed. Dancing up to him again she tied her handkerchiefs like a rope around his neck. Still dancing, pausing only to renew the honey smeared on his face, Oshun danced Ogun back to the city. When they reached the edge of the forest, he awoke from his trance and realized what had happened. But all the other Orisha were there to welcome him back, and he decided to stay. Oshun, the youngest and weakest of the Orisha, had conquered the god of war (Rolando n.d.).

Iyamli, Our Mothers, the Witches

That bird (of the witches) can hold a whip in its hands
It can hold a cudgel in its hand
It can hold a knife in its hand
It can become an orisha (traditional Yoruba god)\(^{77}\)

The yellow and blue fans behind the pots of Oshun and her sister Yemaya speak to us of another set of associations shared by these river goddesses. Thompson says that "Yoruba riverine goddesses are represented by round fans (abebe)…” (Thompson 1984, 72). These fans are emblematic of the

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\(^{77}\)From a song collected by Pierre Verger. The weapons refer to the god of smallpox, Obalualaye/Babalualaye/Shopona (whip), Eleggua (cudgel) and Ogun (knife) (Thompson 1971, 14/2). Shango and Orisha Oko are also associated with the witches. Thompson quotes a member of the Ketu Gelede of Isale-Eko: “You will never see a follower of Orisha Oko who will not be a witch. And so we should have all these idols as a representation of each of all the orisha under the influence of the aje [the witches]” (Thompson 1971, 14/4).
coolness and command exemplified by these deities. Although Yoruba fans are made of metal, in the shape of circles mounted on straight handles, the fans on this throne, and most of those found on contemporary thrones, use a semicircular design. In either case the fan recalls the shape not only of the smooth river stones alluded to earlier but also the rounded curves of the female body, particularly the breasts, the pregnant stomach and the buttocks. Thus fans, stones and bodies all speak of the cooling energy of these goddesses.

But Yemaya's blue fan also reminds us that danger lurks in the cool, dark depths of the river. All of the Yoruba river goddesses are famed for their witchcraft. In fact with the exception of Obatala every Orisha is somehow associated with witchcraft, magic or sorcery. Both Yemaya and Oshun are recognized as "mother of the witches" (Apter 1992, 113, Edwards and Mason 1985, 67, 78). Since witchcraft is perceived to be a particularly female occupation by both the Yoruba and Europeans, I will discuss it in conjunction with these female Orisha understanding that much of what is said applies to the male Orisha as well.

The tales of the European witch hunts are horrific. Two facts of particular interest stand out from Barstow's account: relatively few people suffered death for witchcraft in the Spanish Inquisition (Barstow 1994, 90, Kamen 1997, 269-276) and although there were inquisitional courts in Central

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78 There has been an epidemic of research analyzing the phenomenon of the European witch hunting of the late medieval and early modern periods. Barstow begins her feminist analysis of the European witchcraft with a survey of the literature on this phenomenon (Barstow 1994, 1-13). A complete survey of this literature is beyond the scope of this dissertation, however her analysis and the works she cites provide an excellent introduction for further study. Newer works that discount Barstow's misogynistic stance, (e.g. Robin Briggs' Witches and Neighbors (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996) which focuses on the "disliked" aspect of those accused of witchcraft, rather than their "female" aspect) do not significantly change my own analysis of this phenomena in relation to Santería.
and South America there were no executions for witchcraft in Spanish America (Barstow 1994, 201 n. 13).79

Further investigation into the Spanish Inquisition suggests that rather than concentrating on magic-workers, it focused primarily on issues of religious heresy, specifically the secret practice of former Jews and Muslims as well as on what is called ‘Lutheranism’ a generalized term for various Protestant beliefs.80 (As non-Christians, Jews and Muslims who had not converted were exempted from the jurisdiction of the Inquisition (Kamen 1997, 18)). Thus we can suggest that in both Spain and her colonies witches and the practices associated with them were less likely to be recognized and punished by the Inquisition. Religious activity, rather than witchcraft, seems to have been the focus of the Spanish Inquisition.81 This makes possible the continuation of the witchcraft practices of ‘healing, by both spells and potions, delivering babies, performing abortions, predicting the future, advising the lovelorn, cursing, removing curses, making peace between neighbors’ (Barstow 1994, 109).

79 Silverblatt’s discussion of witchcraft accusations against Andean women presents a different face than that presented by Kamen’s work on Mexico. Although the earliest clerics, conquistadors and administrators in what has become Peru all agreed that indigenous religion was devil worship (Silverblatt 1987, 170), by the seventeenth century the campaign against ‘idolatry, curing and witchcraft’ had the ‘obvious political motive’ of forcing ‘the Indian into the reducciones — all the better to evangelize, to maintain political control, to facilitate the collection of tribute’ (Silverblatt 1987, 175, see also all of Chapter IX). Silverblatt’s work is also in line with the thesis that incomplete conversion, that is heresy, was the focus of the Spanish Inquisition.

80 Greenleaf’s analysis of Inquisition records in sixteenth century Mexico confirms the similar interest in ‘judaizantes’ and ‘Lutherans’, that is crypto-Jews and Protestants of various stripes as well as bigamists and blasphemers (Greenleaf 1969).

81 Perhaps significant for this work, it seems that unacceptable religious activity was closely defined as Jewish, Islamic and Protestant beliefs and practices on the part of Christians as well as indigenous practices by natives of the New World. Non-Islamic Africans seemed to have been considered as not having any religion, or not having a religion that came under the purview of the Inquisition and other religious authorities (Personal Communication, Alice Wood, 1987, (Wood 1997)).
Research into African witchcraft suggests that witchcraft was deeply intertwined in the everyday world and was considered neither extraordinary or awe-inspiring.\textsuperscript{82} Herskovits makes the comparison between the ubiquitous nature of magic in the West African imagination and "our own" use of electricity and automobiles. Like magic, electricity and cars that are handled improperly can be very dangerous, however their helpful properties assure their continued presence in our lives. In the same way witch technology and magical charms, when handled with the proper controls, are seen as beneficial to society (Herskovits 1990 (1941), 74). In addition to being ubiquitous, witchcraft power, the power to effect, was seen as a natural phenomena and was considered to be ambiguous, neither good nor bad. Its ethical quality was dependent upon the motivations of the witch who could use this power to help or hurt others.\textsuperscript{83}

The Yoruba idea of witches like that of other West African groups is ambivalent. The first clue is in the euphemism used to refer to the witches. Among the Yoruba to name something is to call it into presence. Thus they use the term awon iya wa or iyami ("our mothers") as a euphemism to refer to the witches (aje).\textsuperscript{84} The implication of this terminology it that those who

\textsuperscript{82}Significant for my analysis is E. E. Evans-Pritchard's classic Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande (Evans-Pritchard 1983) and Elias Kifon Bongmba's work describing witchcraft among the Wimbam of Cameroon (Bongmba 1995).

\textsuperscript{83}Herskovits notes that any charm can be both protective and destructive indicating the realistic stance of "[t]he African [who] recognized the fact that in reality there is no absolute good and no absolute evil, but that nothing can exert an influence for good without at the very least causing inconvenience elsewhere; that nothing is so evil that it cannot be found to have worked benefit to someone. The concepts of good and evil thus become relative, not absolute..." (Herskovits 1990 (1941), 73-74).

Margaret Thompson Drewal says that there are three types of witch power among the Yoruba: white (funfun), red (pupa) and black (dúdú). White witchcraft is beneficial bringing prosperity and the good things of life; red witchcraft brings suffering, and black causes death. All witches can work all three kinds of magic (Drewal 1992, 178).

\textsuperscript{84}B. Hallen and J. O. Sodipo provide an excellent analysis of contemporary Yoruba witchcraft that focuses on the problems in translating this African concept into a European language. They compare European and African understandings of witchcraft to conclude that
are witches, "our mothers," by night are also our mothers (and sisters, aunts, cousins, wives and co-wives, etc.) during the day. Another clue appears when we read about the Gelede celebrations in Ketu and other parts of southwest Nigeria. Thompson says that one of the functions of the Gelede festival is "worship of the witches [and] honoring of the devotees of the hot gods as messengers of the witches". These gods include Shango, Ogun, Shopona and Eshu\textsuperscript{85} along with Orisha Oko (Thompson 1971, 14/1). The purpose of the festival is a "\textit{confrontation with the gods as witches} (italics in original)" and the appeasement of them through the "ultimate weapon" which is beauty. The senior members of the Gelede cult are old women who command the secrets of "the mothers" for the benefit of society, who work positive witchcraft on behalf of their sons and daughters and through them for their grandchildren (Thompson 1971, 14/2).\textsuperscript{86}

Gelede honors Yemaya who, as the mother of witchcraft, is the leader of the birds of the night who not only punish but also give children and a long life (Thompson 1971, 14/3). Images of birds are important in the Yoruba iconography of witchcraft. Witches are conceived as night birds who perch on the trees of the market and cause troubles while others sleep. Yoruba crowns are surmounted by one or more bird images. These birds speak to the \textit{ashé} (herbal medicine) placed in the crown itself, the role of the \textit{Iya Kere} (one of the royal wives) who is in charge of the crown and who places it upon the king's head each time he wears it and the power of women in general who

\textsuperscript{85}Thompson doesn't name these deities but rather says the "followers of thunder, iron, smallpox, and mischief." I have merely assigned the names commonly associated with these deities.

\textsuperscript{86} Among the contemporary Ondo there is the belief that a witch (the one with birds) has the ability to change one's fortunes (Olupọna 1991, 157).
can either protect or destroy the person who wears the crown.\textsuperscript{87} These birds suggest the roles women have in supporting the king himself and their relationship to witchcraft in general (Drewal, et al. 1989, 38-39).

Contemporary Santería practice conflates many of the European and African ideas of witchcraft in interesting ways. On the one hand all of the Orisha, and by extension all santeros, are understood to be imbued with a certain ability to subtly affect the visible and invisible world, to use "magic" to change lives and fortunes, to control natural phenomena; on the other hand, witchcraft is perceived as an essentially malevolent force used against practitioners and others. Seldom is someone directly accused of witchcraft.\textsuperscript{88} However vague notions of witchcraft being used against individuals fills the air. "Someone is doing witchcraft against you." "You need to protect yourself against witchcraft." This is a very African view of witchcraft: witchcraft is everywhere, the perceptive person guards himself against the witchcraft of others and many develop an arsenal of tools to control the ever-present witch-forces. And in modern Santería, the Orisha themselves, are powerful "witches" and can be invoked against the witchcraft of others. Although no one would admit doing witchcraft against another, positive magic for healing, for wealth, for the love of another, for all the good things of life are an essential part of the religion.

\textsuperscript{87}The Iya Kere is the second highest ranking woman in the palace. Second only to the king's official mother, she not only has charge of the royal regalia but she can choose to withhold the crown and other symbols of power from the king. Because she can prevent the king from performing his royal duties, she is the most powerful person in the palace (Drewal, et al. 1989, 38, Johnson 1960 (1921), 63-64).

\textsuperscript{88}However I have heard at least one practitioner refer to herself as an "Hispanic witch" (Personal communication, Omi Tinibu, December 1998). Many casual conversations among practitioners include discussions of "recipes." These are spells, generally based on a form of sympathetic magic, designed to enhance the life of the practitioner or her client.
As female Orisha Yemaya and Oshun are associated not only with witchcraft but also female sexuality and fertility. Thus we find prominently displayed among their fruits watermelons (Yemaya) and pumpkins (pumpkin). These fruits embody the female both in their rounded shapes and in the lush fertility of their interiors. Watermelon, associated with the queen of the ocean, embodies her nature as ocean in its general characteristic as a watery fruit. Even its name in English (water-melon) recalls the ocean. The multitude of seeds also remind us that she “gives children like fishes,” that is without end. The pumpkin, which also contains a boundless number of seeds is said to serve as the treasury of Oshun, the place she uses to hide her wealth. At least one santera I know keeps money in a miniature pumpkin which she calls “the bank of Oshun.” And while Oshun is fond of honey and sugar (her trademark dessert in Houston is flan, a lush egg pudding with a caramel sauce) Yemaya favors the harsher flavors of brown sugar and molasses (her dessert is a dish called Coco Dulce which is coconut cooked in brown sugar and molasses). We could also suggest that these two desserts also invoke the place of these Orisha as the older, harsher, stern woman who is always portrayed as dark and the younger, softer, “sweeter” mulatta with the honey complexion. While honey’s association with Oshun comes from Africa, brown sugar and molasses are the products of the New World sugar plantations. Brown sugar is the product of the sugar mill, while molasses is one of the secondary products of that process. However, when we look at these connotations it is important to remember that honey can sour and a firm hand can be hidden within a soft exterior. Both of these Orisha are seen as forces to be respected, not to be trifled with or trivialized.

89 Although the official name of this fruit in Spanish is sandía, more than once I’ve heard it referred to as aguamelón, watermelon, continuing the linguistic dialog.
Ogun: Working the Iron

The last two Orisha I will consider present another face of Orisha worship. Looking at a domestic warriors display (Plate 9) we are immediately aware that we have moved into a completely different range of symbology. These Orisha live in open containers, on the floor. Separate from the rest of the Orisha, their space is generally rough and grubby, often near the door of the santero’s home. Whereas the other Orisha we have considered are among the kings and queens of the pantheon, these Orisha are more noted for their work. This is represented in the tools present in their displays, in their position on the boundary between “inside” and “outside”, home and street, and by the general earthiness of their space. Even on birthday thrones these Orisha sit on or close to the floor, toward the front of the display where they might “guard” the more refined Orisha in the back. These Orisha represent the marginal elements of society. The Orisha in this display are (left to right) Ogun, Ochosi and Eleggua who represent respectively the blacksmith/soldier, the hunter and the trickster. Each of these represent men on the “margin.” They live between the town and the forest, their interests are often more worldly than domestic, they are more likely to interact with those outside the life of the village. Their lives are lonely, their work involves long fatiguing hours. Although in the house, that is included within the community, they live at the door, and are never completely integrated into the lives of the community (Armstrong 1989 (1997), 35). As we can see from the photos (Plates 9, 10, 12) these Orisha do not live in fine porcelain containers but rather metal or rough pottery. This tells us that they are too “hot,” to rough, to live in delicate porcelain. Ogun’s pot, like his tools, is iron, traditionally

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90The only other Orisha that I am familiar with that lives in essentially an open container is Orisha Oko who is a farmer and thus exhibits many of the attributes associated with these three.
cast iron. Eleggua, and often Ochosi, live in unglazed pottery. In this section we will first consider the iconography of these two Orisha by looking first at the great worker Orisha, Ogun. Then we will finish this chapter by looking at Eleggua, the Yoruba Trickster.\(^{91}\)

...’Twas Ògún who, after storing water in abundance in his house
Then proceeded to have a bath of blood....
I now ask: “Where is Ògún to be found?”
Ògún is found where there is a fight.
Ògún is found where there is vituperation.
Ògún is found where there are torrents of blood....\(^{92}\)

Looking at the pot of Ogun (Plate 10) we notice immediately his iron tools, the machete, ax, sledge hammer and knives; his metal spikes and horse shoes; we also notice a pack of Marlboros and bottle of liquor. Ogun is a man’s man, a working man who understands sweat, hard drink and the pleasures of a good smoke. Although not apparent in this pot most Ogun pots also have a set of railroad spikes. In North America the railroad has become the ultimate symbol of Ogun’s power. Perhaps we could suggest that John Henry, the “steel-drivin’ man” is the ultimate American Ogun figure.\(^{93}\) Ogun’s philosophy is based on three tenets: “humans are essentially alone.... the ideal individual takes a leadership role.... [a] man will be judged by his own achievements” (Aunwọn 1989, 195–96). These three concepts speak to the

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\(^{91}\)The third warrior, Ochosi who is said to live with Ogun, will not be considered here except where his iconography overlaps with that of Ogun.

\(^{92}\)(Babalọja 1989, 164)

\(^{93}\)Ysamur “Sammy” Flores, a santero in Los Angeles and proprietor of Turey’s Spiritual Shop as well as Ph.D. candidate at UCLA, associates Ogun with Arnold Schwarzenegger in the Terminator, the cartoon character the Tasmanian Devil, Mike Tyson and Sonny from Miami Vice (Cosentino 1997, 294, 96).Wole Soyinka celebrates Muhammad Ali as a true son of Ogun (Cosentino 1997, 305–6). He also associated him with Nietzsche’s categories by classifying him as a “‘totality of Dionysian, Appolonian and Prometheus virtues’” and as the embodiment of Hegelian Will (Cosentino 1997, 306 quoting Soyinka “The Fourth Stage” in The Morality of Art). John Mason says Ogun is the inventor of “the war tale, of the adventure story, of the one-that-got-away tale” and associates him with Uncle Remus, the teller of tales (Mason 1997 (1989), 361). Bastide said that in Brazil Ogun became associated with the warrior and thus became the patron of slave revolts (Drewal 1989, 225). Ogun may also be associated with Sylvester Stallone’s Rambo (Cosentino 1997, 306).
North American psyche of individual achievement—Ogun is the patron of the so-called Type A personality. Rugged individualism characterizes much of his mythology. But his stories remind us of the destruction caused by an over-dependence on individualism. In the mythology he has cursed himself to always work, day and night, without rest. Although he has relationships with various female Orisha, he has no wife, no family. He stands alone, working at his forge.

If Oshun’s power is that of civilization it depends on the previous application of Ogun’s machete to clear away the bush and of his forge to create the tools of the farmer, the hunter and the warrior. In one of the many creation tales, after Obatala has created the dry land a group of Orisha climb down the golden chain to inspect the earth. Because of the thick undergrowth they are unable to move too far away from the chain. Taking his silver sword, Obatala attempts to clear a path. His fine sword, beautiful but of a soft, ceremonial material, twists in his hand, defeated by the bush. Others of the Orisha try, but they too are defeated by the bush. Then Ogun comes forward with his heavy iron sword. Although it is not beautiful it is strong and honed to a keen edge. Slashing right and left he opens a path for the others through the forest (Courlander 1973, 33–35, ldowú 1994, 85-86). Thus Ogun is the clearer of paths, the one who clears the land and makes the road (Cosentino 1997, 295). This an aspect of Ogun that is often ignored in favor of his power to hurt and kill. Ogun is associated with the weapons of war, guns and knives and other tools of individual or mass destruction. Ogun is raw physical power. But his power is morally ambivalent. Whether the machete is used to kill or clear the bush it is Ogun’s tool and Ogun’s power is behind it. The creative, positive aspects of his power can be seen in the creation and maintenance of roads, bridges, homes and fields—and the maintenance and
well-being of human beings (Drewal 1989, 236). His power kills but it is also required to feed and house his children.

Ogun is the patron of technology, the technology that can clear farms, build cities, conquer empires. But Ogun’s power is not only in brute strength. He is also the patron of butchers, surgeons, and jewelers; in Africa he protects the body (scarification) artist, the circumciser and the palm-wine tapper. In both Africa and the New World Ogun is not represented by iron; he is iron. Thus an Ogun shrine can be constructed by placing any two pieces of iron together and performing the appropriate sacrifice (Barnes and Ben-Amos 1989 (1997), 53 citing Barnes, 1980, 37, Cosentino 1997, 296). Ogun is iron in all its manifestations from the tip of the bow to the edge of the scalpel. Ogun represents both the benefits and dangers of technology; he is the personification of mankind’s ability to “invent and wield the technology that can bring about the destruction of oneself and society” (Barnes 1980, 28). His cult “concentrates on uncontrolled human power that threatens to disrupt the social order, and ideologically transforms it into supernatural power that can, instead, be used to maintain social order” (Barnes 1980, 30).

The power of Ogun is the power of transformation. Iron ore leaves the earth to be transformed first at the smithy and later at the forge. In the hard work of the blacksmith and the torture he inflicts on the metal as it is transformed from earth-stuff to tool, Ogun’s followers see a metaphor for the hard and often painful work of personal transformation. Contact with this Orisha is often avoided because of his association with blood. One touches the

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94 In the same way, since iron in many of its incarnations causes bloodshed (not only blades but cars, trains, and the like are included here), all iron-using becomes a sacred activity when it provides the nourishment for the iron, for Ogun’s ashé (Drewal 1989, 241).

95 Eugenia W. Herbert’s Iron, Gender and Power discusses this technology of transformation throughout Africa (Herbert 1993).
edge of iron carefully for it can cut deeply; one invokes Ogun carefully for he not only cuts deeply but represents power that once unleashed must be allowed to burn out on its own. We are warned “Ogun kills in the house; Ogun kills on the road. Violent earth shaker, death in the world” (Mason 1992, 88); “He kills on the right, and he kills on the left. Death is on the road...He is a force you don’t want to unleash unless you have to” (Cosentino 1997, 293 quoting Sammy Flores, Drewal 1989, 238). More than one story tells of Ogun’s fury unleashed on friend and foe alike. Flores associates Ogun with the urban riot that once begun cannot be controlled until it loses energy of its own accord (Cosentino 1997, 293). In Africa Ogun’s iron is used for oath-making much as the Bible is used among Christians.96 Because of his demand for justice and fair play and the fierceness of his anger no one would dare lie while touching iron.

Like every Orisha, the tools associated with Ogun are emblematic of his capacities. Mason names seven tools associated with Ogun: the anvil and hammer associate him with the blacksmith and the jeweler; the hoe, pick and rake associate him with the farmer; the knife and gun associate him with the hunter; the shovel, pick and pry associate him with the miner and grave-digger; the adze and knife associate him with the carver; the knife also associates him with the butcher and the body artist. In addition handcuffs, keys, guns, whistles, swords, clubs, razors, bows and arrows, iron ladders, chains, horseshoes and small pieces of railroad track which associate him with the hunter, barber, policeman and railroad worker are often found in his

96Sandra T. Barnes tells of a new military governor of Ogun State in Nigeria who took his oath of office not on the Koran or the Bible, but in the traditional manner on a cutlass symbolizing Ogun (Barnes 1997, xiv). Jacob K. Olupọna says that among the contemporary Yoruba, even those who might swear falsely on the Bible or Koran, “would hesitate to swear a similar oath upon Ogun’s ritual objects, even a fountain pen” because they believe that the Judeo-Christian or Islamic God is slow to act against sinners, while “the judgment of Ogun is swift and certain” (Olupọna 1991, 115).
pots (Mason 1992, 75). These tools place Ogun into three broad areas of influence: the bush (hunter, miner, grave-digger), the borderland (blacksmith, farmer, railroad worker) and the center of culture, the marketplace (jeweler, carver, butcher, barber, policeman and now, knowledge worker) (Drewal 1989, 239).

That many Ogun pots contain real or toy guns recognizes not only his association with fighting, blood and death but also his role as the protector of the household. Among the Yoruba and many other African groups the blacksmith’s forge is a place of refuge. This leads to the understanding that Ogun is the protector of the poor and dispossessed, the widow and the orphan (Barnes and Ben-Amos 1989 (1997), 57). Ogun is seen as a fierce and terrible deity who demands justice, fair play and integrity, but if appeased he can be tolerant and protective. In Santería households his pot is placed behind the front door so that he can protect the boundary between street and home, public and domestic space.

In Africa, Ogun’s sacred colors of red and white are said to represent the extremes suffered by iron on its journey through the smithy and the forge. In this context red is associated with heat, violence, impatience and blood while the water, leaves, snails and palm oil used to cool the heat of the fire are white. Red is also associated with the color of rust on uncared-for iron98, while iron that is worn with use is considered white (Drewal 1989, 243–44). However, it must be remembered that the strongest fire burns white-hot, hot beyond the heat of red, so both red and white can express the fires of the forge. Like Shango, who is also represented by red and white, Ogun represents

97I was told to place a miniature computer with my Ogun because it represents my work tools.

98Rust indicates that even when it is inactive Ogun and his iron are at work. Rust can be compared to the blood that would cover working iron (Drewal and Mason 1997 (1989)) #277, 363.
violent energies that can be brought under control and used for the good of the community.\textsuperscript{99}

Within Santería the colors associated with Ogun are generally green and black. However, certain paths of Ogun may use red as an accent or even use a pattern of alternating green and white. Assigning the colors of red and white to Ogun follows our understanding of the meanings of these colors. Green and black present a different view. As we discussed above black is associated with the mysterious, the ambivalence between hot and cool. In conjunction with the babalawo’s bracelet of green and yellow, Thompson says that the green represents the cool, dispassion of the god of divination juxtaposed with the hot forces of the trickster (Thompson 1971, 2/2). Ogun’s green is usually a darker shade than that used for the bracelet of the babalawo. Thus his green is moving from the coolness of dispassion toward the mystery of the bush. In African color symbolism the American Ogun bracelets are black (green) and blacker (black). However, in European thought green represents fertility and hope through its association with plants and agriculture. Christian symbolism places green between the blue of heaven and the red of hell, thus it forms a bridge, an intermediate and mediating force (Biedermann 1992, 158–59). This puts into a European frame Ogun’s associations with farming and the bush as well as his marginal place within society. Associating another color with green, for example red, black or white, modifies the view one has of Ogun. Thus white calms and cools his energy while red is a reminder of his association with blood, fire, pain and death.

\textsuperscript{99}There are many stories in the mythology about conflicts between Shango and Ogun. In many ways their similarities provoke conflict. In nature this conflict can be seen when lightning “attacks” iron. Matory uses the conflict between these forces to explore the history of war among the Yoruba (Matory 1994).
Black speaks to the mysteries found at the bottom of the black pot in which he sits.

Looking again at the Plate 10 we notice that most of what is displayed are various pieces of iron. These do not just represent the Orisha the way birds and fans and fruit represent the Orisha we looked at earlier, they are the personification of Ogun himself. Thus we begin to realize that Ogun (and the other warrior Orisha) are seldom symbolized on altars because their pots are open and exposed, thus presenting the Orisha directly rather than through color or other signifiers. These colors (and other symbolic items) are only used when a non-iron symbol of Ogun needs to be constructed, for example in the creation of necklaces, mazos and the like.\textsuperscript{100}

\textbf{Eleggua: The Face of the Trickster}

At one time there were two boys who from an early age were best of friends. Even as young boys they were inseparable. They played together, and hurtled together. Often they ate at each other's houses. When they came of age they were married and built their homes next to each other. They were given farmland across the road from each other so every day they worked together in the fields. Once when they were young men, they went for divination together. They were told to sacrifice so that their friendship would endure forever. The two friends just laughed, since nothing could separate them and their love for each other.

One day they were working in their fields when a handsome Orisha walked along the road separating their fields. When they met later under a tree for lunch one of the two friends said, "Wasn't that Orisha in the red hat handsome?"

"What are you saying?" asked his friend. "That Orisha wore a black hat."

"No, it was red," his friend replied. "What's wrong with you?"

\textsuperscript{100}It is interesting to note that in Africa Ogun priests wear an iron bracelet but in the New World that tradition has been lost. Mainly female Orisha are represented by bracelets: Yemaya, Oshun and Oya have respectively seven silver, five brass or gold and nine copper bracelets. In addition, Obatala and Ochosi have distinctive silver bracelets. Babaluaiye initiates wear a bracelet made of burlap and covered with cowry shells. Initiation into any level of If\textsuperscript{à} includes the presentation of the \textit{idè} (Yr. bracelet) of Orula. According to mythology Orula made a pact with Death so that anyone wearing this bracelet cannot die prematurely. While men receive the bracelets associated with these Orisha they generally only wear the plain silver of Obatala and the green and yellow bracelet of Ifa.
Soon their argument turned to shouts, then blows. Just as weapons were being drawn, men from their village, hearing the noise, came and separated them. As the villagers were attempting to sort out the argument they heard whistling as Eleggua came back down the road. As everyone could see, his famous hat was red on the right side and black on the left. 101

Of all the Orisha Eleggua is the most recognizable because he most closely fits our conception of an “idol”. In his most common form his representation is representation of a head with eyes and a mouth (Plate 11). He is often the only anthropomorphic figure found on African as well as American altars. Of all the Orisha Eleggua may be the most well known.102 He is the first called upon and fed in every ritual; his image is the first received; his presence radiates from the divination texts. He is “the opener of ways, the master of the roads” who brings “health, luck, tranquillity, and all the good things of life” (Murphy 1993, 81). Joseph Murphy describes Eleggua as “a mischievous trickster-orisha whose good will is necessary for the proper transmission of ... message[s] to Olodumare” (17); as a “powerful, restless observer of the human condition” who is sometimes imagined as a little boy, a mischievous trickster fond of dangerous practical jokes” and sometimes as the “serious monitor of human behavior, gatekeeper of the world of the orishas” (46); as a “hungry orisha” who can be influenced by offerings of food, tobacco, rum or, when serious help is required, the blood of animals (72).

101 This story is included in almost every source on West African mythology. In Robert D. Pelton’s version he says that Eshu started the quarrel because “sowing dissension is my great delight” (Pelton 1980, 141 as quoted by McNeely, Deldon Anne. Mercury Rising: Women, Evil and the Trickster Gods. Woodstock, Connecticut: Spring Publications, Inc., 1996., 152). I have chosen another rationale for his action because I find that Eleggua/Eshu never acts capriciously. Rather he provides for the consequences of sacrifices offered or neglected (as in my telling of the story) or, as Joseph Murphy says, “overturning human complacency” (Murphy 1993, 46), which, I would suggest, is the actual motivation in Pelton’s version of this story as well.

102 Eleggua, the trickster, is known by a variety of names in both Africa and the New World. Many of these names identify differences in his worship but I will be conflating all within this section. Thus I will consider Eleggua, Eshu, Echu, and Elegbara as a single complex deity.
Murphy compares him to Satan in the book of Job\textsuperscript{103} who is "restlessly overturning human complacency" (46) and says that he is "not the most responsible of orishas" (72).

Murphy says that Eleggua's name comes from the Yoruba praise name for Eshu, Eshu-Elegba (45); Thompson says that Eshu's name means "the childless wanderer, alone, moving only as a spirit" while Elegbara or Elegba means "owner-of-the-power" (Thompson 1984, 19). Like all Yoruba names these tell us something about the one they describe. Because Eleggua is "the restless outsider betwixt and between worlds" Murphy says that he is the true orisha of divination whose "randomness and unpredictability show the true order of the world" (Murphy 1993, 133). Ìdòwú characterizes Eshu as the "special relations officer" between heaven and earth. It is Eshu who reports the deeds of gods and men to Olodumare, who reports on the correctness of worship and who carries sacrifices to heaven (Ìdòwú 1994, 80). As the companion of Orunmila, the god of divination, Eshu is ubiquitous in the divination and other stories.\textsuperscript{104} It is he who accepts the sacrifices offered and he who changes one's fate—for the better if the sacrifice is presented, for the worse if it is neglected (Ìdòwú 1994, 81).

Murphy also says that "Eleggua serves all the orishas, that each orisha has his or her own Eleggua;" that he "provides the dynamism that moves the

\textsuperscript{103}Ìdòwú also compares Eshu to the Satan in Job saying that although his name is used in the Yoruba Bible to translate "Devil" and "Satan," he is not perceived of as out and out evil but more as one of God's ministers who tries men's sincerity and tests their religion. (Ìdòwú 1994, 80). On the other hand, he says that Eshu is "evil" because "he takes mischief-making as his 'hobby'" (Ìdòwú 1994, 83).

\textsuperscript{104}In Houston where priests of Orunmila are rare, it is often Eleggua's shells that are used for divination. In one story Orula (Orunmila) say "Where do you get your knowledge? If I had your sources of information I wouldn't need an oracle to divine the future." Eleggua then goes on to help Orula pass a divining test and win the right to use the Table of Ifá. Farrow also quotes a story that credits Eleggua with teaching Orunmila (Ifá) to divine (Farrow 1996 [1926]) #227, 37].
road of life" (Murphy 1993, 133). He is appeased in order to keep life in balance. Flores-Peña says that because the Yoruba had no concept of absolute evil, they saw evil as merely the misuse of *ashé* and the restoration of balance as the restoration of *ntutu*, coolness (Flores-Peña and Evanchuk 1994, 9). It is Eleggua that is most instrumental in this restoration of balance.

Eshu/Eleggua is found throughout the Yoruba areas of West Africa. Farrow says that although there is no Orisha worshipped by all the Yoruba all believe in and pay at least some respect to Eshu, whom he calls "the devil" (Farrow 1996 [1926]) #227, 85]. According to Ìdòwú Eshu is generally the object of dread among the Yoruba because "he holds the power of life and death over them as prosperity or calamity for them depends upon what reports he carries to Olodumare (Ìdòwú 1994, 81). He is also feared because he is perceived of as a malicious mischief-maker who causes confusion, complicates situations and promotes malice among people (Ìdòwú 1994, 81-82). Almost every evil tendency and practice is attributed to him. In Yoruba "the devil made me do it" becomes "It is Èsù who is moving him" (Ìdòwú 1994, 83). In spite of this (or perhaps because of it) Ìdòwú says Eshu is worshipped throughout Yorubaland. His emblem stands in the center of the town, village or family compound; he is called *Baba*, Father (Ìdòwú 1994, 83-84). He is one of the principal Yoruba deities because "[t]here is not a place where he is not worshipped and propitiated" (Ìdòwú 1994, 85, Wescott 1962, 337).\footnote{Jean Barbot, whose travel took him along the West African coast in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mentions Eshu-like "fetishes" in his diary several times. In Sierra-Leone he describes one such figure as "a lump of clay in the shape of a head, on a pedestal of the same material" and includes a drawing if this "fetish" under a thatched roof (Hair, et al. 1992, 222, illustration 16). On the River Sestro he describes "a little hut roofed with leaves under which I saw a badly constructed figure of a man, or rather a lump of dark brown earth, two foot high and as thick as a leg. I saw them go in that direction each night (the king like the others). They washed before approaching the shelter, and then made their prayers to this fetish" (Hair, et al. 1992, 275). Along the Gold Coast of Guinea, he describes a "fetish"
Given his universality in Yorubaland we should not wonder that he has become one of the “most important images in the black Atlantic world” (Thompson 1984, 19). Thompson cites an interview with Lydia Cabrera who tells of people of African descent who poured cool water at the crossroads and he himself tells of seeing candles lit in the gutters at intersections in Ipanema and Copacabana (Thompson 1984, 19-20). In Cuba and the United States the various images of Eleggua described by Thompson are formed into the cone shaped “head” rendered in concrete (Plates 11). Generally these are placed in pottery containers and hidden, along with the pot of Ogun, behind the door of the main entrance to the house. This is the image of Laroye, the oldest and best known of the Eshus. But Eleggua can have other forms. Eshu Aiye is made in a conch shell and is associated with Yemaya and Olokun (Plate 12); Echu Bi is associated with Orula and has 21 cowry shells embedded in the concrete; Echua Afra works with Babalualaye and is made of brain coral. Each Orisha is said to have an Eshu that “walks” with him or her and acts as the Orisha’s personal messenger (Drewal 1989, 210).

106 Standing in a vessel which could be a bowl or gourd which “was in the shape of a Bologne sausage…. At one end of the figure was a sort of human face…” (Hair, et al. 1992, 580, illustration 49). The editors also note that European visitors to Whydah in the 1690s saw ‘little figures of clay about their houses.’ They say that these humanoid figures were “were probably statues of the god Legba, which in this district were commonly placed outside houses or in streets leading out of the towns” (Hair, et al. 1992, 638, 649 n. 13).

McKenzie reports that in 1851 a lay missionary visited an Èṣù shrine in Badagry. He describes the shrine as “‘a little …hut covered with a mat’. Inside was ‘a piece of mud, some fowl feathers stuck in it and the blood of the fowl was put on top of it’” (McKenzie 1976, 58).

106 As the owner of the crossroads, corners and intersections are Eleggua’s special territory.

107 Although in some cases in the New World the messenger of an Orisha is another, lesser-known Orisha. For example, although Oke is a separate Orisha in Africa, in Cuba and Cuba-descended houses he is always given with Obatala, acts as his messenger and may even be described as Obatala’s Eshu (Personal communication, Egun Tolle, September 3, 1996).
In Africa Eshu's emblem is often a piece of laterite\textsuperscript{108} or a rock struck in the ground or on a mound of earth; he can also be represented by a pot turned upside down or a piece of rock in an earthenware dish. He can also be represented by an image of clay or wood (Idowú 1994, 85). In the New World and especially in the form of Larøyé, Eleggua figures have a sharp point, a knife or nail, and the tail feather of an African red parrot embedded in the top of his head. The face is composed of cowry shell eyes, nose and mouth\textsuperscript{109} and may have tribal markings or other distinctive features. The head itself is generally concrete although there are exceptions. Usually he sits in a plain unglazed ceramic dish although painted dishes and other containers can be found (for example, the dish in Plate 11 has been painted red and black). Many are hand-made, although empty, unblessed heads are readily available in botanicas\textsuperscript{110}. In or near his dish Eleggua may have toys, bottles of rum, his dance-hook, candy, or cigars. There are exceptions to these generalities that are path-specific, for example, if the representation is of Eshu Aiye, the three shells representing the eyes and mouth may be embedded in a line in the opening of a conch shell; if the representation is Echú Bi one loses the visual of a face in the abundance of cowries. Although anyone can buy (or make) their own Eleggua head only those "worked" by a babalawo or santero and usually received as part of the Warriors initiation are considered to be the embodiment of the Orisha. Even female santeras have to get warriors for their godchildren from a male practitioner.

\textsuperscript{108}Laterite is a reddish ferruginous soil formed by the decomposition of certain rocks.

\textsuperscript{109}This use of cowries is a form of "sacrifice" since the shells were money in West Africa (Thompson 1984, 22, 27).

\textsuperscript{110}Part of the ritual to create a consecrated Eleggua figure involves filling it with an assortment of sacred substances.
Thompson helps us to understand some of the iconology we see in the representations of Eleggua. He tells us a story in which the Orisha, in an effort to discover who after Olodumare was the head of all the deities, traveled to heaven each bearing a rich offering on his or her head. Eleggua, after first consulted the deity of divination, decides to wear a single crimson parrot feather on his forehead. Recognizing the feather as the “seal of supernatural force and àshe”, Olodumare granted to Eleggua the force to make things happen and made him superior to all the other Orisha (Thompson 1984, 18). The parrot feather worn on the brow, the seat of the mind and judgment, is the “symbol of àshe and the techniques of ritual assuagement (etutu) that lead to the attainment of àshe (Thompson 1984, 18)."\textsuperscript{111}

Although it is easy to understand why the Yoruba choose the gray parrot to represent supernatural power (the bird is a dull gray except for his crimson tail feathers) another story tells why he rules over all the other birds. In this story Olofi called all the birds together to select one to rule with him. Each bird preened his feathers to make himself more beautiful than the others. But all the birds especially envied Koide, the African Parrot, so, on the way to see Olofi, they covered him with ashes. He could only expose his beautiful tail before they all arrived in heaven. When they were presented to Olofi he selected Koide because he was unique, different from the other brilliantly colored birds. Thus was Koide chosen to rule with Olofi.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{111}We can see a similar use of the parrot feather tied to the forehead when Drewal described the iteja initiates who emerge from the sacred grove “with heads shaved and painted white, wearing white cloth and the red tail feather of the African grey parrot on their foreheads” (Drewal 1992, 66, see also figure 5.8 and 5.11–5.14).

\textsuperscript{112}From the ita of Olomide, August 26, 1996. In another version of the same story, Parrot's tail feathers are turned red by jealous co-wives. When her blemish is revealed everyone wanted to purchase one of her beautiful feathers. Thus through the maliciousness of others Parrot becomes rich (Bascom 1980, 424–429).
This story tells why this feather is considered holy. It also can be presented as a story about envy and the overcoming of the jealousy of others, in addition it can used to encourage uniqueness and variety in a community that is becoming more diverse and one where gossip and “witchcraft” can be used to explain failure and bad luck. Koide turns his handicap into an asset, confounding his enemies. This is the mark of Eleggua, who can change fate (for worse or better) in an instant.

Thompson says that the nail or knife tip that accompanies the parrot feather on Eleggua’s head suggests “the wonder-working knife of Eshu Odara” (Thompson 1984, 24) and also prevents him from carrying any burdens on his head. But additional images surround it. Freud was not the first or only observer to compare the knife tip to the penis. In Africa Eshu/Eleggua is often shown wearing a long conical hat filled with “medicine”; he may also have an erect and oversized penis.113 Other images in the Eleggua complex speak to his orality. Thompson describes a divination tray with two images he characterizes as Eleggua. One is sucking his thumb, the other smoking a pipe. Stories often characterize him as sucking on candy and one often finds his image buried in candy. Cigars and rum, distinctive New World offerings, are commonly found in or near Eleggua’s pot.

This focus on orality and phallic symbolism speaks to several aspects of Eleggua’s mythology including his potentiality, that is his ability to make things happen through both word (oral source) and action (phallic source). Although African sources seem to emphasize his promiscuity and indifference to sexual mores (Wescott 1962), in the Americas his sexuality seems to have

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113 Joan Wescott notes that many of the figures of Eleggua in Africa have a long curved hair-dress that may or may not be carved into an explicitly phallic form. These figures also include other phallic symbols including a club, long-necked calabash, spoon, knife, whistle or a pipe. Many of her examples also included a ‘phallic’ apron that would hide the oversized penis found in other sources (Wescott 1962, 339-340).
been ignored in favor of his propensity for other types of action. Here he is seen as a protector—and the trickster who promotes personal growth and change.

As we saw with Ogun, color symbology is not prevalent on Eleggua shrines. I would suggest the same explanation. Eleggua sits in an open container completely exposed to the most casual observer surrounded by his favorite offerings. These include candy, rum, cigars, toys, and smoked fish. His colors are generally red and black although in some paths they are black and white. In either case the opposition of colors suggests the variability of his personality. He is always surrounded by mystery as he may appear or disappear from view. He is the accident waiting to happen; the little tug of intuition that prompts you to carry your umbrella even if no rain is forecast. You know he is there when the out-of-the-ordinary event pulls you up short. He may make you either laugh or cry but he’ll never leave you untouched. Thompson says that the extremes of his colors suggest the “violent contrasts and change in a world of provocation” (Thompson 1971, P/3) while Renne says that these colors are seen to act as a catalyst. Eleggua does not help or hurt you by himself rather he causes you to help or hurt yourself (Renne 1995, 43).

Although Eleggua is recognized in many of his aspects, it is as trickster that he often is perceived in the everyday world of the santero. These tricks may be silly—wakeup calls—more often they are serious and meant to be taken seriously.

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114 Wescott’s research showed that most Eleggua figures were painted black while “black and white are emblematic of the god” (Wescott 1962, 340).

115 The story of Obatala’s journey shows one way that Eleggua “helps” one manifest one’s destiny’s even though that help may be unwelcome, even painful.
As an example of how one would find Eleggua in the everyday we can look at a series of incidents during my own initiation.\textsuperscript{116} The evening before the initiation the iyawo (the initiate) is taken to a river. In this case my yubona, a couple of santeras and myself left for our visit to the river. Less than a mile from the house they realized that they had left behind an ebo (Yr. offering) that was to be given to the river, so we all returned to the house and went inside to recover the items. While we were gone, more folks had arrived, so greetings were exchanged. This required that I prostrate to the newcomers and my attendants receive prostrations in return. Again we left for the river. Arriving at the chosen spot the santeros realized that somehow some of the items required for the ritual had been left at the house. So we returned again to the house. It was only after leaving the house three times\textsuperscript{117} that we were able to complete the ritual at the river without further complications.

The following day I was taken to the door of the room where I was to be initiated. There I was asked a series of ritual questions.\textsuperscript{118} Standing on my right was a native speaker of English, on my left a native speaker of Spanish. The questions are asked in English but the attendants prompt me first in their own native languages—English on the right, Spanish on the left—then in the other language—Spanish on the right and English on the left. Following one prompt and then another I switched languages with each response. By the time I has completed this portion of the ritual, I and everyone else was giggling.

\textsuperscript{116}These events took place over a three-day period, August 23–26, 1996.

\textsuperscript{117}Three is one of Eleggua's sacred numbers.

\textsuperscript{118}Castellanos offers a description and analysis of these questions as ritual speech (Castellanos 1977, 87–99).
Two days later, during my ita, (Lk. life divination), I was to learn who my father Orisha was. In addition to the Orisha who owns their head, each santero has a second Orisha of the opposite sex who is his second parent. Who would claim this iyawo? The oriaté began with the Orishas associated with Yemaya, my main Orisha. “Is it Obatala?” “No.” “Is it Inle?” “No.” Then he decides to just go through the pantheon in order. “Is it Eleggua?” “Yes.” The trickster, addressed third, claims his child and shows his face at last.

These “tricks” were not serious interjections of fate but rather ephemeral and unexpected events. They can be interpreted merely as meaningless “accidents” or one can look for a deeper meaning. That these particular events formed into a series of three with other threes embedded and the fact that they brought levity to what were extremely serious proceedings, show some of the ways Eleggua makes his presence felt in the world of Santería. Becoming aware of these types of “accidents” and learning to interpret their meaning in one’s life is one of the ways that Orisha symbology is used within Santería.119

The Use of Human Figures

As was asserted in the last chapter, African altar displays show few images of the Orisha, however Olokun shrines among the Bini seem to be the exception. In describing one such shrine, Emmanuel Babatunde says:

The shrine of Olókun is divided into two parts; an inner section which houses the figures of Olókun, Osanobua and Ogun and an outer section reserved for devotees who are not in a state of ritual purity. The alter [sic] is located at the north end of a rectangular inner section, and has behind it a large sculpture of Olókun, a smaller one of the Supreme Deity, Osanobua, and an even smaller one of Ogun, the god of war....120

119 Marie-Louise von Franz’s On Divination and Synchronicity explores, from a Jungian perspective, the ways these type of physical events can be associated with psychological states (von Franz 1980). The ways these associations work in individual lives deserves further study.

120 (Babatunde 1992, 198).
What makes this description so interesting is that a close look at the photographs which accompany this description reveals that the altar contains a variety of other items. Many are indistinguishable, but clearly visible are machetes, plates, bowls/containers, a fan, and either a live chicken or a life-size statue of a chicken. The figures of Olokun, Osanobua and Ogun described in the text are not readily apparent (178, a and c). What are we to think of this discrepancy?

We could defend Babatunde by suggesting that since his article is concerned with Olokun, statues representing him should take precedence over other paraphernalia found on his altar. However, having analyzed some New World Orisha altars we should be alert to the fact that every item on an Orisha altar has some significance. Like many Western-trained observers Babatunde seems to have focused on anthropomorphic figures and ignored other items as insignificant. Since the early days of Christianity the use of human figures as religious devices has been problematic. Early in the history of the Christian church difficulties developed around the use of human figures to represent God, Jesus Christ, his mother and the saints.\(^{121}\) As a partial solution a strict distinction was made between the worship offered to God and the veneration or reverence paid to holy icons and other images. Christians have always said that their icons and images were different from pagan idols in that it was not “the images themselves that were being worshipped...but the prototype behind the image which became manifest through the representation” (Weitzmann 1978, 7–8). When Europeans began to interact with the peoples of the west coast of Africa they developed a theory of idols and fetishes in an attempt to differentiate between their own practice

\(^{121}\)Baggley and Weitzmann discuss these issues in terms of the Eastern Orthodox Church (Baggley 1987, Weitzmann 1978).
of using images and the images and objects used by Africans. The word *fetish* (from the Portuguese word *feitiço*, meaning “an object or practice pertaining to witchcraft” and from the Latin *factīlius*, meaning an object made by humans (Hackett 1996, 141 quoting MacGaffey’s “Fetishism Revisited”)) was used to describe the type of “wooden figure, leather amulet, gold necklace, stone, bone or feather, or potentially any inanimate material object” used or carried by the local people (Hackett 1996, 141). These fetishes were often compared to the relics and statues of Catholic saints, especially in Protestant sources (Hair, et al. 1992, 87, Hair, et al. 1992, 578, 638 for example, Hallgren 1988, 42 fn 12).

In contradistinction to early observers who tended to conflate all figures and images found in African sacred spaces with fetishes and idols, contemporary observers say that many of the human images found on African altars, rather than being images of deities, are images of the devotees of those deities (Bascom 1969, 111, Drewal, et al. 1989, 26, Thompson 1993, 17, Thompson 1993, 147). We can see this most clearly by looking at the *oshé* Shango. The *oshé* is the dance wand carried by priests of Shango, the great king, when they are under the influence of possession trance. It is one of the most widely recognized symbols of Shango both in Africa and the New World. Almost universally African *oshé* include the image of a woman kneeling, standing or offering a bowl with a baby at her breast or on her back. Over her head, embedded within her hair or as part of her hair itself is the

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122 Roland Hallgren cites a the work of the “old missionary, [T.J.] Bowen” whose *Adventures* were first published in 1857; in *Hair* Vol I, the editors of Barbot’s texts say that the comparison to Catholic practice comes from an earlier work by Marees and Dapper.

123 Although Hallgren again cites Bowen who recognized the figures as “only symbols. No one supposes that they are endowed with spirit, intelligence or power. They are precisely analogous to the images, pictures, and crosses of the Catholics” (Hallgren 1988), 42 fn 13. 
double-axe symbol associated with Shango (see Plate 5). It is unlikely that this woman is intended to represent the Orisha, Shango, who is a king and warrior, the very epitome of masculinity. Rather, her bulging eyes and reverential body position suggest that she is a devotee in the state of possession, much like the priest that carries her image.

Contemporary Santería altars are similarly devoid of human figures. Although I have seen little comment on this phenomenon, two explanations present themselves: 1) the Orisha could never be adequately portrayed in a single image, thus no image is created (this is similar to the Jewish idea concerning the images of their God and the basis of Christian discomfort with human images), and/or 2) because the Orisha are always already present on the altars of initiated santeros, representations are not necessary. This second reason was the actual explanation offered to me by a iyawo in New York city. When I questioned him about the numbers and types of Catholic statues he had with his Orisha he said that although he had quite a few statues in his home, they were not with his Orisha. Before his initiation he had acquired many of these statues but since he now had “the Orisha themselves” he no longer had a need for other types of representations (Personal communication, July 1998).

Rather than statues, what we find on Orisha altars are other types of objects, objects that represent various characteristics of the Orisha. These objects recall myths and stories, associated with Orisha paths. They may have been gifts given to the Orisha by the santera or her godchildren. Even when

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\textsuperscript{124}New World oshé generally have been simplified by the removal of the human figure. Thus the American oshé is more likely to be a simple doubled headed axe.

\textsuperscript{125}Some Cubans maintain that the woman is a “female” Shango similar to St. Barbara who is also a female representation of him (Personal Communication, Changó Ladé, 1998). However, when questioned few santeros credit Shango with having paths, let alone a female one.
these objects are figures they are not understood to represent the Orisha. One priest, an initiate of Ochosi the hunter whose principle tools are the bow and arrow, has a collection of Native American items including dolls, dream catchers and the like along with an African-style spear. Another santero who is quite fond of wizards has wizards scattered about his shrine. Yemaya initiates will collect seashells and marine paraphernalia while a Shango priest might have a propensity for fire engines. In all these cases, the practitioner, his friends and godchildren are digging into their understanding of the Orisha to construct altars and shrines. But in all these cases there is an understanding that all of this is decoration, put there for the enjoyment of the Orisha and the edification of viewers but non-essential in the deepest and truest sense.

All of this was brought home to me quite forcefully when, on a visit to my padrino’s home, I met another santera. She was bringing her Orisha for a visit because her apartment had been flooded by a broken water pipe and was being repaired. She brought her Orisha, not in their pretty pots, but in pieces of material. Each set of fundamentos was wrapped in a cloth. By the colors of these cloths, I recognized the Orisha as she carried them into padrino’s shrine room. In this emergency situation it was only the fundamentos that had to be saved. All else was expendable, mere decoration. And yet color remained to distinguish the fundamentos of one Orisha from another.

One method for analyzing a religious system is to look at its forms of religious expression. These expressions are often divided into three types: sacred speech, sacred acts and sacred places or objects. This chapter has looked in detail at the way that the sacred site of the birthday and domestic altar and the objects contained on it shed light on the sacred speech embedded in the mythology. These altars also serve as a site of sacred action as practitioners
construct the altar and admire its construction, greet the Orisha and one another, give and receive goods, and finally dismantle the space. Each altar is unique, ephemeral, never to be repeated in exactly the same way. At the same time each altar participates in the “grammar” of Orisha symbology. Certain rules about color, placement and design must be followed. Although idiosyncratic, each display can be “read” at a variety of levels. For the casual observer the focus of the altar tells which Orisha is being honored as well as which others are included in the builder’s pantheon. But a deeper analysis tells about the Orisha themselves, their stories and relations to each other and, perhaps, about the priest-builder.

In the next chapter we will look in detail at the sacred actions embedded in the initiation experience. We will suggest that during the extended liminal period called the iyawoage the priest can be characterized as a mobile sacred site, another altar upon which the sacred myths and beliefs are located.
Chapter 5
Initiate, Priest, Embodied Deity:
Constructions of Self in the Initiation Experience

To say that a specific place is a sacred place is not simply to describe a piece of land, or just locate it in a certain position in the landscape. What is known as a sacred site carries with it a whole range of rules and regulations regarding people's behaviour in relation to it, and implies a set of beliefs to do with the non-empirical world, often in relation to the spirits of the ancestors, as well as more remote or powerful gods or spirits.¹

Mircea Eliade tells us that hierophany is the act of manifesting the sacred in the world of the profane. He suggests that when a stone or a tree is worshipped they are no longer simply stone or tree but rather something sacred. And in becoming sacred, the stone or the tree becomes ganz andere, wholly other. Yet, even as it manifests the sacred, the stone or the tree continues to be itself, for it continues to participate in the surrounding (profane) world (Eliade 1987, 11–12).

In this chapter I will suggest that the iyawo (Yr. bride or wife, junior to the speaker), the newly initiated Santería priest, functions as a point of sacred space manifested in the profane world. I will suggest that like other material objects the body of the initiate can be seen as a series of signifiers for religious beliefs. I will look at the person and persona of the iyawo and at the

¹(Carmichael, et al. 1994, 3).
proscriptions of the iyawoage \(^2\) as points of hierophany that manifest a portion of the sacred. Like Eliade’s stone, the iyawo becomes (w)holy other while continuing to participate in the world of work, school, shopping and all the other minutia of daily life. I will also suggest that as part of the initiation process the Santería priest learns to be able to move between the various concepts of self required for this signification process. Rather than a being that is always already shaped into a unified self, Santería metaphysics understands being as flexible and permeable, dynamic without being fragmented. In this chapter I will look specifically at the events surrounding the initiation into the priesthood as visceral experiences that reshape the initiate into an array of beings. Because the sacred is always encompassed by a range of rules regulating behavior I will explore the restrictions imposed on the iyawo and those around him in order to explicate the beliefs they signify.

Although this section will include some first person accounts of being a iyawo, I will not be exploring the experience of the iyawoage from the point of view of the new initiate himself.\(^3\) Santería is extremely external in its approach to itself. That is, internal or mystical experience is hardly valorized. What is important is not one’s inner “feelings” but whether one performs the ritual requirements correctly.\(^4\) Even in the case of possession trance, devotees do not talk about what is happening in the inner world of the medium, the

\(^2\)Iyawoage is a mixed Yoruba-Spanish word referring to the extended initiation period that begins with the initiation itself and concludes with the dismantling of the first birthday altar a year later. It is only after the completion of the iyawoage and his reintegration into the secular community that the new priest is considered “fully crowned”.

\(^3\)See Sharf’s essay on religious experience for a critique of the use of the internal and mystical in the study of religion (Sharf 1998). See also Mason’s account of his warriors initiation (Mason 1994).

\(^4\) Olupona suggests the Yoruba basis of this approach when he says, “Unlike western religions, Yoruba religions place no emphasis on doctrine or belief, focusing attention instead on participation in rituals and ceremonial activities” (Olupona 1991 14).
person entranced, but what is happening in the outer world of the community and its interaction with the purported Orisha. At the same time it is the devotees' personal experience with the Orisha that brings them to and keeps them in the religion. Without some kind of personal connection or experience most people would not continue in this religion. However, much of that personal connection is also external, that is devotees see the touch of the Orisha in their personal lives. Many 'fateful' events (that is the unexpected, either positive or negative) are attributed to the action of the Orisha. Personal experience is important. But these experiences are physical rather than mystical. One must actually endure initiation, have one's hair cut, eat, sleep, and live in the prescribed way in order to enjoy the benefits of initiation. There is no mystical substitute for 'the real thing'. Although there are some who claim 'self-initiation' they are outside the general community.

The creation of his first birthday altar comes at the end of the priest's initiation into the Santería priesthood. During the year-long liminal period the iyawo is subject to a wide range of rules and restrictions that control not only his behavior in personal and ritual settings but also in public, before the world at large. Some of these rules are protective—the newly made priest is considered "reborn" with many of the requirements of an infant or small child on both the physical and spiritual planes; others are educational, teaching the new priest new ways of thinking and acting. Because the priest, like the altar pot, carries the Orisha within his person, I will also suggest that he is a mobile sacred site, both hiding and revealing the Orisha in his daily life. Although he will carry the Orisha throughout his life, during this period he, like the birthday altar, is marked as the receptacle, the container of the gods. His face is the face of the gods to the larger world.
This chapter is divided into two relatively discrete sections. The first deals with the process of initiation itself. It suggests that during the initiation event and the subsequent liminal period the initiate is reshaped not only into a priest and minister but also as the embodiment of the deity itself. The second section will look at the way clothing is used to signify the relationships created as part of the initiation experience. In it I will suggest that the movement between cultural systems necessitated by the forced migration of slavery required a re-thinking and re-signifying of critical religious signifieds. I will suggest that by substituting one type of power relationship for another the religious practitioners were able to continue to inscribe the priest’s body with the elements critical for spiritual awareness.

The Initiation Experience

The santera entered the house followed by two women and a man all dressed completely in white. She hovered over them like a mother hen, leading them first into the throne room to pay their respects to the Orisha and then through the crowded rooms. They greeted each of the older santeros, throwing themselves to the floor in full body prostrations before each elder. The women wore no makeup, no jewelry other than their sacred necklaces and bracelets. They both wore white scarves firmly tied around their heads without a strand of hair showing. The man also wore beads and bracelets as well as the traditional white hat that completely covered his head. Finally, the madrina led her charges to the family room where straw mats were produced. They lowered themselves to the floor, each sitting straight-legged on a mat. The madrina and her friends served them food and later took away the dirty dishes. White towels protected their sparkling white clothes from possible spills. Changó Ladé, whose spiritual birthday party we
were celebrating, presented each of the iyawos with coconuts and candles on a plate in the color of their Orisha. They carried these around the room, presenting them to each of the other santeros who kissed the edge of the plate, muttering a prayer.

After everyone had eaten and the madrina had a chance to visit with her friends she gathered up her newly-crowned godchildren, their mats, dishes and other paraphernalia and guided them from the house. The others may stay and continue talking but the iyawos mustn’t stay out too much past dark.

Eliade suggests that an initiation is a set of rites and teachings designed to alter the religious and social status of the initiand. It involves an existential change in the initiand’s condition so that he emerges from the ordeal as a totally different being (Eliade 1965, x). Every initiation is a symbolic death and rebirth in which one dies to his old life situation and is reborn as a “new man” (Eliade 1965, xii). Victor Turner divides all rites of passage into three phases: separation from the community, a liminal period, and finally reincorporation into the community. During the separation phase the initiate is detached symbolically and actually from the everyday world and his “old” social status. In pre-industrial communities, the initiate may be taken into the forest or bush where he remains for the duration of the initiation period. In other communities he may be taken to a special building, house, or room. During the liminal phase, the initiate is betwixt and between, neither a member of his old social group nor a fully manifested member of the new community. Finally the liminal period comes to an end and the initiate is reintegrated into the community with his new social position fully confirmed. Now he has all the rights and obligations of his newly defined
position and he is expected to behave in accordance with his new social status (Turner 1969, 94–95).

The Yoruba term iyawo is used in Santería to designate a person who has undergone the initiation ceremony and being initiated into the priesthood. Typical of many rites of passage, the initiation into the Santería priesthood consists of three phases. During the first week of his initiation the iyawo is taken out of the community and confined to a single room. It is in this room that the both the initiate and his Orisha are “made” by the community. During the rest of the year the iyawo’s status is ambiguous. He is set apart from the religious and secular communities and marked in both overt and subtle ways as separate. As the year progresses these restrictions are loosened or lifted so that the new santero is slowly integrated back into both communities. For an entire calendar year after the initiation ceremony the iyawo dresses entirely in white, is subject to a wide number of taboos and is generally “in training” towards his eventual position as a fully certified priest. Because they are deemed especially vulnerable to a wide range of forces during this period, iyawos, like children, are protected by a number of rules and the solicitous care of their religious elders. During this year-long liminal period the iyawo serves as a religious exemplar to the community, learns to live his new religious role, and presents a vision of purity and holiness to the outside world. It is not until the completion of the iyawo period that the initiate is accepted as a fully functioning member of the religious community and fully integrated back into his previous life.

The initiation into the Santería priesthood conforms to many of the elements described in the literature on religious initiation. Before the
initiation the godparents\(^5\) of the initiate creates sacred ground for the ceremonies that will follow. Because most Santería initiations take place in an urban situation, the requirements for separation from the community are typically performed within a house or apartment. Sometimes a house is rented for this occasion but many godparents reconfigure their own home or apartment into the requisite spaces. Because few homes in Houston have basements, few santeros have the luxury of a large area that they can devote to their spiritual work as described by scholars studying the religion in other locations (Murphy 1993). Whether the initiation takes place in a single room or in several areas throughout the building, the igbodu or sacred grove is generally a room that can be closed off from the rest of the house. In this sacred space the initiate has a limited area in a corner or along one side of the room, traditionally is about three feet radiating from a corner of the room (Flores-Peña and Evancho 1994, 35). The initiate will spend the first seven days of his initiation period in this “room”, separated from family, friends and community\(^6\). It is in this room that the initiate undergoes the trials of his initiation, receives his Orisha, and is “made saint”. Both Eliade and Turner stress the importance of this separation from the community. However, within Santería a form of this separation is extended well past this initial

\(^5\)Each initiate has a primary and secondary godparent, called madrina (Sp. godmother) or padrino (godfather). Although two godparents are required, “just like two parents are required to make a baby,” they may be of any combination of genders, two men, two women, a woman as the primary godparent with a man as the second godparent or a man as primary godparent with a woman as the second godparent. See discussion of religious family in Chapter 2.

\(^6\)As we have seen in previous chapters the Santería priesthood includes both men and women. Throughout this chapter I have preferred the male to the female, understanding that this may lead one to believe that men are more commonly initiated. This is not true. Women and gay men form the major portion of the Houston community. I am preferring the male form in this section in order to keep the discordance between initiate as iyawo/bride and his male sex in the foreground. All initiates are brides, regardless of their gender or other sexual characteristics as will be discussed more fully later in this chapter.
period. During the entire year of the iyawoage the iyawo’s status continues to be unique. After a week he returns home and may resume some, but not all of his of normal activities. However, many activities are forbidden to him during this period and he is circumscribed by a wide variety of rules.

As see in the figure, the iyawoage consists of an intense initiation event followed by a series of re-integration episodes.

Santería Initiation Process

Initiation begins with a radical separation event. The initiate is brought to the initiation site and left in the care of godparents and other santeros. During the time between his arrival at the site and his entry into the actual ighodu or initiation room, which may be as long as 24 hours, he begins the existential change of condition that will culminate in the initiation proper. His identity is taken from him; he is called iyawo from the moment he enters the house. He won’t hear his birth name from these people again until the completion of his iyawoage. His autonomy is taken as well. Although his presence is required for the preliminary rites, much activity takes place without him. In Houston, the iyawo is put in a chair facing a blank wall and only released from ‘doing penitence’, as this is called, when his presence is
required. After each such activity he is returned to his chair to continue facing the wall.\(^7\)

After his participation in the initiation itself he is presented to everyone in the house, both initiates and non-initiates, who prostrate themselves to the Orisha that is embodied in him. On the following day, he is presented to the community at large. After spending seven days in the coronation throne\(^8\) he is "taken to the market" and then back to his home. This begins his re-integration into the outside world. However he maintains his liminal state, represented by his white clothing, for a year and seven days after his initiation. After three months some of the most arduous of the restrictions on his behavior are lifted giving him back the use of mirrors, combs, and the dinner table. After three months he is also entitled to perform the Three Month Ebbo (Yr. sacrifice).\(^9\) This ritual "wakes up" his Orisha and

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\(^7\)The beginning of the Ondo girls puberty rite is signaled by the marking of the initiates bodies with black chalk. Olupona suggests that this makes them "structurally invisible" (though physically visible)" (Olupona 1991, 145). "Doing penitence" seems to similarly make the Santería initiate structurally invisible.

\(^8\)The coronation throne is the area of the initiation area delineated as the iyawo’s "home". It is constructed by using fabric to form room-within-a room. Similar in construction and design to the birthday altars described in previous chapters, it’s interior is empty of furnishings except for a pilón the iyawo can sit on. Brown has the best description of these thrones (Brown 1989, Chapter 5).

During his time in the throne the iyawo is pampered like a young child, served whatever food and drink he desires, and is generally waited on "hand and foot".

\(^9\)A three month liminal period appears frequently in descriptions of Yoruba life: newborns participate in a ritual called "outdoing" about forty days after their birth. During this ritual the mother and child is escorted throughout the area and the newborn is introduced to the community (Bádéjó 1996, 39). Although they describe different strictures on new brides both Renne and Bascom describe a ritualization of the first three months of marriage (Bascom 1969, 62-63, Renne 1995, 77). McKenzie describes the initiation of a priestess of Òrìṣà-Oko who lived for three months in seclusion (McKenzie 1997, 410). McKenzie also describes the installation of a king that can not be confirmed until the king-to-be has spent "three moons or more" in a booth constructed of palm branches (McKenzie 1997, 372). In describing the installation of a king in Ondo, Olupona says that among the contemporary Ondo the king-elect is secluded in the circumcision house for three months, the first week of which is the most critical (Olupona 1991, 60-61).
completes his initiation. Although many santeros perform this ritual more than three months after their initiation, most try to do it sometime during their iyawo year. Until this ritual is performed, their initiation is not complete and they are not considered to be fully crowned. This means that they may not ‘work’ their Orisha or initiate godchildren of their own.\textsuperscript{10} Even after completing the Three Month Ebbo, however, the iyawo remains in a liminal state until the conclusion of his iyawoage symbolized by the building of his birthday altar.

Rites of passage in pre-industrial societies include occasions of birth, marriage, coming of age and, in those societies with the institution of kingship, the coronation of the king. The Santería initiation combines elements of all of these. Before looking in detail at the iyawo’s experience we need to first look at similar rituals in the African environment. These cases studies are contemporary African developments of ideas about these events. They represent parallel developments to the Santería initiation rituals re-created by those Africans displaced to Cuba and their descendants. Although they are not directly related to the Santería case they can give us insights into the common thought patterns that inform both African and Cuban initiations.

**African Initiation Models**

In her book *Yoruba Ritual* Margaret Drewal describes several ceremonies including a ritual for new-borns, funeral rituals, the initiation of young boys into Ifá and women’s initiation into the priesthood. Each of these  \[\textsuperscript{10}\text{An initiate must also be presented to the sacred bata drums. Until he is formally introduced to the drums he can not dance at a tambor at which fundamento, that is consecrated, drums are played and may not become possessed by his Orisha. Drums, drumming and drum parties are extremely important in this religion, but outside the scope of this work n the area of ethnomusicology.}\]
has elements that can be found in the Santería initiation; however two, the
initiation of young boys into Ifá known as Itefa (The Establishment of the
Self) and the initiation of women into the priesthood, most closely parallel
the initiation ritual of Santería. The Itefa ritual is designed to help diviners
identify a young boy’s personality type and provide him with a corpus of texts
he can use as models for self-examination and self-interpretation (Drewal
1992, 61).\footnote{Although this ritual is intended for six- to seven-year old males, Drewal says that it is also performed for adult men whose lives have been shattered and who need the synthesizing process it provides (Drewal 1992, 72).} The discovery of a boy’s divination texts tells the initiate and his
family information about his personality and potential in life. With this
information he can “understand how to conduct his life to maximize his
chance for success” (Drewal 1992 66).

The ritual begins with a journey to the sacred grove by the diviners,
initiated students, the initiates and their family and friends. Although the
uninitiated, including the women, are not allowed into the sacred grove
itself, they journey with their sons (and husbands, in the case of older men) to
the entrance of the grove where they await the return of the others. The
journey to and from the sacred grove begins on the first day and continues to
the evening of the second day. During their time in the sacred grove the
initiates learn their personal sets of Ifá divination texts and encounter many
“wonders.” A major portion of this ritual involves the preparation of the
initiate’s personal set of divination palm nuts. These nuts are used initially to
divine his personal texts and are kept by him for use in later divinations. This
set of nuts represent the “initiates rebirth, his personal destiny, and by
extension, Orunmila, the deity of divination” (Drewal 1992, 64).
Afterwards the initiates emerge from the grove with their heads shaved and painted white, wearing a white cloth and a red parrot's feather. White is worn, according to Drewal, because it is the color of the birth caul and thus is "the color of all human beings when coming into the world anew" (Drewal 1992, 66). On the third day the diviners check on the progress of the initiates and they enjoy feasting, dancing and playing (Drewal 1992, 61). Returning to the home of the diviner-priest the initiates are confined to a specially prepared mat where they sleep and eat for the next twelve days (Drewal 1992, 66).

Although girls and women are not initiated into divination through the Itefa, among the Yoruba the "spiritual powers attributed to women make them the primary candidates for priesthoods" (Drewal 1992, 182). According to Drewal, the fundamental role of the priest in Yoruba society is to be a medium through which the deity can pass into the embodied world. In preparation for this role devotees undertake initiations that "installs the deity on their heads" (Drewal 1992, 182). During this process the initiates "metaphorically die and are reborn. Their clothes are taken away, their heads are shaved and they are secluded in a dark shrine where they must remain quiet and still for some weeks." During this time their heads are incised and an amalgam of leaves, animal blood and pulverized minerals are rubbed into the incisions. These actions are thought to "fix the power of the deity in the head of the devotee and to stimulate possession trance" (Drewal 1992, 182).

After her initiation, the woman is known as adoso, one who has received, in her head, the ball of medicine (Yor. osu), that signifies the deity. She is also called the wife, iyaowo, of the deity. As part of her initiation, she receives a special personal name that suggests the deity's claim on her. Even a
man who is initiated as a possession priest is referred to as the "wife" of the deity and may affect female dress and hair styles (Drewal 1992, 182).

In these two "priestly" rituals we see elements found in the Santería initiation ritual. Both the Itefa and the women's initiation are priestly initiations because at the conclusion of each ritual the initiate has a special relationship with one of the Orisha. When we compare these rituals to the Santería initiation we see that in all three the initiates have their clothes changed and their heads shaved. They all spend time in a 'secret grove' where they learn secrets, meet the deities and undergo the actual initiation event. After the conclusion of the initiation both the African and Santería priest is called iyawo, bride of the deity and receives a new personal name that represents that deity's claim on him or her. Both the boys receiving Itefa and the Santería priests (and perhaps African priestesses as well, Drewal doesn't say) receive personal divination texts that represents their personal destiny and information necessary for the future conduct of their lives. All three types of initiates are confined to sacred space for a period lasting from seven days (Santería), to fourteen days (Itefa) to "some weeks" (priestly initiation). We can suggest that these elements function as the mythemes that form the basis of Yoruba initiation events (Lévi-Strauss 1963, esp. Chapter XI).

12Full or partial head shaving is common among the Yoruba. McKenzie mentions several occasions for head-shaving in the mid-nineteenth century. One's head might be shaved as part of the second burial of a king, as part of the initiation as an ilarif, in conjunction with Orisha worship, for baptism into a Christian group (McKenzie 1997, 273–74). Head shaving is much less common in European cultures, where, particularly for women, it is considered shameful. Female saints who shaved their heads were considered to be practicing a strict asceticism because they have deprived themselves of the primary sign of femininity (Hotchkiss 1996, 23). Imprisoned prostitutes had their heads shaved and wore rough clothes to symbolize their depraved state (Ferry 1990, 143).
Childhood and Marriage Symbolism

One’s first relationship with the Orisha is as a child to a loving parent. Two different terms are used to describe one’s guardian deity: “so-and-so owns my head” or “so-and-so is my father/mother.” Before they reach the point of initiation most followers of Santería have discovered the name of this Orisha and have begun to make association between their own life and personality and those of the guardian Orisha. It is expected that such knowledge, like that gained in the *Itefa*, will help one coordinate his conduct with the personality chosen before birth. During the *Ita* a second Orisha is identified as one’s second parent. If the guardian deity is male the *Ita* names one’s “mother” Orisha; if the guardian is female a father is identified. This second parental Orisha seems to provide some type of modifying influence on the characteristics associated with the primary parent. When one acts in a way uncharacteristic of the Orisha that owns one’s head the behavior may be explained with “well, so-and-so is his mother, but so-and-so is his father.” Thus one aspect of one’s relationship with one’s primary Orisha is one of familial kinship. The *Asiento* ceremony adds to this parent/child relationship one symbolized by marriage. Now the Orisha is not only one’s parent and ruler, it becomes one’s spouse.

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13 The terminology “guardian angel” is also used in the literature but I have found the term used infrequently in the Houston community.

14 This understanding of the relationship between a person and his or her guardian Orisha often is used as an explanatory device similar to contemporary use of astrology. Since Shango is associated with fire and a quick temper, a child of Shango might be excused for an inappropriate outburst with “well, Shango does own his head” instead of “he is an Aries after all.” An analysis of this use of the Orisha as an archetype of human behavior awaits further research.

15 *Ita* (Lk. life story) is the life divination received on the third day of the *Asiento* week. It is described in more detail below.
Regardless of the sex of the person being initiated into the Santería priesthood he is given the title of iyawo and considered to be the bride of the Orisha. In order to understand the ways in which the life of the new initiate resembles the life of a new bride we need to understand something of the marriage customs of the Yoruba.\(^{16}\) When a Yoruba woman marries, she joins the household of her husband as the newest and thus “youngest” member. Not only does she become the wife of the man she marries but also of all his male and female relatives, as well as all the women who may have married into his family. Each of these is also considered to be her oko or husband with authority over her. All the adults in the house outrank her regardless of their age or sex. Even children born before she entered the household are considered her elders. Each may require certain types of respect and obedience. She is addressed as iyawo or “bride” until she bears a child into the household. At one level the titles “husband” and “wife” do not so much indicate a sexual relationship as the possession of certain rights by all the “husbands” of the new bride. From this viewpoint wives are always younger than and subordinate to their husbands (Bascom 1969, 49–54, Matory 1994, 105).

When a priest is initiated, he stands in the same position relative to the deity as a new African bride does in relation to her husband. At the same time the priest’s relationship to the religious community is similar to a new bride’s relationship to the household she joins upon marriage. This relationship holds regardless of the nominal sex of either the initiate or the deity. By extension human initiates are always subordinate to the god they manifest and the other santeros in the religious family.

\(^{16}\) Again we need to understand that this example is based on twentieth century patterns. However the correspondences between this case and Santería are instructive.
The relationship between the visible and invisible worlds is one of mutual and reciprocal service. Murphy, in describing the *asiento* ceremony that initiates a Santería devotee into the service of an Orisha, begins by telling us that *asiento* is a Spanish word connoting both “seat” and “agreement” or “pact”.\(^\text{17}\) This ceremony to “make” or “crown” a new priest seats the Orisha in the head of the devotee, but it is also a pact or commitment between the devotee and the Orisha. The intimate nature of this commitment is shown in the title given the newly crowned initiate. To be a *iyawo*, Murphy tells us, “is to be married to the spirit, with all the mutual rights and obligations of marriage. Throughout the one-year novitiate that constitutes *iyawoage*, the junior ‘bride’ is beholden to the spirit husband, a subordinate but reciprocal relationship of mutual service” (Murphy 1994, 94). In addition, he suggests that the use of the marriage metaphor encourages the newly crowned *santero* to experience in a conscious way (outside of the trance situation) him or herself as the Orisha. As the self and other become blurred the new priest or priestess is encouraged to develop the mutual relationship one has with one’s Orisha so that “[t]he spirit [Orisha] is not the conscious self, but something greater which may subsume the self, overcome its borders and direct the whole person” (Murphy 1994, 191).

Although the Santería initiate belongs to the Orisha he is also tied by a variety of relationships to all the other members of the *ilé*, (Yr. household). Regardless of his actual sex, a *iyawo* assumes a female position in the household. He is addressed as “*iyawo*” throughout his novitiate year and must begin to prostrate himself to all the members of the household whose

\(^{17}\) *Asiento* also refers to the license given by the Spanish crown to certain ship’s captains to provide slaves to its colonies. Speculation about the relationships between this understanding of *asiento* and the Santería initiation ritual are interesting but beyond the scope of this work.
initiations predate his own. After their first three months, during which they are treated as infants, iyawos can begin to perform certain types of physical and spiritual work, although they are also prevented from performing much spiritual work by their liminal status. One often finds iyawos to be among the hardest workers at ritual events where they perform any number of tasks not tabooed by their liminal status or by their personal ṭà (life divination).

The Asiento: Making a Saint

In Lucumi, the dialect of Yoruba spoken by practitioners of Santería, the initiation ceremony for the priesthood is kariocha, (Yr. to place the Orisha on the head) (Murphy 1994, 93). A quick review of the seven-day long ceremony will help us see the relationship between this ceremony and its African antecedents. My discussion of the asiento, the initiation ceremony of Santería priests, uses material from my own initiation as well as from the work of others including Joseph Murphy (Murphy 1994, 96–104). Like the Itefa ritual described by Drewal, the asiento takes place in a simulated grove. In my case a bedroom was cordoned off from the rest of the house by white cloths and a corner was decorated with fabric in the colors of my Orisha. As the initiate I would not see this space until the initiation proper was

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18 Some houses require all those who have received any initiation (for example necklaces or warriors) to prostrate to crowned santeros but the requirement becomes absolute after the asiento.

19 Other terms used are hacer santo (Sp. to make saint/Orisha), coronición (Sp. crowning), asiento (Sp. seating) (Murphy 1994, 93). In the Houston community coronation, crowning and asiento are the most commonly used terms.

20 Murphy's description is based on the film The King Does Not Lie by Judith Gleason and Elise Mereghetti (Murphy 1994, 95). The film was made with the cooperation of the ilé (Yr. spiritual house) performing the initiation. Murphy also includes additional material based on his discussions with Gleason. Since much of this ceremony is secret I have included only that material that could be gleaned from published sources, it is filtered by my own experience.
concluded. In Judith Gleason’s film, during the first evening the initiate is taken to a mountain stream where he is bathed in the waters of Orisha Oshun. Here his clothes are torn from his body and he “is washed of the impurities of his old life.” The initiate is then wrapped in a white cloth and draped with the beaded necklace of Obatala, the Orisha of clarity and serenity (Murphy 1994, 97). Murphy suggests that these actions are designed to clear the initiate’s head and prepare the way for the upcoming rituals. Later his head and body are washed again in a preparation of herbs and leaves soaked in water. This solution, omiero (Yr. water of propitiation),21 not only cleans the initiate but is the first step in his ritual transformation. Later his head is shaved, incised and a poultice of herbs, blood, white efun chalk and red camwood are put on it (Murphy 1994, 99). After his head is prepared, the tureens holding the stones and other emblems of the Orisha are placed one by one on his head. At this point the Orisha often manifests in the body of the new priest (Murphy 1994, 100).

Later the newly made Orisha housed in their individual tureens are fed the blood of their favorite animals. As each of the four-legged animals are brought forward for sacrifice the iyawo touches his head to the head of the animal. In his description of a contemporary African Sango initiation, Matory suggests that this gesture identifies the victim and sacrificer so that the subsequent decapitation severs the head of the iyawo by proxy.22 “Much as worldly husbands purchase the ‘heads’ of their brides with bridewealth (owó

21 For more information about Osanyin, the Orisha of herbs, and the herbal liquid called omiero, see Four New World Yorùbá Rituals (Mason 1985, 93–131).

22 However, head-shaving is often considered a similar substitute sacrifice “in the sense of pars pro toto, cutting off a part of the body, which stands for the whole” (McKenzie 1997, 273). It is interesting that in the Santería initiation both types of substitute decapitations occur.
ori iyawo—literally, 'money for the head of the bride'), Sango demands the 'head' of his new bride" (Matory 1994, 133). These animals will be dressed, cooked and presented as part of the feast the following day.

The dia de media (Sp. middle day), the middle of the three "great" days of the asiento, is a time for the community to celebrate the making of a new Orisha. On this day the new iyawo dresses in the sumptuous coronation clothes he will wear, like a wedding dress, only once.\(^{23}\) The royal clothes in the colors and patterns of the patron Orisha includes a crown and the appropriate implements.\(^{24}\) In the case of Gleason's film which details the crowning of a new Shango priest, the red and white costume is complemented by the oshé, the axe-scepter of Shango. In my case a sea-blue dress is accented with the various implements of Yemaya, the queen of the ocean. A fan, decorated with blue and white feathers, completed my own outfit.\(^{25}\) In every case a portion of the Orisha's iconography is incorporated into the clothing of the priest, so he becomes, like the containers on the altars we looked at earlier, a sign of a particular Orisha. On this day both santeros and outsiders are invited to view the new priest, celebrate with the initiating household and feast on the animals whose blood was offered on the previous

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\(^{23}\) Actually the iyawo may wear the coronation clothes several more times but each event, except his funeral, is an extension of the primary initiation. There is a further discussion of this clothing below.

\(^{24}\) Unlike most of the other Orisha, the warrior Orisha (Eleggua, Ogun and Ochosi), rather than being presented as royal are dressed in European interpretations of their primary associations: guard/farmer, soldier and hunter respectively. But even in these cases, silk or satin accent the rough burlap of the outfit.

\(^{25}\) Initiates of other Orisha carry other implements. For example, Obatala and Oya carry horsetails, Eleggua carries his hooked staff, Oshun carries a fan and Ochosi carries a bow and arrow.
day to the Orisha. In larger communities there may also be a bembe (Lk. drumming) or dance party as part of this celebration.\textsuperscript{26}

On the third day the itá or life divination is read for the iyawo. It is during the itá that each newly created Orisha speaks in detail to its new priest. Thus the new bride learns his personal taboos, the particular roads of his Orisha, and the ethical considerations of his new station in life. In general, the itá is used to guide the new priest throughout his remaining life. It is also at this time that his new name en santo is determined.

\textbf{Initiation as Radical Transformation}

Turner has identified four characteristics of what he calls liminars, that is people undergoing ritualized transitions: anonymity, submissiveness, formlessness, sexual continence (Turner 1969, 102–104). He suggests that during the liminal period the initiands are sexless and anonymous, so that "all attributes that distinguish categories and groups in the structured social order are here in abeyance" (Turner 1969, 102–103). To symbolize this anonymous state all initiates may be dressed alike and referred to by a common term; they may be expected to do without "property, structural status, privileges, material pleasures of various kinds and often even clothing" (Turner 1969, 143). Because initiands have regressed to a formless state they are usually enjoined to submission to the authority of their caretakers and the community at large and to ritualized silence. Both submission and silence are important if the initiate is to learn the cultural values, norms, attitudes, sentiments and relationships of his new position. In

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{26} In Houston most crowning do not include a bembe, but may include some singing and drumming.}
\end{footnotesize}
addition, Turner suggests that in “primitive” societies speech has power and must be controlled for the good of the community (Turner 1969, 103).27

We can find the majority of these attributes in the description of Santería initiation. Although priests are normally initiated alone or with only a single other person their participation in this ritual includes them among the whole group of people who have passed through this ritual period and often there will be a bond formed among those in a community who were iyawos during the same period. During the week-long initiation period the iyawo resembles Turner’s liminars. Although his is the focus of most of the ritual attention he becomes anonymous: his clothes are taken away, he loses his name; he becomes an infant, a non-person. He learns that he is no longer what he was when he entered this house just a few short days ago. He may not so much as get a drink of water or walk to the bathroom by himself. He must wait until an elder is available to help him with these most basic of needs. The infantization imposed upon him during this period impresses upon him, in a completely visceral way his new state, his “born-again” status.

Another important aspect of the liminal period Turner discusses is its association with magico-religious properties. He says that liminars are often regarded as “dangerous, inauspicious, or polluting to persons, objects, events, and relationships that have not been ritually incorporated into the liminal context.” Turner suggests that the liminal period is dangerous to both the initiate and to others exactly because it is liminal, that is because it is outside the normal restraints of the community structure and control. Thus manifestations of the liminal state must be “hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions and conditions” (Turner 1969, 108–109).

27 Also see Ong’s work concerning the power of the word in oral (pre-literate) communities (Ong 1982, 31f).
It is not always clear who is being protected from whom in the igbodu. The iyawo must be shielded from others, particularly those who have not been initiated. His family and friends may visit but not touch him; he may not even give or receive objects directly from others. Such interaction is dangerous for both him and the others surrounding him. Since he is situated between one state and another he is beyond the restraints of normal community control. Because he is vulnerable, he must be sheltered from others—and they must be protected from him. These actions are not natural. He must be taught that he is vulnerable and dangerous. Although explanations might be proffered, generally he is taught by actions. He is told how to act in his new state.\(^\text{28}\)

**The Iyawo Year**

The liminal period of a Santería initiation lasts well past the time the new priest leaves the igbodu. For a full year after his "birth en santo" the iyawo is subject to a wide-ranging list of prohibitions. During this period, called the iyawoage, the new priest’s status resembles that of a newborn, a new wife and royalty. Compiling a list of the restrictions facing a iyawo during the one-year novitiate period we find an amazing array of requirements and prohibitions: the iyawo may have to practice sexual continence, must always dress in white, can not visit bars, jails, cemeteries, hospitals or other places of contamination, must be safely home by nightfall\(^\text{29}\), must not drink alcohol or use other types of drugs, must not use

\(^{28}\)See for comparison Michael Mason’s "I Bow My Head" for a description of the ways physical performance informs the warriors ceremony (Mason 1994). As he describes, Santería practitioners often use physical performance instead of explanation as teaching tools.

\(^{29}\)Night is a dangerous period among the Yoruba. Women especially are encouraged to remain indoors since they are prohibited from seeing members of the Oro society who may come out any time between sunset and sunrise (Farrow 1996 [1926]) #227, 78. The Oro society is concerned primarily with spirits of the ancestors and with death but they are also the
profane language, shake hands or eat with a knife and fork. Female iyawos cannot wear makeup, curl, cut or dye their hair. All iyawos must keep their heads covered and the only jewelry they are allowed to wear are their Santería necklaces and bracelets. For the first three months after the initiation, the iyawo may not use a mirror and must eat all his meals on a mat on the floor using only a spoon. After three months many of these restrictions are lifted but it is not until the end of a year that the iyawo is considered to be a "fully crowned" santero who is mature enough to relate to the outside world. After the birthday party described earlier and the final rituals of the iyawo period he can put aside his white clothes and return to his regular life. After this he can present the Orishas he carries within himself to his own godchildren. However each santero carries with himself the lifetime restrictions identified during the itá.

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executioners of criminals condemned to death and procurers of victims when human sacrifice was practiced (Drewal 1992, Farrow 1996 [1926]) #227, 98]. Strangers who may be around the town after dark were often chosen as victims for such sacrifices.

Mason suggests that leaving one's hair loose in public is an open invitation to an uncontrolled possession event (Mason 1996, 55). Iyawos would be especially susceptible to random possession because of their 'fragile' nature and because of their shaved heads. However African initiates seem more likely to only cover their heads with white chalk than hats and scarves (Brandon 1993, plate 9, Drewal 1992, ill. 5.11-5.14, Matory 1994, fig. 16). After their initiation the head continues to carry special significance. Yoruba priests may wear a special hairstyle to identify them with their Orisha and to signify the power enthroned in their heads (Drewal 1989, 208, Drewal 1992, fig. 10.7). Olupọna suggests that among the contemporary Ondo unplaited hair transforms women “into the sacred state of being” (Olupọna 1991, 80); he also describes a special braiding style given to girls during their puberty ceremony that indicates their liminal status and prohibits them from placing anything on their heads for a period of three months (Olupọna 1991, 145).

Yoruba kings not only wore crowned but also beaded veils that covered their faces. Drewal says that it was “taboo for people to look directly at the head of the king because of the powers it embodies.” Concealmint represented the heightened spirituality of the king while moderating the “penetrating, piercing gaze of one whose power is like that of a god” (Drewal, et al. 1989, 39).

On the secular level, Cordwell suggests that the gele (African headtie) was brought to west Africa by former slaves returning from the New World where they were required to wear head kerchiefs while they worked (Cordwell 1973, 499–500). This suggests that strict head-covering for initiates may be partially a New World innovation.
Although the new iyawo has left the igbodu, he is still a child, vulnerable to both physical and spiritual malignant influences. Rules governing what the iyawo can do and where he can go not only protect him but inform him of the places that are considered dangerous. Bars, jails, cemeteries and hospitals are sites dedicated to particularly powerful Orisha; at the same time they can be home to evil or misguided spirits. As an initiate they are avoided, but there is a stronger message of their continued danger. Even after the iyawoage, one must approach these sites with caution because of their power and significance (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 102).

Clarity of thought and restrained action are promoted by prohibitions against sex, drugs, alcohol and profane language. The iyawo is a new person, he carries the deity in his head, he must be clear-headed, in control of himself and his environment. Rules about head covering, hair and makeup also remind the iyawo that his head has become sacred. The relationship between the individual’s head, his destiny and his guardian Orisha will be discussed in detail below. But it is these rules that begin to shape the iyawo’s understanding of his head as a sacred site.

Omitutu: Cool White

One day during my iyawoage I had to go to the pharmacy to pick up a prescription. I was in full regalia, several layers of white: skirt, slip, stockings, shoes. My head was wrapped in a white scarf. As I pulled my white billfold out of my white purse, the young woman behind the counter said, “You must like white.” Not wishing to get into a long discussion with a stranger, I nodded in agreement.

In analyzing the appearance of the initiate, we can see how different types of metaphysical ideas are incorporated into each of these contexts. Like
many other types of initiation experiences (Mason 1994, Smith 1978) the experience of the Santería initiates involves a change of clothes.\footnote{Quoting Galletti, Thompson suggests that Yorubaland is “a dressy civilization where people spend more on clothes than any other item save food and shelter.” They have used textiles since “the dawn of time”—archeological evidence from between the first millennium BCE and the second century CE shows a history of “tribal elegance.” This use of textiles has been embodied in the mythology through Obatala, the head of the pantheon, the god of creativity and the “king of the white cloth” (Thompson 1971, 18/1).} The initiate, already addressed as “iyawo” leaves for the river in street clothes and returns wrapped in white. He enters the igbodu wearing rumpled and soiled clothes and emerges in sparkling clean, brand-new, white clothes. We can see the movement here from mundane clothes to those that are white but not necessarily pristine to the immaculately clean, fresh and new. Although the visit to the river may have been cleansing, it is during the initiation itself that the iyawo is born again. It is in the room that he is re-created, remade. His past life is over, he will reckon his age from this day forward.\footnote{Santeros refer to the anniversary of their initiation as their “birthday” and their age in the religion is computed from that date.}

The iyawo is surrounded by white. From that moment when his old clothes are removed at the river until the final ritual of the iyawo year everything he touches, uses, or wears is white.\footnote{With the exceptions noted below.} Before the initiation ceremony he must buy seven brand-new, completely white outfits. Even small colored elements, such as buttons, have to be replaced with white. Each morning during the seven-day period he is dressed totally in new white clothes. From his head tie or hat, to his underwear, to his pants and shirt, everything is completely new and immaculately white. The plate, cup, bowl and spoon he eats from must be brand new and pure white. Long sleeves and high necklines are preferred for both men and women. Anything sexual or provocative is forbidden. A women would generally wear a skirt but her legs...
must be covered with tights or leggings. When the iyawo returns home after the week-long initiation, he continues to sleep on white sheets and use the white dishes. He must carry a white billfold, and, of course, wears all white clothes. This overwhelming presence of white separates the iyawo from the profane community. Like a Catholic nun’s habit, a Buddhist monk’s robes or an Islamic woman’s veil, the iyawo’s clothes mark him as a different type of being, one dedicated to a particular way of life. During the first three months and generally throughout the year, the iyawo’s head must be covered. Men wear hats of various types, women wear scarves, hats or even wigs (when they need to appear more conventional as in the business environment). The only colors allowed are in the Orisha necklaces and the idé (Yr. bracelet) in the colors of the ruling Orisha.

In her discussion of Mormon temple garments Colleen McDannell says that Latter-Day Saints are defined by the way their covenants with God are acted out in their lives rather than by any expressions of belief. Rather than merely attending services and being “good,” Mormons are expected to adhere to certain food and beverage restrictions, practice pre-marital sexual abstinence and tithe to demonstrate their religious beliefs. The Latter-Day Saints emphasize that living a particular way is how the proper divine/human relationship is established and maintained. Because they are uniquely Mormon, temple garments demonstrate one’s commitment to his or her religion and define the boundaries of the Mormon community, separating Mormons from non-Mormons (McDannell 1995, 205). But these

34It was during my iyawoage that I gained an appreciation for the positive aspects of Islamic veiling. In both cases one’s clothing choices are dictated by religious proscriptions. One feels oneself as both protected and exposed. Certainly you are protected not only in a spiritual way but by the clothing itself which is of the least provocative nature but at the same time you feel exposed in its distinctiveness. Every time I got dressed I was reminded of my dedication to the Orisha. I suspect many Islamic women have similar experiences.
garments are unique because they are secret (that is, hidden beneath one's secular clothes). They make a uniquely Mormon, albeit private, statement, about the wearer (McDannell 1995, 206).

The Mormon 'Garments of the Holy Priesthood', given as part of the "endowment" ceremony, are worn throughout life and connect the faithful to the promises they made in the temple, their "covenants" with the Lord (McDannell 1995, 202). The garments are a muslin or linen "union suit" worn next to the skin. Originally this suit reached from the neck to the ankles and wrists although it has been shortened (McDannell 1995, 201). The garments are marked with the symbols that are also marked on the veil in the Temple. This veil represents the separation between the abode of humans and that of the divine. It is these marks that make the garment sacred; they must be removed and burned when a garment has become old and frayed (McDannell 1995, 209–10). Young men receive their garments as part of a rite of passage to manhood that includes having a mission calling and going through the temple ceremony. Young women generally receive their garments as part of their preparation for a temple marriage. Although one may receive garments before marriage or mission, they serve as part of those rites of passage into adult Mormon culture and physically mark that transition (McDannell 1995, 210).

Citing Georg Simmel, McDannell suggests that any action that cuts, scars or otherwise remodels the body "inscribes secrets on the person and thus dedicates that person to the elders and the dead" (McDannell 1995, 220). The ritual acquisition and marking of the garments worn over the most intimate part of the body signals to the wearer of Mormon garments the hold that his religion has over him. In one sense, the Mormon garments are completely
different from the *iyawo's* clothing which is both public and conventional. Other than its white color nothing separates it from similar items worn by any other person. But these garments too are associated with a radical inscription of secrets on the body, mark a new intense relationship with both human and spiritual beings and represent the hold his religion has over the *iyawo*. His clothing represents all of the other requirements placed upon him during his *iyawoage*, often referred to as the 'year in white'. In addition, it must be understood that the *iyawo's* clothing requirements extend from the most public to the most private. Not only are his outer clothes white but all his undergarments, his nightwear and sheets are also white. Everything that he touches and uses is white. In some ways because his clothes are conventional, the *iyawo's* whites represent a secret similar to Mormon temple garments. The checkout woman at the pharmacy and my fellow shoppers at the mall did not realize the significance of my clothing. Particularly in Houston where the religion is generally unknown I may have been the only person in my neighborhood who understood the significance of my clothing choices. Thus they also made a uniquely private statement.

In her discussion of cloth in *Bùnú* society, Elisha Renne says that white cloth is “used to represent relationship between individuals and society” such that when an individual’s conduct is “disorderly” as evidenced by miscarriages, crying fits, argument and illnesses; the prescription in such cases is often the wearing of white cloth (Renne 1995, 23, 32). Because white is associated with the spirit world, the invisible world (Renne 1995, 25) it can be used to bridge the gap between that world and the visible world of society (Renne 1995, 29). In Yoruba culture, coolness or gentleness of character is of the utmost importance. This coolness is also symbolized by the color white.
Immaculate white cloths represent Obatala, the Orisha of purity and creativity, but they also cool the fires of passion, protect against evil influences and enhance the character of the practitioner (Thompson 1984, 11f).

For the Santería community the iyawo’s white represents not only his new status in relationship to the Orisha and entry into a new spiritual relationship but also the new coolness of character he should be manifesting. Iyawos are expected to embody the Yoruba religious qualities of ‘coolness’, gentleness of character, respect and discretion (Thompson 1984, 16). In African art the artistic sign that communicates the quality of iwa (good character) is the color white. Whiteness represents the fine character apparent in one who is close to the divine (Thompson 1984, 11). During the initiation ceremony and throughout the liminal year these religious qualities are inscribed onto the body of the new initiate by surrounding him with white. By avoiding people, places and things that are not imbued with “whiteness,” the iyawo’s character is developed and enlarged.

Additional images of white are encoded on the iyawo, marking him as a newborn and a bride. Drewal suggests that initiates wear white because it is “the color of the birth caul and thus the color worn by all human beings coming into the world anew” (Drewal 1992, 66). In North American culture white is associated with purity and innocence. Children being baptized and women being married are traditionally dressed in white. Although scientifically white is the presence of all colors, some esoteric groups believe that white represent the absence of color and believe that it has the ability to “repel evil” and thus consider it as protective of one who is newly-reborn and vulnerable. For the bride it represents her innocence and purity of virtue.
Although the new *iyawo* puts on a completely new white outfit each day during his time in the *igbodu*, the day after the initiation itself, the Middle Day, finds a different set of images played out in terms of clothing. On the Middle Day the *iyawo* is presented to the initiating community. For the presentation itself he is dressed not as a bride or initiate but as the Orisha itself in what Flores-Peña calls the "consecration garment" (Flores-Peña and Evanchuk 1994, 13). This garment is custom-made for each *iyawo*. The consecration garment may be in one of two styles: men and those whose ruling Orisha is male normally dress in a shirt in the colors of their Orisha and either plain white trousers or knee-length pants in the color of that Orisha (Flores-Peña and Evanchuk 1994, 19); women whose ruling Orisha is female wear elegant floor-length gowns in the colors of their Orisha (Brown 1989, 395). The style of these garments are derived from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century western Europe.\(^\text{35}\) As Flores-Peña suggests, their "regal" design is meant to associate the black royalty with the white ruling class of that time. Not only is the garment in the color of the Orisha and the style of royalty, it is decorated with symbols and icons of the ruling Orisha (Flores-Peña and Evanchuk 1994, 14).

Like the Orisha pots found on altars, these garments identify the *iyawo's* ruling Orisha through their use of color, style and decoration. A person with a minimal knowledge of Orisha correspondences should be able to identity the deity associated with any new initiate or with each garment Flores-Peña presents in his book. Although there is a large pantheon in

\(^{35}\) The "royal" Orisha (Obatala, Yemaya, Oya, Chango and Oshun) are dressed in the style of royalty while the warriors (Eleggua, Ogún, Ochosi) are dressed in the style of their positions as guard or farmer, soldier and hunter (Brown 1993, 4748). Even though these outfits are of courser material, they often have silken inlays or patches.
Santería most Americans are dedicated to a relatively small subset,\textsuperscript{36} thus one can use basic color correspondences to identify the ruling Orisha—if it’s blue it must be Yemaya, if it’s red and white it’s Shango, etc. Additional confirmation is provided by the icons displayed—Yemaya’s fish, Oshun’s sunflower, Ochosi’s bow and arrow, and so forth. A more sophisticated use of the mythology is the attempt to incorporate a particular story or event in the life of the Orisha into the consecration garment. Flores-Peña tells of incorporating a green design into an Oshun garment in order to invoke Ololodi, an avatar of Oshun who includes green among her colors (Flores-Peña and Ewanchuk 1994, 19). In another garment he invokes Oya’s praise name \textit{Iya Mesan} (Yr. mother of nine) by drawing a river of nine colors from the left shoulder curving down the front to the train on the back of the garment (Flores-Peña and Ewanchuk 1994, 21).\textsuperscript{37} Not all garments point to specific stories but each invokes aspects of the Orisha presented.

The iyawo dons the consecration garment around noon of the Middle Day and wears it for four or five hours—most iyawos have changed into whites by six o’clock. In life he will only wear that garment twice more: during the middle day of the next priest or priestess to be initiated by his godparent (when he is “lifted up”) and when he is presented to the drums.\textsuperscript{38} It will also serve as a burial outfit, so that “[h]aving brought the initiate into the world, the garment will also carry that person out of it” (Flores-Peña and Ewanchuk 1994, 13). However before donning the consecration garment on

\textsuperscript{36}Eleggua, Ogun, Ochosi, Obatala, Shango, Aganyu, Yemaya, Oya, and Oshun.

\textsuperscript{37}This name refers to a time when Oya who was childless made an ebbo (Yr. sacrifice) and bore nine children who are represented by the nine streams of the Niger Delta in Africa (Flores-Peña and Ewanchuk 1994, 21).

\textsuperscript{38}It is not required that one wear his \textit{traje del medio} to be presented to the drums, whites are also appropriate.
the Middle Day, the iyawo will wear another coded outfit. Called the morning or breakfast suit (Sp. traje del desayuno), it consists of white pants and a gingham shirt in the color of the Orisha for the men and a plain gingham dress for the women (See Plate 13). After the iyawo has changed into the consecration outfit the morning suit is hung “like a hovering angel” (Brown 1989, 395) next to the throne. It will be worn again at his first birthday party. Like the consecration garment, this outfit is custom made for the iyawo.

However, unlike the consecration outfit that is constructed of silk and satin and may be encrusted with cowries (traditional Yoruba money) and other designs elements, the morning suit is plain without only rick-rack and simple lace for ornamentation. Although it is barely mentioned in the literature, it also represents a movement from one state to another, worn as one passes from an earthy to royal, private to public persona (Brown 1989, 395). If the consecration garment transfigures the iyawo into the Orisha as Flores suggests (Flores-Peña and Evanchuk 1994, 14), then the morning suit presents him in the dress of a servant or house slave and reminds him of his “place” within the community, as the servant and captive of that same Orisha.

Even after the completion of his iyawo age the new priest is not released from clothing as spiritual discipline. Many santeros are subject to clothing restrictions and taboos: one may be prevented from wearing particular colors, red and black are common but others are possible. Another may be required to wear white or light colored clothing the rest of his life. Another might be required to keep his head covered or avoid wearing borrowed clothes or clothing with stripes, polka dots or holes. The hold of the Orisha and their religion continues to assert itself throughout one’s life. Even

39Personal communication, Oba Dina, June 24, 1997.
without specific restrictions santeros will often choose to wear the colors or attributes of their ruling Orisha. Yemaya’s children may favor blues while those of Shango will wear a spot of red.40 A child of Ochosi, the hunter, might wear jewelry with native American themes while the children of Oshun will favor gold. Although white is always appropriate for rituals, often you can identify a person’s ruling Orisha by close observation of his clothing or jewelry. A blue shirt with sail boats points to a Yemaya, while a red and black pattern would lead one to look for other signs of Eleggua.

In his discussion of fashion, Arthur Berger presents two points of view concerning the self and clothes. From one viewpoint fashion is a front, a facade that hides the “true self”. Those holding this view assume that people “have selves or identities that are somehow ‘given’ and that fashion is either consciously or unconsciously manipulative.” The clothes one wears function as a persona that hides the real self. The other view argues that our identities are created based on the feedback we receive from others in our environment. Thus the responses to the clothes we wear affirms or reinforces our own sense of who and what we are. Proponents of this view suggest that clothes help to shape our personalities, that in a real sense clothes do “make” the man (Berger 1992, 104, 105).

The different ways in which uniforms are used in this society support both of these ideas. Situations in which a uniform is worn as part of a job or recreational activity suggest that one can “put on” the personality and actions appropriate to a business person, or baseball player without changing the “real you” behind the mask. On the other hand, some uniforms are thought to both shape and represent one’s personality. Soldiers, police officers and priests

40 Although a priest of Shango might be prevented from wearing red because it make him “too hot”.
are expected to exhibit certain personal attributes whether or not they are actually wearing the uniform of their profession. If they act in an inappropriate way (whether or not they are "in uniform") they are said to have "disgraced the uniform" or "the collar". The use of religious clothing may represent a special instance of the view of clothes of the shaper of personality. Members of religious orders usually don the habit or clothing of their vocation at the beginning rather than at the end of their religious training. The implication of this is that the clothing itself helps to shape one's progress in the religious life. It used to be that Catholic nuns were given different styles of habits to mark various milestones along their religious journey toward "final vows". Thus one could know a woman's progress toward full incorporation into the religious community by the clothing she wore.

The use of various clothing metaphors within the Santería initiation experience suggests a non-essentialist view of the person. The movement toward and continued use of white clothing suggests that the initiate can be shaped and molded into a fully functioning priest. Although one may enter the igelodu with an understanding of the self that is unique and immutable, the year-long discipline of the iyawoage provides another view of the self. The 'uniform' of the iyawo sets him apart, even if no one else seems to notice, he is constantly aware of himself as different, set apart—and his actions are shaped by that awareness.

In Cuba and certainly in sections of Miami, New York and New Jersey where the religion is a familiar part of the environment a iyawo would be recognized on the street for what he is. The community knows how he
should act and monitors his behavior. In other parts of the country, the *iyawo* as *iyawo* may not be recognized. Thus his identity as *iyawo* may not be directly shaped by feedback from the majority of the others he meets. Elders may only be encountered within prescribed ritual environments, so his adherence to the requirements of the *iyawoo age* may be more loosely monitored. However, one could argue that even in a more anonymous environment, the *iyawo*’s identity is being shaped as he attempts to negotiate the boundary between self as religious being and the Other. Strangers will look at him and some may even comment on his unusual appearance (“You must like white”). Family, friends and acquaintances will have to be informed, perhaps at different levels, of his new religious commitment and the limitations they impose on his activities. The absence of close monitoring on the part of his religious elders may mean that he must take on a deeper level of responsibility for his own behavior—when human authorities are absent, one’s level of adherence becomes a matter “between the *iyawo* and his Orisha.” Thus even the choice to not follow the rules would be shaped by his knowledge and understanding of his new status.

**The *Iyawo* as Sacred Site**

During the *iyawo* year the new priest is undergoing and consolidating a personal religious transformation. At the same time because he has become the embodiment of a sacred being, his body has become a mobile shrine. Like the Orisha shrines, the body of the *iyawo* both conceals and displays the sacred being it contains. Resting in a sea of cool white the Orisha necklaces and colored bracelet tell the story of this *iyawo*’s personal religious experience. He

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41 He may be “fined” if an elder believes he is dressed or behaving inappropriately (OmiVega April 25, 1997).
has received one beaded necklace, coded in the colors of the deity, for each Orisha sitting on his home altar. On his left wrist he wears a beaded bracelet in the colors and design of his guardian Orisha. In addition to the beaded bracelet on his left wrist, he may also be wearing other metal and beaded bracelets associated with various Orisha. Like the items on the altar these pieces of jewelry celebrate and glorify his Orisha patrons. However, like the altar pieces, this jewelry is only a representation of his deities. They relieve the overwhelming white of his surroundings while reminding him and those he sees of his sacred commitment. However it is what is hidden that contains the holy presence of the deities.

In his essay introducing Phyllis Galembó's book *Divine Inspiration*, Robert Ferris Thompson describes a photograph Galembó took of an altar to Oxum/Iemanjá (Oshun/Yemaya) at Cachoeira near Salvador in the northeast of Brazil (Thompson 1993, 5–8). After describing the various elements on the altar and the way they display the iyáloríxá's (Yr. & Pr. mother of the Orisha, a priestess) understanding of her deities, he describes a container, barely visible in the far back of the photograph, saying:

A last element, seemingly insignificant, actually harbors the central point of this altar. The metal container, emblazoned with an image of a sailing ship, contains actual river stones, emblematic of Ygmoja's immortal presence, which are immersed in water, gathered from the River Ògùn, her most proximate domain in the region of Ibadan (Thompson 1993, 8).

Although the whole of the iyawo embodies the sacred essence of the Orisha he received, it is his head, covered and hidden, that is believed to be their abode and sacred passageway from the invisible to the visible world. During the first three months of his initiatory period, when he is freshest and most vulnerable, the iyawo must keep his head covered 24 hours a day. Like Ygmoja’s stones the hard surface of the skull of the iyawo holds the
"immortal presence" of his guardian Orisha. Although iyawos generally refrain from touching or being touched by others, it is the head that is most protected. Only the initiating godparents may touch, handle, or caress the iyowo’s head, the "seat" of the sacred presence and home of the deity.

Within the Yoruba cosmology, the inner or spiritual head is considered to be the bearer of one’s destiny, the key to one’s success or failure in life and perhaps the most powerful force in a person’s life (Gbadejesin 1991, 48). This destiny can be described as a unique and personal deity, Ori. Ìdòwú says that Ori is the "very essence of personality" that it "rules, controls, and guides the ‘life’ and activities of the person" (Ìdòwú 1994, 170). He says that the Yoruba understanding of Ori conceives of it as a "semi-split entity" that is, it is not only the person’s personality but also a guardian or protector that is separate from the person himself (Ìdòwú 1994, 172). Ori is an object of worship throughout Yorubaland. The Yoruba understand that as the essence of personality it must be kept in good condition so that all may be well with the person; at the same time because it is a sacred force one must remain on good terms with the Ori in order to manifest the best destiny possible (Ìdòwú 1994, 172). The separation between the person and his Ori is expressed in the proverb, "as long as your Ori is with you you can succeed, but if your Ori, your destiny, is against you success is impossible."

Part of the way this destiny is realized is through the individual’s interaction with the guardian Orisha. A portion of the destiny chosen and encased in the Ori42 is a relationship with an Orisha whose stories and

42The mythology presents several conflicting accounts of how one acquires a destiny. These include 1) one chooses a ‘case’ and receives the unknown destiny contained in it, 2) one’s ori (personal Orisha) chooses the destiny for the person or 3) the developing person chooses a destiny called the ori (Gbadejesin 1991, 37–38). Regardless of the mechanics, the Yoruba understanding is that one is born with a destiny associated with the inner head and personified as the ori or personal Orisha.
mythology provides guidance as one moves through this life—the guardian Orisha. One’s guardian Orisha, chosen before birth but identifiable only through divination, provides a model for the working out of one’s destiny. Although one’s personality is seen to have a correspondence with the guardian Orisha and the archetypal element he or she represents, there is a continued awareness of the separation between the person and the Orisha.\textsuperscript{43} Within the Santería community, it is the guardian Orisha that is spoken of as one’s personal deity, however the deeper understanding of the Ori as a deity can be seen in certain rituals of blessing and propitiation of an individual’s head. When the iyawo is initiated, crowned with the power of the guardian Orisha, this personal deity and the life-force that is the guardian Orisha are inexorably combined within the head of the initiate. From that moment on, he is not only himself, he is also the embodiment of the Orisha who has been seated on his head.

Because the head is the point of entry of the Orisha it takes on additional sacred qualities. Iyawo’s must keep their heads covered for the first three months, but other santeros are often counseled to cover their heads either as a standard practice or as a precaution in particular circumstances. Iyawo’s cannot cut, dye or curl their hair because of its connection to this sacred site. Even after the iyawoage, the santero will be cautious of who he lets touch his head. Like the iyalarixá’s container of sacred stones, the head of the iyawo, and later of the santero, is a sacred vessel carrying the essence of the deity.

\textsuperscript{43}A person who forgets this, for example a child of Shango who acts too full of himself, will be reminded, “you are \textit{not} Shango”.
The Sacred Center

Eliade suggests that *sacred* and *profane* are two ways of being in the world, that certain cultures live in a sacralized cosmos that produces a type of behavior he calls *homo religiosus* (Eliade 1987, 14, 17–18). I have suggested in this chapter that the Santería initiation and the *iyawoage* are designed to produce a *homo religiosus* by constructing a completely sacralized cosmos with the initiate as the *axis mundi* that connects the invisible world of the Orisha to the visible world of mankind (Eliade 1987, 35). Like the sacred pole (*kauwa-auwa*) carried by the Achilpa of Australia, the *iyawo* transforms a portion of the profane world into sacred space by his presence. Like the *kauwa-auwa* and other sacred centers he is fashioned and anointed to serve as the center of a sacred universe and the passageway between the worlds. His fashioning and anointing is begun in the ritual space of the *igbodu* where he is stripped of his profane clothing, where his head is shaved, where the Orisha are installed not only into their icons and implements and hidden away in ceramic pots but into his very being.

We can see that the transformation has occurred when we observe the physical changes he has endured. We see additional marks of his new status in the silks and satins of the Middle Day marking him truly as the break in homogemonic profane space, as the passageway between heaven and earth, as the Center of the World (Eliade 1987, 37). Finally we can observe the development of a sacred cosmos as the initiate lives out the *iyawoage* and becomes a fully crowned santero. We have traced this development through the *iyawo’s* clothing, through his rules, and through the image he presents to us—both what is visible and what remains hidden. We have traced the
signifiers presented to us to discover some of the signifieds hidden behind a change of clothes and a set of rules.

**Costume as Communication System**

In *Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication through Clothing* Nathan Joseph looks at clothing as a system that allows various components of the society to communicate particular functions defined by roles, statuses, group memberships and institutions. Although clothing is not the only channel of such communication, he suggests that it "precedes and introduces other systems and provides a running commentary on them during interaction" (Joseph 1986, 4). Of particular interest to our discussion is his description of disguises and costumes as clothing metaphors. He suggests that when one adopts a particular clothing metaphor, that is, puts on the clothing of a person or group to which one does not belong, one can express various degrees of identification with that person or group. In the most extreme case, the impostor, the undercover policeman, or the intelligence agent attempts by disguise to make a complete identification with another group (Joseph 1986, 18).

While disguise, whether total or partial, is intended to fool the audience, costuming is an open proclamation of departures in behavior. The costume announces to all that the wearer is stepping out of character and into a new constellation of relationships. Joseph suggests that costumes create this impression of the extraordinary in a number of different ways. The costume may indicate a status that is inappropriate to the person wearing it. Joseph gives as an example of a man wearing women’s clothes, but I might also suggest servants wearing the clothes of the masters or conversely, masters wearing the clothes of their servants. Secondly, the costume may depict a
nonexistent status, for example in our society, Santa Claus, Disney characters or college mascots. And finally the costume may circumvent the necessity for usual behavior or practice. Carnival costumes seem to exemplify this characteristic (Joseph 1986, 124). Joseph suggests that costumes allow the wearers to operate outside of normal time and space, to suspend the rules regarding morality, sexuality and religion. Such suspensions may weaken the hold of those rules and awaken an awareness of their constructed nature (Joseph 1986, 189–90). While costumed, one is another being. Joseph suggests that this transformation opens one up to a state of liminality that suspends one in a no-man’s-land between the status that has been discarded and the one not yet assumed (Joseph 1986, 190).

Because the local Santería community is headed by a gay man and many gay men, and lesbians are among the leaders, questions of gender ambiguity are pushed to the foreground here in a way they might not be in other Santería communities. One of the founders of the local community, crowned to Eleggua the trickster (who is himself androgynous), often dresses in an ambiguous manner calling into question ideas of his own gender position. Problems of personal sexuality, sexual intolerance and its impact on religious practice are beyond the scope of this project, however we can profitably explore some of the chains of signifiers presented by these gender questions.

In Africa male possession priests often wear women’s clothes and often wear their hair in women’s styles (Bascom 1980, 10, Drewal 1992, 177, 185, 190, Matory 1994, 7, 171, passim). In the same way, women possessed by male

44See Afolabi’s on-line article “As Long as They Don’t Shove it Down Our Throats—The Regulation of First Class Oloshas to Second Class Status,” for an excellent exposition on the homophobia he has experienced in the Religion (Afolabi (Clayton D. Keck) September 21, 1997).
Orisha may dress in a typically male fashion (Drewal 1992, 177, 185, 190). While in the New World women also wear men's clothes when representing a male Orisha, American and Cuban men generally do not wear women's clothes in a ritual context even if they are representing a female Orisha.\textsuperscript{45}

There is little gender differentiation within Santería. What, then, are we to think of this inconsistency? Why are women and not men always dressed in the costume appropriate to their ruling Orisha. Do these questions have something to do with African cross-dressing? And if cross-dressing is meaningful in Africa, what has replaced it in the American context?

At first glance this discrepancy seems to point to a difference in viewpoints about gender and the appropriate dress for male and female religious figures. The use of cross-gendered metaphor as a religious statement has been explored by a variety of scholars. One of the most fruitful sources of this discussion has focused on the life of Sri Ramakrishna, the Indian mystic. The analysis of Ramakrishna's cross-dressing and other homoerotic behavior can most simply be described according to one of three formulas: 1) Ramakrishna is a "happy pervert" whose female clothing and other behavior are the result of gender confusion (Parsons, 1997, 357, 356 citing \textit{Ramakrishna Paramahamsa: A Psychological Review}, by Narasingha P. Sil); or 2) Ramakrishna's appropriation of female attire lets him develop his own "female element and allows him to experience his own 'femininity'" (Parsons, 1997, 357 citing \textit{The Analyst and the Mystic: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Religion and Mysticism} by Sudhir Kakar) or 3) Ramakrishna uses female clothing to reject a secular view of life "while emphasizing the ascendancy of lila (divine play) and the world as a 'mansion of fun'" (Parsons, \textsuperscript{45}Even men who may be cross-dressers in other circumstances don't generally cross dress as part of their religious practice (Personal communication, Changó Ladé, September 22, 1997).

However, cross-dressing in the African context is not the result of gender confusion, a search for femininity or an effort at spiritual play. A close look at African and Santería dressing and cross-dressing reveals not issues of sexuality and gender but of costume and disguise, power and the presentation of embodied deities. My research suggests that the Yoruba priest’s cross-dressing and the iyawo’s Middle Day clothing represent similar religious concepts and that rather than gender, these concepts revolve around representations of power and the relationship between different levels of beings. In this section I will suggest that the use of gendered clothing, hair-styles and other accessories in Africa are signifiers of a power relationship between the priest and his deity. Because of the abhorrence of cross-dressing (particularly male-to-female cross-dressing) in early modern Europe, I will suggest that in colonial Cuba cross-status dress rather than cross-gender dress was used to signify these same relationships.

**Santería Costumes and Sacred Garments**

The most obvious use of costuming in Santería involves the clothing worn by initiates when they are presenting or representing their Orisha. Whenever an Orisha takes possession of an priest during a sacred drumming ritual, he or she is immediately removed from the ritual space and dressed in elegant silks and satins before being presented back to the worshipping community. But the first time a priest wears such an outfit is during the initiation itself. As part of the preparation for the asiento, the godparent of the initiate commissions a gala outfit, the traje del medio (Sp. dress of the middle (day)), or consecration garment, to be worn on the Middle Day of the
initiation week. Often that same outfit is worn when the iyawo is presented to the sacred drums sometime during their iyawoaje. Any time a tambor (Sp. drum ritual) is dedicated to an Orisha a santero who is a known medium for that Orisha is asked to dance in the expectation that the Orisha will join the party through him.\textsuperscript{46} A costume, similar to the gala outfit, is commissioned in the expectation that the Orisha will manifest through this medium. If an Orisha takes possession of a person for whom no outfit has been commissioned, colored scarves, fans, horsetail whisks, oshés and other iconographic items are given to the priest-become-Orisha to serve as costuming.

Traditionally, female Santería initiates who embody male Orisha and male initiates wear a similar gala outfit: knickers and a silk shirt in the color of the Orisha. Women who embody a female Orisha wear a silk gown in the appropriate color. These costumes are in the style of colonial Spanish elite although they are decorated with cowry shells and beading as well as symbols of the Orisha the new priest is representing. The colors used as well as the decorative elements tell the community which Orisha has been given a new priest with this initiation. The iyawo wears this outfit on the second day of the initiation week, the so-called Middle Day. It is on this day that the new priest is presented to the larger community. Initiated priests and other followers of the Orisha as well as friends and family of the new priest are invited to a celebration that includes the presentation of the new priest, feasting, and in many cases, drumming. The iyawo wears this outfit from about noon until about six p.m.

\textsuperscript{46}The Orisha may choose to possess any of its initiates but inviting a known medium enhances the likelihood of the Orisha joining the party.
However before donning the consecration garment after lunch on the Middle Day, the iyawo wears a different outfit. Called the morning or breakfast suit (Sp. traje del desayuno), it consists of white pants and a gingham shirt in the color of the Orisha for the men and a plain gingham dress for the women. After the iyawo has changed into the consecration outfit the morning suit is hung next to his throne. It will be worn again at his first birthday party. (See Plate 13.) Like the consecration garment, this outfit too is custom-made for the iyawo. However, unlike the consecration outfit—which is constructed of silk and satin and may be decorated with cowries and other traditional design elements—the morning suit is plain with minimal ornamentation (Brown, 1989, 395).

Little has been said in the literature about these costumes. Everyone mentions the consecration garments in passing—their beauty is hard to ignore. Although half of Ysamur Flores-Peña and Roberta Evanchuk's book Santería Garments and Altars is devoted to the gala outfits, little is said about why they are worn and what they represent from a religious point of view beyond the suggestion that they are meant to associate the initiate with the Orisha he or she represents (Flores-Peña, 1994, 14). In his dissertation, David Hillary Brown suggests that the morning suit somehow represents the distinction between the private act of eating associated with breakfast and the public presentation of the iyawo as Orisha later in the day (Brown, 1989, 395). However, I would like to suggest that these costumes tell an explicit and detailed story of the new priest and his relationship to the Orisha.

Because issues of cross-dressing are significant in this story I will look first at both the European and African views of cross-gender dressing. Then I
will analyze how these views are embodied in the development of the Middle Day costumes.

**Gender Ambiguity: The European Perspective**

A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God. (Deut. 22:5)

This Biblical verse has lead to the explicit rule "you are expected to present yourself in public situations in a manner consistent with your anatomical sex, and such presentation is expected to be unambiguous" (Doctor 1988, 4). Although discussions of cross-dressing in late medieval and early modern Europe revolve around the force and interpretation of this verse from Deuteronomy, it (and the behavior it describes) was interpreted very differently when applied to men and women. Hotchkiss suggests that even in the early modern period female cross-dressing was glorified as a reaction against male domination, while male cross-dressing was seen as a disruption of cultural norms (Hotchkiss 1996, 4–5).47

Valerie Hotchkiss (Hotchkiss 1996) and Rudolf Dekker and Lotte C. van de Pol (Dekker and van de Pol 1986) show that female cross-dressing was a part of a deeply rooted tradition in medieval and early modern Europe. Although their studies cover different time periods (second through fifteenth century vs. seventeenth through the nineteenth century), sources (historical, pseudo-historical, hagiographic and literary vs. primarily judicial archives) and geographic locations (continent-wide vs. northern Europe) they arrive at

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47 The first chapter of Hotchkiss’s *Clothes Make the Man*, presents a thorough review of the literature of European transvestitism from pre-Classical to contemporary times. It is important to note that female-to-male behavior has engendered the preponderance of attention in historical studies while research on male-to-female behavior remains in the domain of psychology and social anthropology. Thus there is more information on female-to-male behavior in the more distant past and more information about male-to-female behavior in the present and recent past.
similar conclusions: "disguised women combine traditional feminine virtues with stereotypical male qualities of daring, strength and perseverance" (Dekker and van de Pol 1986, 74, Hotchkiss 1996, 4, see also 11–12).

Female soldiers and sailors were especially valorized in the early modern period. Of particular interest for this study is the story of Catalina de Erauso, the "nun-ensign" who renounced her femaleness, fought in the New World and became a legendary sexual rebel upon her return to Spain (Dekker and van de Pol 1986, 95–96, Merrim 1994). Dekker and van de Pol say that in the eighteenth century the stories of cross-dressing women like Erauso became very popular in fictional novels. Because reading was limited to the middle and upper classes, they suggest that the idea of female cross-dressing must have especially appealed to women of the middle and upper classes (Dekker and van de Pol 1986, 100). Although few of these women actually took this road, we might expect them to be sympathetic to those who did. I will suggest below that this acceptance of cross-dressing by women may have aided in the establishment of female cross-dressing within Santería.

The story of male transvestitism in medieval and early modern Europe, in addition to being less well documented than that of female transvestitism, presents a completely different attitude. Although a woman could raise her status in society by dressing and acting as a male, men who exhibited any sign of femininity were deprecated as weak and were in danger

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48 Although an in-depth analysis of cross-dressing literature and the Female Warrior genre is beyond the scope of this project, the reader might find the following works of interest: (Cohen 1997, Creighton and Norling 1996).

49 In addition Catalina de Erauso and other cases in which female cross-dressing is valorized, Hotchkiss described instances in which female transvestitism is severely criticized. She suggests that cross-dressed women who present little threat to traditional male domination are more palatable than those who attempt to overthrow the established order like the female pope (Hotchkiss 1996, 69–82) or women who use a male disguise to dominate men (Dekker and van de Pol 1986, 74, Hotchkiss 1996, 97f).
of losing their manhood (Bullough 1994, 34). Richard F. Doctor suggests that male cross-dressing continues to generate "feelings of revulsion or fear" because men dressed like women "violate one of the basic rules of our culture: Men should not present themselves as women" (Doctor 1988, 5–6). Like medieval women, medieval men were allowed to experiment with female dress and action only in very controlled environments. These included the theater, where women were generally not allowed to perform (Bullough 1994, 36), and in connection with festivals and carnivals when "the usual standards of behavior where laid aside" (Bullough 1994, 37). Outside of these situations male cross-dressing was perceived as extremely objectionable because the man was considered to be demeaned by such actions (Dekker and van de Pol 1986, 55). Hotchkiss suggests that although women in male dress appear frequently in medieval literature, male characters are more likely to disguise themselves within their own gender, that is a knight may disguise himself as a pilgrim or the king may go among his people as a beggar (Hotchkiss 1996, 10–11).

Male cross-dressers were considered to be lewd or comic (Bullough 1994, 37), in search of sexual conquests (Bullough 1994, 35, Dekker and van de Pol 1986, 43, Garber 1992, 218–221) or homosexual. During the Early Modern Period male homosexuality, the pecado nefando (Sp. abominable crime), was considered so dangerous that the accused were segregated within the Royal Prison in Seville so that their deviance wouldn’t infect others (Perry 1990, 123f).

50Bullough says however, that women’s roles were generally played not by men but by adolescent boys, “perhaps emphasizing that the boys were not yet men” (Bullough 1994, 36).

51Dekker and van de Pol say that although the use of the clothing of the opposite sex would be an obvious disguise for swindlers and other criminals, they found very few cases where men dressed as women for these purposes (Dekker and van de Pol 1986, 38).
Mary Elizabeth Perry suggests that although women in early modern Seville were believed to have "special power to heal, divine and foresee the future" there were two different responses to this perception of female power. Either it was said to demonstrate women's proximity to God or to come from the devil (Perry 1990, 8). Certainly women could be considered holy and spiritually endowed. However, spirituality was more often associated with manliness (Jantzen 1995, 51, Merrim 1994, 188). Thus a woman, whether or not she cross-dressed, who exhibited a "manly spirit" was considered more likely to be striving to "become something better, higher than she had been" (Dekker and van de Pol 1986, 74, Hotchkiss 1996, 125). Both women who lived a life of chastity within traditional convents and those who disguised their gender to live a life of a male monk promoted a vision of spirituality that was enhanced by a repudiation of female sexuality. Maleness was seen as a gender of empowerment while femaleness was associated with weakness and corruption (Hotchkiss 1996, 125). One became empowered by masculinity and disempowered by femininity.

**Gender Ambiguity: The African Perspective**

Looking to Africa we find a different set of responses to gender relationships and cross-dressing. Matory suggests that in Yoruba society the heterosexual dyad is not the most privileged site for the manufacture of hegemonic gender categories (Matory 1994, xif). Rather, he suggests, in certain African societies, including the empire of Oyo, center of the Yoruba people, the categories "man" and "woman" were constructed in such a way that
certain biological women had to be reclassified by ethnographers as men and at the same time some men were gendered female (Matory 1994, 2).

Ifi Amadiume’s book *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* describes the ways this might happen in her Igbo culture. Like Yoruba women Igbo daughters are considered male relative to the wives of the lineage (Amadiume 1987, 57, Bascom 1969, 49–54, Matory 1994, 105), however women also acquire male gender in two other ways: a woman could either buy another woman who is known as her “wife” or she could be designated a “male daughter” for a lineage without a male heir (or both—one does not preclude the other). A woman becomes a female husband when she pays money to acquire another woman. In the Igbo language this is called “buying a slave” (Ib. *igba ohu,* ) but the process is similar to the one a man uses to acquire a wife and, Amadiume tells us, the slave has the status and customary rights of a wife. At the same time the woman who has purchased the slave has the same rights as a man over her and is referred to as her husband. It is through this process, Amadiume suggests, that the richest of Igbo women obtain their wealth (Amadiume 1987, 46–47).

The institution of male daughters, on the other hand, solves a problem characteristic of patrilineal societies. Because the Igbo use a principle of unilateral descent for inheritance and succession, the only way a lineage head without a male heir can preserve

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52I am not suggesting that there are no gender-specific roles in these societies, merely that they are sometimes defined in an ambiguous fashion. See Drewal’s discussion of gender roles in *Yoruba Rituals* (Drewal 1992, 172-3172f).

53The Igbo are a west African tribal group that is also included with the Yoruba and other groups in the *nacion* Lucumi in Cuba (Brandon 1993, 55).

54Male daughters, however, are not generally wives. Since their children belong to their father’s house, they can not produce children for a husband’s lineage.

55Specifically in regard to her productive and reproductive acts.

56Charles Abbott suggests a similar Nigerian practice of “older rich women [who] paid the bride price for marriageable women in order to build up their lineage” (Abbott July 6, 1998).
his lineage property is to designate a daughter as his heir thereby making her a male in status and authority (Amadiume 1987, 32). Such a male daughter safeguards her father’s obi (Ib. line of descent) and the property associated with it (Amadiume 1987, 34).

Although these women are gendered male within their societies, they do not seem to change to male attire. Unlike the medieval and early modern Europeans who had to appropriate a complete male disguise to be accorded male status, these women could partake in male status roles without engaging in any disguise or costuming. In addition, these gender roles were flexible. Daughters of the lineage, for example, although gendered male relative to the wives who married into their lineage households maintained their own female gender relative to the elders of their own households and the various members of the households they were married into. Rather than a single inflexible gender, their gender was always determined in relationship to those with whom they were associated.\(^{57}\)

Looking at the Yoruba, we find that during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (before the 1840’s) the head of the Oyo empire was represented by a group of “wives” that included not only the royal wives (Yr. ayaba) but also transvestite ministers and representatives, called ilari. While the secluded royal wives, who included the spouses of both the reigning king and his predecessors, were entrusted with administrative functions, the ilari, who declared themselves to also be the ‘wives of the king’ although they were both male or female, served as diplomatic observers, toll collectors, messengers, cavaliers, royal guards and priests (Johnson 1960 (1921). 60–63,

\(^{57}\)It must also be noted that all of the members in the household would be gendered female relative to the master of the household regardless of whether the master was a man or a woman.
Male ilarí used women’s clothing and hair styles to project an image of their social status or position (Joseph 1986, 18). That is, partial costuming was used to represent the status of the ilarí as the “wife” of the king. Similarly, male possession priests used women’s clothing and hair styles to emphasize their position as “wife” of the Orisha. Although both Africans and Europeans viewed men as belonging to a higher and more powerful order, when we look at their attitudes toward cross-dressing we find that they expressed these beliefs in very different ways. Both the ilarí and possession priests (male and female) enhance their social status and position within the society when they take on their new social role and change to female dress. Like a woman married to a powerful man, their new position is a reflection of the power and position of the person to whom they have dedicated themselves. This is expressed in their society by designating them as “wives” and can be explored in terms of prestige structures.

**Prestige Structures**

Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead suggest that prestige structures shape the ways a society evaluates individuals and that the social organization of prestige directly affects cultural notions of gender and sexuality. The fact that the gender system is a prestige structure means that the same concepts used to distinguish men and women in social worth are used to distinguish other social types as well as individuals within the same gender. This also means that prestige positions outside of the gender realm

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58 Lawal shows an Òṣùn priest at Òṣùn festival in Òṣogbo 1972 wearing a female hairdo (agògò style) with a baby sash (òjà) on his waist (Lawal 1996, 27, figure 1.20). Drewal shows male Shango priests “with their hair plaited in a female style” and a priest of Oya dressed as a woman with plaited hair flanked by his two wives (Drewal 1992, fig. 10.8 and 10.12). Matory shows various priests wearing female attire and hair styles (Matory 1994, Fig. 13, 14, 16).
are often rendered in gendered terms (Ortner and Whitehead 1981, 16–17). In general prestige structures work according to this model in example cases. However, there are interesting exceptions.

In both Yoruba and Igbo societies men in general are perceived to have higher prestige than women. For example, they control the lineages and own the family compounds; they inherit the most valuable property, the ancestral home, and the land associated with it; they generally control the movement of women through brideprice and descent rules. Using Ortner and Whitehead’s theory we would expect that male daughters and female husbands along with all the other members of a lineage who are defined as “men” would have a higher place on the prestige hierarchy then those defined as “women”. Yet ilarí and possession priests also gain status when they become the brides of others. How, then, can an individual man achieve a higher status by taking on a gender role normally associated with women?

The language usage suggested by Bascom, Matory and Amadiume suggest that although men generally have more prestige than women, women (and men) associated with certain highly placed men may have a higher status than other men in the hierarchy. Thus, in some cases, taking on a wifely gender can increase a man’s prestige. This is especially true for ilarí and possession priests. In these cases the man “marries up,” he gains in status because his gender change also entails a role change, he becomes the representative of either the king or a deity. Although his status becomes dependent upon his relationship with his “husband,” as the embodied

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59 Generally it appears that men in these societies “marry down” that is they marry women who are younger and have a lower prestige than themselves (Matory 1994).
representative of a powerful being he gains not only status but the corresponding power.\textsuperscript{60}

These ideas come into clearer focus when we realize that the term we are translating as "husband" (Yr. \textit{oko}) could also be translated "master". Thus it appears that a set of terms we may consider to be indicators of gender are actually indicators of power; these terms are constructed not according to a sexual model but rather to describe a form of power relationships in which the "husband" or "master" asserts certain types of authority over the subordinates who are called "wife." Because these are power rather than gender relationships the biological sex of each person (whether human, king or deity) has no connection to his or her place in the relationship such that one could be both husband and wife to different groups of people at the same time and one could secure progeny regardless of one's gendered role.\textsuperscript{61}

One of the ways these concepts were expressed in African society is the appropriation by the male "wife" of an Orisha of items of female dress. Thus we find male priests dressing as women, wearing their hair in female styles. This cross-dressing among African possession priests should not be seen as an expression of gender confusion, or as a desire to develop a "feminine" identity or even as an expression of spiritual play but as a signifier of the power relationships between the priest and his deity as well as that between

\textsuperscript{60}This is not to suggest that the Yoruba did not engage in the social construction of gender along sexual lines. They have detailed descriptions, based on sexual characteristics, of what characterizes one as male or female. At the same time they "devote a great deal of attention to transforming the amorphous, asexual, and uncivilized child into the fully human adult, assuming that it doesn't just happen" (Herbert 1993, 224-25).

\textsuperscript{61}Drewal suggests that the fact that the Yoruba shift so easily between gender roles is "in and of itself significant." She suggests that this is because of the emphasis the Yoruba place upon procreation and further suggests that this explains the absence of homosexuality "as a way of life" among the Yoruba (Drewal 1992, 186). However, it must be remembered that homosexuality does not necessarily preclude procreation as any number of gay and lesbian parents will attest.
the priest and other worshippers of that deity. On the one hand, the priest is the representative of a powerful being; on the other hand the priest is the servant to both the deity and the community, maintaining the sacred shrines and altars, feeding and caring for the Orisha, interceding with them for the community. Thus Yoruba marriage customs provided a nuanced metaphor of power relationships that was used in both political and religious contexts.

**Marriage as Metaphor: The Colonial Perspective**

As we have seen, among Europeans, including the early Spanish colonists, cross-dressing, particularly the appropriation of women’s clothing by men was an abomination. And in colonial Cuba, the slaves and *gente de color* who reconstructed the religion were not in a position to go against centuries of European ideas about cross-dressing, particularly cross-dressing by men. In addition, they may not have found marriage customs to have formed as good a metaphor for images of powerful relationships in the New World as they had been in Africa.

A good source to understand nineteenth century Cuban marriage customs is *Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth-Century Cuba* by Verena Martinez-Alier. According to her survey of nineteenth century Cuban marriage customs, concubinage rather than marriage seems to be the norm among the non-white Cuban population (Martinez-Alier 1974, 117). She

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62 Since the anthropologists who are used for this African material were not surprised to find female possession priests dressed as women or men wearing men’s clothes and carrying tools associated with males while impersonating male Orisha we can only assume these generalizations apply when the sex of the priest and Orisha match.

63 Kamen suggests that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Spanish inquisitors found a wide-spread belief that “simple fornication,” that is voluntary intercourse between two unmarried adults, “was not wrong if it broke no rules. By extension, concubinage was not wrong, nor was it wrong for an unmarried adult to have sex with a prostitute” (Kamen 1997, 265). Greenleaf suggests “Given the rapid growth of a mestizo population in New Spain by the 1560s, it is apparent that the clergy, while not condoning simple fornication, were permissive in their views” (Greenleaf 1969, 132-33). Although Kamen’s and Greenleaf’s data doesn’t extend into
suggests that several sociological factors worked against the formation of marriages among black, mulatto and other mixed-race and mixed-blood Cubans.\textsuperscript{64} Throughout the nineteenth century there were always more white men than white women;\textsuperscript{65} at the same time there were more freed mixed-race women than similarly designated men. This meant that a large number of white men could look to the community of mixed-race women for various types of sexual unions (57–62). While there were more black men than women, many of these were enslaved. Unless the free partner could buy and free his or her enslaved spouse the marriage would be subject to the whims of a third party. Since marriage across color and status lines were seen as degrading to the “whiter” or higher status participant mixed-race women seemed to prefer consensual liaisons to lighter and higher-class males over marriage to those similar to or darker than themselves. In addition, marriages across color and class lines required a special license while

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\item From the time of the Reconquest purity of blood was a concern among Spaniards. \textit{Limpieza de sangre} (Sp. purity of blood) began as a way of distinguishing between those whose ancestors had ‘always’ been Christians and those whose ancestors had been Jewish, Muslim or who had been disciplined by the Inquisition for some offense. Laws and regulations attempted to limit the participation in the highest levels of society to honorable Old Christians, those with “pure” blood. These laws were still enforceable into the nineteenth century (Kamen 1997, 242). In Cuba impurity of blood was extended to mean “bad race”, that is, African origin and slavery status in either the present or previous generations (Martinez-Alier 1974, 16-17). Thus there developed a complex social hierarchy based on the place of one’s birth (Europe, Africa, Cuba) and the status of one’s parents (slave or free in the case of people of African heritage). \textit{Peninsulares} (Spaniards born in Europe) held a higher status than \textit{criollos} (those born on the island); whites higher than Moors, Jews, \textit{conversos} (new converts), Indians or Africans; \textit{pardos} (mulattos) higher than \textit{morenos} (Negroes); the free born higher than the enslaved. Legally a child’s status was traced bilaterally, through both parents, back several generations (Martinez-Alier 1974, 15–18). According to Martinez-Alier, the non-white population endeavored to advance their families by “whitening” themselves through liaisons with lighter, if not white, partners. At the same time marriages between social unequals were often contested by the family of the higher status partner, since the off-spring of such unions were classified according to the status of the racially inferior partner (Martinez-Alier 1974, 17–19).
\item For example, there were 114 white men in 1827, 127 in 1846 and 150 in 1862 for every 100 white women.
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consensual relationships were unregulated. Although these consensual unions were not necessarily brief (Martínez-Alier tells of one case lasting 40 years (66)), there was no assurance that the woman wouldn’t be abandoned if the man could find a spouse in his own racial and social group (127). Thus the strong and multifaceted symbol presented by the African marriage customs was lost in the social world of colonial Cuba.

**Clothing as Power**

However other emblems of power and subjectivity were available in the colonial environment to express relationships between more and less powerful “persons”. The most obvious of these in Cuba was the relationship between the colonial masters and the black, mulatto and creole members of society. The white Spanish upper classes were the royalty of the island. Whether born in Cuba or Spain generally these were the people who controlled not only the society but also the lives of the majority of the other inhabitants of the island. Most, if not all, non-white Cubans stood in a subordinate position to these white Cubans. Even shop owners and artisans who may have servants and apprentices of their own were subordinate to their upper class patrons and customers. Thus we should not be surprised to find the appropriation of the style of clothing worn by the white ruling class of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to represent the presence of powerful spiritual beings (Brown 1989, 395–96, Flores-Peña and Evanchuk 1994, 14).66 Instead of an African image of power symbolized by the husband/wife dyad, a white colonial metaphor was chosen. Thus we find

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66Brown suggests that the colonial styles used in the religion are based on a nineteenth century Spanish revival of seventeenth and eighteenth century styles (Brown 1989, plate 15–18).
whenever a person represents an Orisha he or she is dressed in a colonial Spanish costume in the finest materials available.

Although the visual metaphor encoded in clothing changed radically when the religious ideas of the Yoruba were reconstructed in Cuba the signified behind the signifiers remained the same. The clothing said here is a person who represents a powerful being; while wearing this set of garments the priest is to be worshipped as though he was the Orisha he represents; satin and lace, beads and other decorative elements speak to the elegance of the Orisha whose representative stands before you; his European-style crown further marks him as a royal presence. This costume, however, is a hybridized statement. While the cut and style of the clothing follows the Spanish model, it also uses many African design elements. Cowries, the money of West Africa, and beads, the symbol of royalty among the Yoruba, also tells those who participate in a Yoruba symbolic system that this is a royal personage. The color of the costumes and other symbols particular to the various Orisha highlight exactly which Orisha is being presented. 67

This new visual metaphor presented some problems not found in the African situation, however. When an African priest presented himself as the wife of a royal or sacred figure, the audience knew that he was both powerful as the representative of a powerful being and subordinate to both the Orisha and the community being served. The priest could easily slip between the roles of embodied Orisha, servant to the sacred, and ordinary person. In Joseph’s terms, these are partial or mixed disguises. A priest may wear his hair in a woman’s style while continuing to wear men’s clothes, or vice versa

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67Although the warrior Orisha (Eleggua, Ogun and Ochosi) are not presented as royalty, in these cases European images (of the guard/farmer, soldier and hunter respectively) have also supplanted African ones.
he might wear women's clothes while maintaining a man's hair style. Or he may dress and style his hair as if he was a woman, but at the same time maintain a household with one or more wives of his own. These clothing options are not meant to be complete disguises and no one in the community is fooled that this priest is "really" a woman. Instead his clothing is meant to be signs to the community of the priest's position and role in the community as both servant of his Orisha-husband and mediator between the community and the deity. At the same time, a female priest could partially dress as her Orisha-husband. Carrying the cutlass of Ogun was enough to mark her as Ogun's spokesman—and if she was under possession, as Ogun himself. Thus we find female possession priests not only wearing men's clothing but also carrying the tools associated with that Orisha (Drewal 1989, 218).

Within the colonial environment one's status was more firmly fixed by the society than appears to be the case in Africa. One was male or female; white or black, or one of the many named mixtures; although one could attempt to better one's social position, one generally could only rise within certain limits so that the status of one's parents and grandparents limited one's own status. Moving between status roles was difficult but not impossible. I would suggest that two different types of clothing were required to inform both priests and observers about the complementary roles of the priest. Because the Orisha should be associated with the most powerful members of society, when one was representing the Orisha one should dress in the costume of the most powerful elite. Here we find our hybridized royal costume. The gala outfit and the corresponding costumes for dance rituals are the finest, richest, most spectacular outfits possible. Their majestic style tells all observers, both Spanish and African, that this is an important personage.
More is going on than just a statement of style, every element of these outfits points to the royalty of the Orisha represented. But these costumes must be reserved for those times when one is actually embodying the Orisha. This is particularly obvious at dance rituals. Not until the priest is completely possessed and the Orisha has fully joined the party is he taken and dressed in the outfit created for the occasion. If the Orisha chooses not to attend, or if he chooses a different medium, the costume may remain hidden, unworn and unused.68

The morning outfit, on the other hand, speaks to both the initiate, and his audience, of his position vis-à-vis his deity and the rest of the community. Rather then fine satin, this outfit is common gingham reminiscent of the clothing a slave might wear. Its only decorative elements is the use of the Orisha’s color, perhaps a ruffled sleeve or hem and simple lace or rick-rack. Wearing this outfit the iyawo is not the Orisha but of his household. He is the representative, the servant of the deity. He may embody the deity during possession events, but this outfit speaks to him in the metaphor of service and respect.

The morning suit is first worn on the morning of the Middle Day, the day after the initiation event, the day the new priest is presented to the larger community. Only his attendants normally see him wear it but when they hang it on the throne behind him during the afternoon presentation it serves as a notice to the community that he did wear it. If the consecration garment transfigures the iyawo into the Orisha (Flores-Peña, 1994, 14) the morning suit

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68 If a different medium is chosen he or she may wear as much of the commissioned costume as possible. However, since the costume was sewn for a particular person it may or may not fit a different individual.
presents him in the dress of a servant or house slave and reminds him of his "place" within the community—as servant and captive of that same Orisha.

The second time he wears the morning suit is on the occasion of his first religious birthday, the first anniversary of his initiation as a priest. As part of this celebration, the priest builds the elaborate birthday throne for his Orisha. On that day, the Orisha themselves are dressed in satins and silks and again, their servant, the new priest is dressed in the costume of servitude, the morning suit. Throughout their ritual lives priests wear may gingham shirts, blouses or skirts to ritual and celebratory events but the only time they are allowed to don outfits similar to the gala outfit is if they are possessed by the Orisha during a ritual drumming. The priest is always the servant of the Orisha, but he only is allowed to dress as the Orisha during possession trance—when his consciousness is absent and the Orisha has invaded his body.

**Clothing as Metaphor**

I have suggested that clothing can work as a metaphoric device to disclose information about the relationships between priests and their deities as well as between priests and the rest of the worshipping community. In Africa these relationships are presented in terms of a gender metaphor based on the relationships between husbands and wives. Because there is a discontinuity between the genders "husband/wife" and the sex of the person fulfilling the gender role it was possible, in Africa, to appropriate the clothing and other attributes of either gender without becoming a "gender outlaw". However Europeans viewed gender as intimately tied to sex so that

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69 Many santeros will also wear the morning suit (or a similar gingham outfit) at subsequent birthday celebrations (Flores-Peña and Evanchuk 1994, 67. Plate 37 is the only example I have found in the literature).
"man/woman," "male/female" and "husband/wife" were closely connected concepts. This meant that appropriating the dress or attributes of a gender role not associated with one's sex was forbidden by both civil and religious authorities. As we have seen this negative response to cross-dressing was stronger in the case of men appropriating the dress of women. Women who choose manly dress or attributes were often seen as choosing to deny their own sex in the pursuit of a higher goal. But even then they were not free to move between roles.

These two views came into conflict in the reconstruction of African religious systems in colonial Cuba. Whereas in Africa one could use clothing and attributes to make a statement about one's relationship to another powerful person, in Cuba men could not generally appropriate the clothing and attributes of women without calling their masculinity into question. As a consequence another visual metaphor needed to be adopted. Thus the African Orisha began to wear the clothing of the Spanish elite.

When African men wear women's clothes or hair styles they are making a statement about their position in the hierarchy of their cult and town. As the "brides" of the Orisha they serve both the deities and the town. By bringing the Orisha into presence they provide guidance to individuals and groups in their community. By maintaining the sacred spaces devoted to their deities they perform service to those same deities. Wives are responsible for those types of activities of care-taking and service. By donning the clothing of those whose role includes those activities, cross-dressing priests silently proclaim their acceptance of those role activities in conjunction with the sacred communities.
When the religions of Africa were reconstructed in Cuba a different metaphor was required for this aspect of the priest’s role. I would suggest that the morning outfit, worn before donning the elegant gala outfit and again in conjunction with the first birthday celebration, functions to highlight the priest’s role in serving the community and his deities. As a counterbalance to the dress of the elite, the morning dress reminds the new priest of the slaves who preserved the religion while materially humbling him.

And the conversation continues. Because of the purported egalitarianism of the United States, use of a master/servant metaphor is often unwelcome. Many Americans have a strong negative reaction to the traditional outfit. Dressing the representative of an African deity in the clothing of white Caribbean slave owners not only looks silly but is reminiscent of the old minstrel shows in which white performers blacked their faces to sing Negro folk songs. In their book Flores and Evanchuk both talk about a gala outfit designed by Flores for a white American initiate. Flores, a Puerto Rican with African ancestry living in Los Angeles, describes the traditional gala outfit in this case as “a manifestation of the ‘minstrel dilemma’ at its worst: a white man wearing the clothing of a black man imitating the clothing of a white man!” Evanchuk describes how he blended African and western fashions with the traditional outfit to create a uniquely styled garment (Flores-Peña, 1994, 35). Although I haven’t found similar objection raised in the local community I suspect that many African-American (and perhaps white) initiates share Flores-Peña’s objections.70

70 Comparisons of photographs of iyawos in Mason’s “Yorùbá Beadwork in the Americas” to the outfits in Santería Garments and Altars show another solution to this dilemma. Mason, who is African American, shows examples of iyawos wearing extravagantly beaded African-style crowns with beaded veils and relatively simple outfits that are neither identifiably west African nor colonial Spanish (Mason 1997, plate 182, 183, 261).
In Flores' own description of this garment he doesn't voice this objection (Flores-Peña and Evanchuk 1994, 18–19) and instead speaks of attempting to design a garment for a male initiate of a female Orisha. Oshun is “beautiful,” “seductive,” “the epitome of sweetness,” and “a learned woman” (18). He suggests that these were the issues governing his design decisions. He describes designing an outfit to include a traditional Yoruba abada in gold lamé to fit over a rather traditional shirt and long and loose pants (18–19). These two accounts provide an insight of how the conflict between African and European metaphors are continuing to be negotiated by initiating priests. When the initiate is described as white, issues of using the colonial Spanish style may be foregrounded and the designer may try to create a new metaphor using elements from a variety of cultures; when the initiate is identified as a male embodying a female Orisha this “poses” as Flores suggests, “an interesting problem in composition and style” (18). Since Santería men do not wear female clothing certain possibilities open in the African context are closed here. Through his use of the abada and loose-fitting pants Flores creates a more effeminate outfit than usually worn by initiates. This outfit forms a creative negotiation of both the racial and gender elements found in the traditional garments.

Conclusions

Kenneth Gergen suggests that because modern technologies, particularly transportation (railroad, automobile, aircraft), communications

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71 As himself a male priest of a female Orisha (Oshun) Flores may be particularly sensitive to the design issues of dressing a man as a female Orisha.

72 I have not found the sorts of objections raised by Flores within the Houston Santería community. Whether other North Americans will see traditional outfits as manifesting the "minstrel dilemma" and to what extent they will develop a new vocabulary to express their own view of the Orisha/priest relationship awaits time and additional research.
(public postal service, telephone), entertainment (radio, motion picture, print, television, VCR) and electronics (computers, copy machines, modems, cellular phone) (Gergen 1991, 50–60) allow us an expanded range and variety of relationships, we tend to acquire a population of selves that are multiple and disparate potentials for actualization. These relationships spread over time and space and allow us to experiment with different personae such that we can create a set of selves. Because each “self” is constructed out of our knowledge of others, what they are like and how they act, each is found to be absurd, shallow, limited or flawed by the on-looking audience of the interior (68–73). Thus, he suggests, when one peels the onion of his own personae he discovers that there is no “real” self there, that the “object of understanding has been absorbed into the world of representations” (122). Although Buddhist meditation theory considers this discovery of the constructed nature of the self one of the first steps along the path to enlightenment (Klein 1986, 25f, 139,170–71, 204–5 passim, Lati 1986, 25, McDonald 1990, 58–62, Sopa and Kopkins 189, Chapter 5), many others find this fragmentation provokes anxiety and dread (Gergen 1991, 272, f. 47).

The Santería initiation experience calls unitary concepts of self into question in a way different from both the Gergen analysis and Buddhist theory. Although participants may speak as though there is a self being initiated they act as though there are a variety of selves present and available to interact with the community. We will conclude this chapter by looking at the ways in which the signs generated by the initiation, the iyawoage and the on-going life of the santero express a multiplicity of selves.

West African psychological tradition explains the vicissitudes of the current life as the working out of a particular destiny chosen by one before
birth. This destiny is personified on one’s *ori* (Yr. head), which can be described as a personal deity. Also associated with one’s destiny is the Orisha who has chosen to accompany one on this life’s journey. Initiation both accentuates and negates differences between the self, the *ori* and the guardian Orisha. After initiation the *iyawo* is expected to be able to move between the expression of his own personality and that of the Orisha seated on his head. This movement is not framed as a role one assumes or a form of self-expression but rather the willingness to allow a superior being temporary access to one’s physicality. Embodied Orisha preach, teach, heal, comfort, chastise and bless the community as a whole and individuals and small groups directly. Some Orisha enjoy their temporary embodiment eating, drinking, dancing and playing with their devotees. Often the horse, the medium, returns to find his body bruised and his clothes soiled. As we say in Texas, he or she has been “rode hard and put up wet.” Like a well-trained horse, the medium gives control over to the possessing Orisha.  

Even if the Orisha is not expressed in a possession event, it is believed to be always present in the body (literally the blood) of the priest-initiate. Rather than being selfless, the initiate is believed to be the vehicle for a variety of beings. That these beings possess different sex and gender attributes as well as different hierarchical relationships are among the signs we have been exploring in this chapters. However, at a deeper level, these

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73During the possession event an individual is selected as the attendant to the embodied Orisha. He or she not only serves the Orisha but is also responsible for protecting the body of the medium from injury. Because the medium loses consciousness during the possession event, the attendant and the community as a whole must take responsibility for the well-being of the medium’s body during this time.  

74In addition to the “self”, the Ori and the Orisha, spiritist mediums are believed to be capable of embodying a variety of spirits who can affect their behavior under different circumstances.
ideas present a way of responding to Gergen's concerns about a multiplicity of selves as a spiritual experience.

In her *Saints and Postmodernism* Edith Wyschogrod offers up insights into the saintly body that may help us think about the Santería priesthood. She suggests, first of all, that saintly corporeality is a "conduit between the Other and ordinary existence" (Wyschogrod 1990, 89). The saintly sensorium makes the saint "open or vulnerable to the Other" in a unique and unmediated fashion. "The saint is one who is totally at the disposal of the Other and lives this exposure as response to the Other by stripping the self of its egoity or formal unity." She says that the saint thus bestows a power on the Other as commanding him or her. In her analysis this "denuding of the self" leaves the saint "vulnerable to the Other of lack and destitution" (98). If we substitute "iyawo" for "saint" and "Orisha" for "Other" in Wyschogrod's description of the saintly sensorium, we create a description of the iyawo experience that concludes in vulnerability not to an Other of lack and destitution but to an overwhelmingly powerful Other. This openness requires that the iyawo separate "the self from itself" in order to be penetrated by the Other that can only be effected outside of ordinary existence. Only through the vulnerability of the iyawo-saint can the Orisha-Other be manifested in the embodied world.

Wyschogrod suggests that the saintly body is a neuter. Drawing on the work of Levinas and Blanchot she suggests that, like Heidegger's Dasein, the saintly body is "sexless not because it is a nullity, an indifferently empty being, but because it is something prior to sexual differentiation" (111 quoting Heidegger's *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, 137). On Wyschogrod's reading the "ungenderedness" of saintly bodies is required in order to
dismantle egoity and make a place for the Other (89). Coupled with Turner’s suggestion that the “undifferentiated character of liminality is reflected in...the absence of marked sexual polarity” (Turner 1969, 104) we might suggest that the gender ambiguity surrounding the iyawo is the result of the neutrality of the saintly body. Only a sensorium “prior to sexual differentiation” is capable of making a space for the full manifestation of the Other. However we must be careful here. Within Santería there is no tradition of the type of ascetic Wyschogrod finds in the stories of the saints. Although some iyawos are expected to practice sexual continence, there is no expectation that the iyawo will remain celibate. Rather they return to a fully rounded human life that includes family relationships, work and school. They marry, have children, work and play while continuing to represent the Orisha and remaining open to possession trance.

Wyschogrod suggests that the “sexual dislocation and decentering” caused by the saintly neuter are seen as “startling dissonances or counter discourses within conventional logocentric frameworks” (Wyschogrod 1990, 115). Saintly neutrality calls all conventional ideas and ideals of sexuality into question so that conventional categories of gender and sexuality can no longer be used in analyzing saintly behavior. Her retelling of the tale of Saint Marina/us asks the same sorts of questions we encountered in our analysis of the relationship between the iyawo and the Orisha. She uses this story to suggest that no sexual identity can be inscribed on the saintly body because it “accommodates all sexual identities...and none” and the love of the Other requires the totality of the saintly body (115–116) leaving no remnant for saintly sexuality. After initiation the body of the santero may express a range of identities and relationships including both gendered and non-gendered
roles. Like the saintly body the priestly body must accommodate the totality of the Other.

Wyschogrod suggests that saintly neutrality also identifies passivity and nonwork (Wyschogrod 1990, 89). The “distinctive mark of saintly work” is its “self-renouncing character” so that self-effacement is the “mark or trace of saintly labor” (Wyschogrod 1990, 96). A religious vocation that includes the possibility for full trance-possession is characterized by the renunciation of egoity and self-effacement. Each candidate for Santería initiation must be willing to endure such a level of self-renunciation. Although any particular iyawo may not be required to endure possession by the Orisha, each one must be prepared for that possibility. Possession is probably the most saintly of labors since any meaning or benefit ascribed to the episode is provided to the witnessing community, not to the target of the possession event himself.

Santería initiation implies a radical re-construction of the self. Unlike the saintly life, the initiate’s life en santo involves a constant possibility of movements between ego-states that involves a neutral body on which gender functions as a continual sign of the relationships between the person and the sacred Other as well as between the Other and the community. After the liminal period of the iyawoage the santero must be able to move between child, priest, spouse, and embodiment of the Orisha while maintaining a presence in the secular world.

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75If two or more Orisha are embodied during a possession event, as is often the case, their interaction is framed and shaped by their mythological narratives including their gendered relationships.
Chapter 6: Conclusions

God made us and commanded us to make the pety gods (sic) and worship them, and send them with sacrifices to him. We do not violate God's laws but we keep them daily.\(^1\)

I have reserved this chapter to talk about certain portions of this work that transcend the particular discussions that make up the preceding chapters. These issues include the place of Spanish elements, particularly Spanish terminology in the religion as a whole, the place of Catholic iconography and images in the religious practice of the communities I observed, and the ways in which a Santería altar display functions as a site of memory.

Orishas and Saints

Throughout this project we have been concerned with problems of the translation of concepts from one cultural milieu to another. African ideas of the transcendent embodied in altar displays are reformulated in the new world using Spanish and Catholic elements to valorize the deities. Forces found in local weather and geography are re-defined half a world away. Language, too, was changed. It was important for Africans, particularly those living in the city, to be able to express their ideas in the language of this new

\(^1\)(McKenzie 1997, 326).
culture in which they found themselves. As they reconstituted their indigenous religion they creolized their language usage. Thus we find both hybridization and heteroglossia. On the one hand they kept their ancestral language for usage in deep ritual. Thus the songs, prayers and religious terminology continued in a creolized form of the Yoruba language called Lucumi. On the other hand, it would have been important to be able to express some of their religious concepts in the common language of their surroundings, that is Spanish. In addition, when it became necessary one could hide forbidden religious discussions behind common words and phrases by using Spanish terminology to describe Yoruba concepts (a sophisticated form of hybridization).

Translation is always difficult. Willard V. Quine approaches his philosophical analysis of meaning and translation by suggesting the way a ‘bush’ linguist might penetrate a completely alien language (Quine 1959, 148). In his famous gavagai example he suggests that when a rabbit scurries by and the native informant says “gavagai” the linguist will note “rabbit” or “lo, a rabbit” as the tentative translation (148). However, as he goes on to suggest, gavagai may apply “not to rabbits after all, but mere stages, or brief temporal segments, of rabbits...[o]r perhaps...all and sundry undetached parts of rabbits...” (153). Thus our linguist is left with the need for further exploration with the informant. My research has suggested that further exploration is also needed in respect to several crucial terms used in Santería, specifically the Spanish words “santo,” “santero” and “Santería” itself. These terms are used not only in the literature, but also among practitioners, to connect the worship of African deities with the veneration of Catholic saints. “Santo” is normally translated “saint” and is said to refer to the Catholic saints that have been associated with the various Orisha; “santero” is not normally translated
but is assumed to refer to a priest, a practitioner of the religion; “Santería” is translated “the way of the saints” and refers to the religion itself.

But casual conversations with practitioners raises questions about these assumptions. Santo in Spanish carries connotations beyond the facile translation of saint, that is, a holy person canonized by the Catholic church. ‘Santo’ is first of all an adjective meaning “holy, sacred, consecrated.” In respect to a person it means ‘saintly’ or ‘blessed’ (Smith 1996, 658). Thus, Holy Week is Semana Santa, Holy Office (the instrument of the Inquisition) is Santo Oficio, Holy Ghost/Spirit is Espíritu Santo, etc. As a noun it is translated as “saint” and can be used both as a common and a proper noun, that is as the designator of a “holy or esteemed person” or part of the name of a particular person, Santa Barbara (St. Barbara) for example. But it is the connotation of holy and sacred rather than any particular connection with Catholic personages that may have enticed the early Afro-Cubans to call their sacred beings ‘santos’ so that ‘Orisha’ and ‘santo’ are merely two terms, Yoruba and Spanish, for the same religious concept. Conversations with santeros seem to validate this suggestion. They switch between the two forms indiscriminately—sometimes in mid-sentence.

While attempting to establish the place of statues of Catholic saints on the domestic altars of practitioners in New York City I found that I had to be very careful in framing my questions. If I said “How many saints do you have on your throne/in your house/etc.?” santeros invariably started naming their Orisha. I had to specifically say “statues of Catholic saints” to get information about the saints themselves. In Houston, in a discussion with my madrina, I pointed to an Orisha altar saying “see, there are no saints there.” She looked at me in complete amazement. While I meant ‘statues of Catholic saints’, she heard ‘Orisha’ and couldn’t understand how I could say such a thing! Within
the Santería context saint, santo, and Orisha are merely three signifiers whose signified is a Yoruba deity, not any European personage. I would suggest that practitioners continue to confound researchers by their usage of these terms and researchers confuse practitioners by attempting to make distinctions that do not actually exist.\(^2\) I do not mean to suggest that practitioners cannot distinguish between Catholic saints and the Orisha, merely that many of these conversations reported in the literature seem to be based on a dichotomy not recognized by practitioners.

Although the most common translation of Santería is “the way of the saints” (Murphy 1993, 2) there are a variety of reasons for disputing this. First of all, one can make a list of parallel terms, that is nouns ending in ‘-ría’ that do not mean “way of the...”: abacería means grocery store, the place to buy groceries; carnicería is butcher shop, the place to buy meat (carne); frutería is fruit shop, the place to buy fruit; panadería is bakery, the place to buy bread (pan); zapatería is shoe store, the place to buy shoes (zapatos). Smith confirms our suspicions when he translates Santería as a “shop selling religious images, prints, etc.” (Smith 1996, 658).\(^3\) So we might suggest that Santería is the place one went to get ‘saints’, that is the Orisha.

Further enlightenment is provided by an analysis of ‘santero/a’.

Parallel terms to those listed above include abacero (grocer, seller of groceries), carnicero (butcher, cutter or seller of meat), frutero (fruit seller), panadero

\(^2\)Joseph M. Murphy provides an excellent example of one attempt to analyze these distinctions while Mary Curry discusses how these distinctions are handled by an English-speaking African-American community that has rejected Spanish forms (Curry 1997, 40–41, 120–121, Murphy 1993, 120–25).

\(^3\)His second definition is “= santidad” that is ‘holiness, sanctity, saintliness’; and finally his third definition is ‘religion of African origin’. The Enciclopedia del Idioma which describes historical and modern Spanish from the twelfth to twentieth centuries also defines Santería as “calidad de santo” (having the qualities of a saint) based on usage for the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries (Alonso 1958, 1155).
(baker, maker of bread), zapatero (shoemaker, cobbler). By extension we could suggest that a santero is one who makes or sells saints/Orisha. One of the most common names for the initiation ceremony, hacer santo (Sp. to make saint) suggests we are on the right track (Murphy 1994, 93). And again Collins confirms our guess when he defines santero as “maker (or seller) of religious images, prints, etc.” (Smith 1996, 658). His second definition, a “person excessively devoted to the saints” is in line with William Christian’s usage. In Spain, according to Christian, ‘santero’ is one who maintains a saint’s shrine (Christian 1981, 105, 107–8, 112, Christian 1972, 58) or the member of a church fraternity (Christian 1981, fig. 6 is a photo of one such santero, Christian 1972, 96–97). Thus we might suggest that a santero/a is one who ‘makes’ saints, maintains a shrine and may be a member of a religious fraternity—all of which could describe both nineteenth and twentieth century practitioners.

Our understanding of these ideas is expanded when we notice that in his analysis of nineteenth century Yoruba religious usage, McKenzie consistently uses the phrase “to makes ọrìṣà” to mean to worship the deities (McKenzie 1997, 391, 479, passim). This seems to be based on the usage he found in the missionary record and is consistent with contemporary usage. The term ‘ṣe orìṣà’, which means “to make, do or work the Orisha,” is used by Yoruba-speaking people in Nigeria to refer to their activities as Orisha-worshippers. Thus we can suggest that the idea of a worshipper as one who ‘makes saint’, that is, a ‘santero’ is a very close translation of the Yoruba idiom that again has nothing to do with Catholic usage.

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4Curry also translates Santería as “the making of saints” (Curry 1997, 171 f. 3) “emphasizing”, she says, “the system of initiation”.

5My thanks to William Muldro for helping me with the Yoruba terminology (Fatunmishe January 6, 1999).
What this suggests is 1) these Spanish words are a fairly accurate translation of Yoruba concepts and may represent an attempt to express them in a new language rather than an attempt to 'hide' the religion behind Christian/Spanish terminology. If this is true, I would also suggest the place of Catholic saints in the religion may have been over-emphasized in the literature. However, Catholic saints as a rich set of signifiers can be used to enhance our understanding of the religion.

The Place of Saints in Santería

William R. Bascom says that stones, blood and herbs, rather than Catholic saints were the focus of Cuban Santería. He suggested that the chromolithographs and statues he found so prominently displayed in the shrines and homes of santeros were "empty ornaments or decorations, which may be dispensed with," that the real power of the santero lay in the stones hidden from view (Bascom 1950, 64–65). He was told that these stones contain the power of the Orisha, each of whom has its own favorite food, herbs, beads and colors, names, characteristics and mythological relationships, divination techniques, prayers and songs, drum and dance patterns and possession style (Bascom 1950, 66, 67).

One of the first things one learns when one begins exploring Santería is the correspondences between the African Orisha and Roman Catholic saints. Obatala, the Orisha of clarity and purity whose name means "owner of the white cloth," is associated with the Virgen de la Merced, an aspect of the Virgin Mary who is dressed in white garments. Oshun, the Orisha of the river and fresh water, who controls all that makes life worth living including love, marriage, children, money and pleasure, is associated with the Virgen de la
Caridád del Cobre. Ogun, the ironworker who is the patron of surgeons, policemen and soldiers, is associated with either St. Peter who holds the keys to heaven or St. George, the knight. Icons and symbols of the Catholic saints are seen as corresponding to the other icons and symbols of the African Orisha so that the one represents the other to the devotee. Although it often seems that a minor detail of the Catholic iconography is chosen (for example Merced’s white dress, Cobre’s association with copper and golden clothing, Peter’s metal keys or George’s sword and armor), some associations are more difficult to understand. For example, until you know that Aganyu, in addition to being associated with the volcano, was also a ferryman, his association with St. Christopher, who is shown carrying the Christ Child across a river, is enigmatic.

When the Yoruba began to reconstruct their religion in Cuba they already had a rich system of symbols with which to work. While the worship of some deities had been widespread and their iconography widely recognized in Africa others may have been less common. However the basic system of signs and signifiers was in place. Thus elements of their new environment could be easily integrated into their world view without significantly disrupting it. As Brown suggests, many elements of the Cuban landscape were re-interpreted and placed within an Africanized milieu. New foods and manufactured items were also integrated into the symbolic system. In the same way, I would suggest, the Catholic saints were appropriated as one more set of representations of the Orisha. Catholic saints may have provided a particularly rich addition to the symbolic language. The saints came with

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6 Cobre is a copper-mining town in eastern Cuba near Santiago.
7 See Appendix 3 for a chart of these correspondences.
their own symbolic system that could be integrated (to a greater or lesser degree) into the existing African systems. However it is obvious that the founders of Santería had an incomplete knowledge of the Christian symbol system and thus often the correspondences between saint and Orisha is tenuous and perhaps even contradictory.8

Once one understands the basic Yoruba sacred symbolic language it is easy to see why particular saints were associated with certain Orisha. However, interesting and unexpected associations were made. Ogun is represented by St. Peter who carries a pair of large metal keys. Although both Ogun and Eleggua are associated with “opening the road,” Peter’s use of metal (keys) moves his iconography into Ogun’s, the metal-worker’s, domain. A second, perhaps more obvious, correspondence with Ogun is St. George who is seated on a white horse and carrying a long sword. Eleggua himself is represented by a variety of saints including Niño de Atocha, St. Anthony, and others. Niño de Atocha provides a particularly rich image since he is a young child holding a shepherd’s crook in one hand and a basket in another. Calling to mind Eleggua’s child-like nature, crooked staff and insatiable appetite.

Our Lady of Mercy, Virgen de le Merced, is dressed entirely in white and thus has become associated with Obatala—even though Obatala is generally considered a male deity, the father of the Orisha, and Mercedes is female. In fact four of the six Orisha we have looked at are represented by either the Virgin Mary or another female saint: Obatala/Virgin of Mercy,

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8An interesting example of this type of appropriation can be seen among Vodouists in Haiti who use St. Patrick to represent the snake deity Dambala. Catholic mythology suggests that Patrick expelled the snakes from the island of Ireland and a common iconography shows him standing on the edge of the water, dressed in his bishop’s robes, with snakes at his feet. Among a group of people for whom the snake represents one of the highest deities this picture represents not a person who is antagonistic toward snakes but rather the personification of Dambala, the snake deity, surrounded by his faithful followers.
Shango/St. Barbara, Yemaya/Virgin of Regla and Oshun/Virgin of Cobre. Yemaya and Oshun are both represented by aspects of the Virgin Mary. In Cuba, Yemaya is associated with Virgen de Regla who provides an interesting chain of signifiers. The image itself is of a black-faced woman holding a white child. She is dressed in blue and has the moon and stars at her feet. This image invokes not only Yemaya's association with the ocean and motherhood but also the mothering that may have been done by African women both of their own lighter-skinned offspring and of the children of their masters and employers. But Regla provides a host of additional connotations. It is the name of the city across the bay (ocean) from Havana. It is also the Spanish word for rule, regulation. Thus it is common to find rulers and other measuring devices somewhere among her icons. Like mothers everywhere Yemaya is believed to be stern but loving. She shelters her children from the wrath of others but requires them to "follow the rules" she establishes.

Oshun's association with Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre (the Virgin of Charity from Cobre) also provides wide-ranging signifiers. The Virgen of Cobre is the patron saint of Cuba. She is believed to have appeared to three fishermen off the eastern coast of Cuba near the city of Santiago in 1608. Her shrine was eventually build in the nearby copper mining town of Cobre. Her golden dress and association with copper mining makes her an obvious choice to represent the golden Orisha, Oshun. Embodied within the image of Caridad, Oshun is described as the most popular Orisha. Her image is found everywhere from churches to tourist shops. In the US she not only has a popular shrine in Miami (Tweed 1997) but is enshrined in almost every
Cuban home and many commercial establishments owned by Cubans. Even the Pope paid homage to her during his recent visit to the island.⁹

Perhaps the most unusual association between an Orisha and a Catholic saint is that between the virgin-martyr Barbara and the king-Orisha Shango. Shango, who was the legendary fourth oba or king of the city of Oyo and who personifies thunder and lightning—power—as well as the essence of male sexuality—is widely associated with Santa Barbara, a virgin-martyr whose tormentors were killed by lightning.

Saint Barbara, whose story "historians and realistic people agree...is unauthentic" (Haas 1998, 7) is the patroness of architects, builders and stonemasons, artillery men, and miners. She is considered to be a refuge against lightning, fires and sudden death (Haas 1998, 2–3). According to legend her pagan father was so proud of her that he built a large tower "to keep her from the glances and leers of the men of the village" (Haas 1998, 3). Somehow a Christian hermit penetrated this structure and taught her the worship of the Christian God (Haas 1998, 4). Called upon to worship her father's gods she refused. When whippings and torture would not change her stance, she was condemned to die by sword. After her own father had killed her, he was struck by lightning, "fire came from heaven and consumed him so thoroughly that nothing remained of him but ashes" (Haas 1998, 5–6).

Barbara's iconography include her tower and the sword that caused her death. She wears a royal crown, the white gown of a virgin and the red cape of a martyr. The cannon, whose explosion sounds like thunder and kills like

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⁹Santeros will suggest that the Pope, who himself dresses in white and gold, may unwittingly be a child of Oshun.
lightning, also belongs to her (Matibag 1996, 1). All of this iconography points through her to Shango, warrior, king, and thunder-god whose colors are red and white. And thus we find her on Changó Ladé’s altar (Plate 8), within her tower, peering down onto the red and white draping of her double, Shango.

The association between Barbara and Shango is one of the most consistent and widespread of documented saint-Orisha combinations. Like any number of other such correspondences the chain of signifiers connecting the two is multi-faceted. At first glance they seem to have little in common: she is a virgin-martyr, he is the sensuous king with three named and perhaps hundreds of unnamed wives; she is the daughter of a noble who locks her in a tower, he is a commander who leads his troops to conquer surrounding city-states and create the Oyo empire; he himself is the personification of thunder and lightning, while her death is avenged by lightning from heaven. Perhaps most significantly discordant for Europeans and Americans studying these traditions, she is a woman, he a man. Of the primary Santería pantheon only two Orisha are syncretized with saints of the opposite sex—Shango and Obatala. Several explanations may be presented for this use of a female saint to represent the most masculine of Orisha. As Murphy suggests, the saints can

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10 According to Haas, as late as 1966, the Army Field Artillery School in Fort Sill, Oklahoma held its graduation ceremony on December 4, St. Barbara’s feast day.

11 It is interesting to note that in the group of altars built by this santerio over a ten-year period this is the only one to include St. Barbara. Today her statue can be found, not on the Orisha altar but relegated outside, on the front porch.

12 According to Herskovits’s research Barbara is associated with Shango in Bahia and Cuba, with Yansan, the wife of Shango in Brazil, and in Haiti perhaps with Erzulie. In addition in the West African city of Abomey members of the Catholic Church also associate Barbara with Xevioso (Shango) (Herskovits 1937, 641–2, 640).

13 I am calling the primary pantheon the most commonly known of the New World Orisha: Aganyu, Babalu-aye, Eleggua, Ibeji, Inle, Obatala, Ogun, Olokun, Orula, Osanyin, Ochosi, Oshun, Oya, Shango, Yemaya (Murphy 1993, 42–43).
be seen as merely humans taken over by the deity. Within the Santería tradition gender is not a criteria for possession (an Orisha is not limited to humans of the same gender as itself); it may be that Barbara’s association with lightning and her red and white clothing provide enough correspondences or it may be that gender is not understood in Yorubaland as a strong category. Each of these explanations suggests that Barbara was chosen to represent Shango in spite of her gender. However, based on J. Lorand Matory’s study of Shango’s kingdom of Oyo in Sex and the Empire that is no More, I want to suggest instead that because of her female gender Barbara is one of the most appropriate representations of the king-Orisha, Shango.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (before the 1840’s)¹⁴ the head of the Oyo empire was represented by a group of “wives” that included not only the royal wives (ayaba) but also transvestite ministers and representatives (ilarí). While the secluded royal wives, who included the spouses of both the reigning king and his predecessors, were entrusted with administrative functions, the ilarí, who declared themselves to also be the ‘wives of the king’, served as diplomatic observers, toll collectors, messengers, cavaliers, royal guards and priests (Matory 1994, 9). Thus the representatives of the king outside the palace, in the various cities and towns of the Oyo empire, presented themselves as women to the population; while at home in Oyo, women were the royal advisors, intermediaries between the king and the subject chiefs and provincial representatives to the palace. They were also

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¹⁴Matory identifies the 1840s as the time when warfare was changing the face of the Oyo empire from royal supremacy to military republicanism (26). This is important in the history of Santería because the single largest group (over 34%) of slaves brought to Cuba during the last twenty years of the slave trade (1850–1870) were identified as Lucumi. The Lucumi included not only members of the Yoruba language group but people from neighboring tribes (Brandon 1993, 55, 57–58). Thus it was people who lived with the royal cultural model described in this section who created Santería in Cuba.
the heads of the empire-wide priesthood focused on the mythical king, Shango.

Like many west African deities, Shango is a possessing god. After the appropriate initiations and training and under the influence of spirit possession, his priestesses are said to become Shango. Initiation moves one from devotee to both the representative and presentation of the divinity, that is the priestess represents Shango to the worshipping community in her own person and presents him directly during possession events. In the same way the male ilarí were the presence and representatives of the king and they were prepared by similar initiations. According to Matory, the senior palace priestess of Shango in her own apartments used the same initiatory symbolism as that used to initiate Shango priests to invest the ilarí with the royal will (Matory 1994, 11).

Since the head is first of all the seat of one’s personality, one’s metaphysical self, it encompasses the person’s intelligence, competence, personal limitations and capacity to defend himself. As part of the priestly initiation the Orisha is enthroned in the head of the initiate. The Rev. Samuel Johnson says that the ilarí were called “keepers of [the king’s] head.” He thinks this suggests a special metaphysical relationship between the king’s own inner head such that the ilarí were in effect possession priests of the king’s “head” (260 f. 8, citing (Johnson 1960 (1921))).

Based on this chain of signification, I would suggest that a pale virgin dressed in the colors of the king and associated with lightning would have appeared to be an excellent representative of the Orisha-king Shango. Just as the ilarí dressed in women’s clothes represented the king in Africa a white woman (or was she also a man dressed as a woman?) could represent the Orisha in the foreign land to which the slaves were taken. The question of the
gender of an Orisha and its representative, whether Catholic saint or human priest, is immaterial not because gender is not a strong category but because, as discussed in Chapter 5, gender is identified as a power rather than sexual relationship and the Orisha, like kings, are always in the more powerful position. Thus it is completely appropriate for kingly-Orisha like Shango and Obatala to be represented by female saints.

The Santería Altar as Memory Palace

In a 1997 lecture on memory and place in monastic meditation, Mary Carruthers suggested that there is a relationship between architecture and human memory. In her examples medieval churches and monasteries formed a type of architectural rhetoric that was used to facilitate seeing, remembering, and teaching. These buildings were designed in such a way that they facilitated meditation and became meditative schemes for their residents. She suggested that monasteries in particular could serve as the foundation for individual memory palaces, collections of internal rooms wherein one could store information for later retrieval (Augustine 1961, esp. X, 8, Carruthers 1997). In another work she cites the thirteenth century saint, Albertus Magnus, to suggest that monasteries were the places where memory-work was best done (Carruthers 1993, 893, Carruthers 1990, Kelber 1995, Yates 1966).

There are many differences between medieval religious structures and Santería altars and displays: monasteries tended to be large, permanent, public structures while Santería displays are modest, ephemeral and intensely private. At the same time both served many of the same purposes of focusing the attention of practitioners through the use of the sensual. Both provide an external image that could be internalized and recalled at a later time. By associating new information with the internal image one could construct
new relationships. Remembering the various objects placed on or near an Orisha can become the first links in the chain of signifiers that leads from a particular altar display to more generalized notions of the nature of that Orisha.

But medieval monks did not just use buildings to shape their memories, they also built internal memory palaces around various Biblical stories: for example, the six days of creation, Noah’s ark, the Ark of the Covenant and the heavenly Jerusalem described in Revelation (Carruthers 1993, 893). In the same way santeros use the stories embedded in the mythology and divination texts to create internal environments for the recollection of the Orisha and other sacred knowledge. And these stories find their way back onto altars. David Brown tells of a santera who likes to put Shango and Oya together on her altar because they are “lovers” while separating Oya from Yemaya because they are “enemies” (Brown 1989, 417). In his 1993 display Changó Ladé placed Obba, Shango’s first and legitimate wife directly in front of his batea (See Plate 6), while surrounding him with the other female Orisha. Obatala is usually the highest element on these displays because he is the “head” of the pantheon while Olokun, who represents the depths of the ocean, sits on or close to the floor. Many santeros will separate Obatala and Olokun because of antagonisms in their mythologies (see Plate 1). The warriors, Eleggua, Ogun and Ochosi, are found on the floor toward the front of the displays where they can “guard” their fellow Orisha.

In her analysis of Christian material culture Colleen McDannell says that “Religious objects assembled on the top of a piano or tucked in the corner of a room not only serve as a bridge between the human and divine worlds, they can also be objects of memory” that serve as reminders “of significant events, people, moods and activities” (McDannell 1995, 39). Santería birthday
and domestic altars form a unique site for religious memory. Not only do santeros select and place items on the altars based on their own understanding of the Orisha and their mythology, objects received as gifts from others or as part of earlier ritual events can be found on these displays. These items serve as reminders of the past and become incorporated into each individual's personal chain of signification. A Mardi Gras-style mask invoking Oya's association with masked cults in Africa reminds me of the drumming I attended for her, while innumerable fish commemorate the birthday celebrations of various children of Yemaya and Oshun.

**Conclusion**

I began this work by suggesting that material culture could be used to mediate and express religious experience and practice. By tracing the chains of signification embedded in Santería altars and on the body of the iyawo, I have shown the ways that Yoruba concepts of the holy continued to be embedded in displays that have incorporated other iconographic languages. I have suggested that while African notions about what can and cannot be displayed continue to inform these displays, there has been a continual movement from intensely private to more open displays. At the same time the African aversion to the use of human figures on sacred displays has been continually re-negotiated in the New World so that contemporary altars, when they contain figures, may include Catholic saints, Asian deities, and popular images as well as African and Africanized forms.

In tracing the chains of signifiers associated with six of the major Orisha I suggested that there are many such associations and that everything can and does have an Orisha correspondence. I have found that when one is familiar with the Orisha, their stories and the existing correspondences, it is possible to create appropriate new associations. I have suggested that this was
the method by which Catholic elements, particularly the saints, were incorporated into the symbiotic system and have suggested that such an incorporation predates active persecutions and the need to camouflage the Orisha behind such elements. In addition, I have suggested that such incorporation continues as new elements are brought into the orbit of the Orisha and their devotees.

I have said that during the iyawo year the new initiate serves as a mobile sacred site that can be analyzed to provide further understandings about the Orisha and their religion. In the course of this analysis I discussed the ways in which ideas about the Orisha and their relationship to their priests are encoded in the rules surrounding the iyawo. I particularly highlighted the ways that clothing served as a symbolic system to maintain Yoruba ideas about these relationships in the face of a cultural system that was antagonistic to their original symbolics. By substituting cross-status for cross-gender dress, I have suggested that early santeros were able to translate their understanding of the roles performed by the priesthood from one symbol system to another.

Finally in this section I have discussed two areas that have served as points of contention within the wider Santería community. By proposing a pro-active and dialogic source for some of the terminology and symbols used in the religion, I have attempted to re-valorize certain of its elements. My analysis suggests that these elements rather then being reactive attempts to disguise African practice may have been efforts by the early practitioners to re-interpret their religious heritage in a new and alien world. That these terms and symbols were later used in an attempt to hide certain practices does not negate their earlier, resourceful development. This is perhaps the most significant finding in my work—that all of the elements I have explored
point directly back to Yoruba precedents, that the Spanish and Catholic elements (as well as more recent American secular and Protestant ones) function as “translations” of existing African religious ideas and are easily incorporated into the chains of signifiers associated with altars as a unit, with the individual Orisha and with the iyawoage. Although no single link in these chains is essential, it appears that these newer elements were incorporated without deforming the existing links.
Illustrations

Map 1: Yoruba area of Nigeria.

Map 2: Cuba.


Plate No. 4: Closeup of birthday altar of Changó Ladé from Plate 4.
Plate No. 5: Oshé from collection of the author.

Plate No. 6: Detail from birthday altar, Changó Ladé. Houston, Texas, 1993.

Plate No. 8: Detail from birthday altar, Changó Ladé. Houston, Texas, 1989.

Plate No. 11: Eleggu sculpture.

Left: Eleggu sculpture from display at Instituto de Segunda Ensenanza, Ciego de Avila, Cuba. 1995.

Right: Eleggu sculpture from collection of the author. (Photo by Arthur Gorski.)

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Orisha Correspondences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orisha</th>
<th>Colors</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Force of Nature</th>
<th>Foods, etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Babalu-aiye</td>
<td>purple, black, light blue</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>small pox, AIDS, infectious diseases, skin eruptions</td>
<td>beans, dog, crutches, popcorn, sweets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleggua</td>
<td>black &amp; red, or black &amp; white</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>trickster, cross-roads, chance, messenger</td>
<td>sugar cane, guava, candy, rum, hooked staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inle</td>
<td>green</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>fisherman, healing</td>
<td>fish, snake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obatala</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>8, 16</td>
<td>purity, wisdom, coolness, creation, older man</td>
<td>eggs, meringue, pears, rice pudding, doves, white fly whisk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ochosi</td>
<td>blue &amp; yellow, violet</td>
<td>2, 7</td>
<td>hunter, bow and arrow, justice</td>
<td>anisette, deer, police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogun</td>
<td>green &amp; black, or green &amp; white</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>iron, work, technology, railroad, car, warrior</td>
<td>honey dew melon, aguardiente (cane liquor), dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olodumare, Olofi, Olorun</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olokun</td>
<td>dark blue</td>
<td>4, 7</td>
<td>deep ocean, mystery</td>
<td>shells, mask, mermaid, snake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ori</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orula</td>
<td>yellow &amp; green</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>divination</td>
<td>Popcorn, sweets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osain</td>
<td>green</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>forest, herbs</td>
<td>cornmeal &amp; okra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deity</td>
<td>Color</td>
<td>Meanings</td>
<td>Objects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oshun</td>
<td>yellow, maroon/nine colors</td>
<td>5, 10, 15 sweet water (river), female sexuality, young woman</td>
<td>pumpkin, honey, orange, fan, gold, brass</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oya</td>
<td>red &amp; white</td>
<td>9 wind, death, cemetery</td>
<td>eggplant, chocolate, black fly whisk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shango</td>
<td>red &amp; white</td>
<td>6, 12 lightning, male sexuality, power, passion, force, balance, young man</td>
<td>bananas, corn, okra, horse, oshé, pílon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemaya</td>
<td>blue &amp; white</td>
<td>7 ocean, fish, maternity, moon, stars, mature woman</td>
<td>watermelon, brown sugar, molasses, fan, mermaid</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix 2: Orisha/Saint Correspondences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Yoruba</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Saint</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Babaluaiye</td>
<td>Òbalúayé or Œpóná</td>
<td>Babalú-Ayé</td>
<td>St. Lazarus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleggua</td>
<td>Èśli-Èlegbára</td>
<td>Elegguá</td>
<td>Niña de Atocha, Lonely Spirit of Purgatory, St. Anthony of Padua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inle</td>
<td>Erinlè</td>
<td>Inlé</td>
<td>Archangel Raphael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obatala</td>
<td>Òbátálá</td>
<td>Obatalá</td>
<td>Our Lady of Mercy (Señora de las Mercedes), Jesus Christ, St. Joseph, St. Sebastian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ochosí</td>
<td>Òsòsì</td>
<td>Ochosí</td>
<td>St. Norbert, St. Hubert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogún</td>
<td>Ògún</td>
<td>Ogún</td>
<td>St. Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olodumare, Olofi, Olorun</td>
<td>Olódumarè</td>
<td>Olofin</td>
<td>God the Father, Jesus Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ori</td>
<td>Òrì</td>
<td>Eledá</td>
<td>Guardian Angel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orula</td>
<td>Òrunmílè</td>
<td>Orunlá</td>
<td>St. Francis of Assisi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osain</td>
<td>Òsanyín</td>
<td>Osain</td>
<td>St. Sylvester, St. Joseph, St. John the Baptist, St. Anthony the Abbott</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oshun</td>
<td>Òṣun</td>
<td>Ochún</td>
<td>Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre (Virgin of Charity of Cobre)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oya</td>
<td>Òya</td>
<td>Oyá</td>
<td>Our Lady of Candlemas, St. Teresa of Avila, Little Flower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shango</td>
<td>Èàngó</td>
<td>Changó</td>
<td>St. Barbara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemaya</td>
<td>Yemoja</td>
<td>Yemayá</td>
<td>Our Lady of Regla</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1Based on chart by Babatunde Lawal (Lawal 1996, 29–32).
Glossary

àdúmu òrìṣa (Lk. the Orisha that one embraces) Orisha that is received outside of the asiento ceremony.

àje (Yr.) witch.

Aláafín (Yr.) title of the king of Oyo.

àṣẹ (Yr.; Lk. ache, En. ashe) the power make things happen, the power of the universe; ritual power; also name of medicine with such power.

asiento (Sp. from asentar, to put, set, place) initiation ceremony to “make” or “crown” a priest; puts or “seats” the Orisha in the head of the devotee. Also the Spanish name for the licenses giving ships captains the right to engage in the slave trade.

aiyé (Yr.) this world, earth, the visible world as opposed to orun, heaven, the invisible world.

babaláwo (Yr. father of secrets) priests of the Orisha Orula/Orunmila, the owner of Ifa, the highest form of divination.

babalocha (Yr. father of Orisha) male priest.

bata (Yr.) double-headed drum used for sacred drumming parties. Consecrated in sets of three.

batea (Sp. flat-bottomed boat or tray) wooden bowl used to hold fundamentos of Shango.

bembe (Lk.) sacred party where drums are played to invoke the Orisha.

botánica (Sp. botany) store selling religious goods including the herbs and other materials needed for Santería religious practice.

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1En. = English, Lk. = Lukumi, Sp. = Spanish, Yr. = Yoruba
2(Mason 1996, 59).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cabildo</td>
<td>(Sp. chapter of a church, town council) in Cuba social clubs for gente de color modeled on guild organizations in Spain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>camino</td>
<td>(Sp. road, path) advocation of an Orisha; some Orisha have many caminos, others have none.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cascarilla</td>
<td>(Sp.) white chalk-like material made from eggs. See efun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diloggun</td>
<td>(Lk. sixteen; Yr. mediologun) divination system using sixteen cowry shells.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ebbo</td>
<td>(Yr. sacrifice) offering or work given to Orisha or egun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>efun</td>
<td>(Yr.) white chalk used in rituals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>egun</td>
<td>(Yr.) the dead, honored ancestors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>egúngún</td>
<td>(Yr.) cult of masqueraders who impersonate the personal and communal dead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eleke</td>
<td>(Yr. bead) single strand of colored beads representing an Orisha.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Espiritismo</td>
<td>(Sp. spiritualism) religious practice that invokes spirits through a form of seance called misa blanca (white mass) or spiritual mass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fundamento</td>
<td>(Sp. basis, foundation) object or set of objects serving as residence of an Orisha.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gente de color</td>
<td>(Sp. people of color) former slaves and others of African descent who attained their freedom in colonial Cuba.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>idé</td>
<td>(Yr. bracelet) beaded bracelet in the color of the Orisha of the head given to new initiates; also yellow and green beaded bracelets given to initiates of Orula and burlap and cowry shell bracelet given to initiates of Babalu-aiye.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ifá</td>
<td>(Yr.) divination system invoking the Orisha Orula/Orunmila performed only by babalawos; also an alternative name for Orula/Orunmila.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ikú (Yr. death; Sp. muerte/muerto) personification of Death; dead person.

ilè (Yr. earth/town/house) in Santería, religious family.

ítá (Lk. from Yr. itàn story, history) diloggun divination performed as part of asiento initiation, tells the initiate’s past, present and future.

iyálocha (Yr. mother of Orisha) female priest.

iyàwó (Yr. bride, junior wife) newly initiated priest. Person (of either sex) who has been initiated but not yet allowed to practice as a priest.

iyawoage (Yr. & Sp.) year-long liminal period after the asiento during which the iyawo is subject to a laundry list of restrictions and requirements and is forbidden to participate in certain types of rituals.

Lucumi (?) name given to Yoruba slaves in Cuba; alternative name for Santería.

madrina (Sp. godmother) female initiator, see also padrino.

mazo (Sp. bunch, bundle) large and heavy ceremonial necklace, a set of mazos is worn as part of the Middle Day costume.

misa blanca (Sp. white mass) seance for calling upon spirits within Espiritismo tradition. Also called mesa blanca (white table).

ọba (Yr. king) chiefly title; within Santería title of oriaté, master of ceremonies of ritual events.

obi (Yr. cola nut) in Cuba and US coconut used for divination; also name of Orisha associated with coconut divination.

och'a (Lk.) Contraction of Oricha, used to designate both the religion and its deities. See ọrìṣà, Relga de Ocha.

odú (Yr. letter; Sp. letra) in dilloggún, divination configuration represents the number of shells falling “mouth” side up; in Ifa one of 256 possible
divination configurations; also deity associated with divination configurations in Ifá.

ọlọricha  (Yr. owner of Orisha) priest of the Orisha religion.

omiero  (Lk. water of propitiation³) mixture of water, herbs and other materials used to cool both Orisha and persons.

opele  (Yr.) divining chain used by babalawos.

orí  (Yr. head) physical and/or inner head; the destiny for this life chosen before birth; also considered one’s personal Orisha.

oriaté  (Lk. head/king of the divination mat) highly-trained diviner and ritual specialist who presides over the initiation of Santería priests and other rituals.

òrìṣà  (Yr.; Sp. Oricha, En. Orisha) Yoruba deities, forces of nature, archetypes.

òrun  (Yr.) heaven, sky, the other world, the invisible world as opposed to aiyé, earth, the visible world.

ọṣẹ  (Yr.; Lk. oché, En. oshe) double headed axe associated with Shango.

padrino  (Sp. godfather) male initiator, see also madrina.

paños  (Sp. cloth) brightly decorated squares of cloth that are often draped over or around the pots holding the Orisha.

pataki  (Lk.) story or legend.

pilón  (Sp. mortar; Yr. odo) inverted African-style mortar used as stand for Shango’s batea (wooden pot).

Regla de Ocha  (Sp. & Lk.) way of the Orisha; alternate name of Santería.

³(Mason 1985, 102).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Santería</td>
<td>(Sp. having the quality of a saint,(^4) shop selling religious images, prints, etc.(^5)) conventionally translated as &quot;the way of the saints&quot;; common name for followers of Orisha religious traditions in Cuba and the US; see also Regla de Ocha, Lucumi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>santo</td>
<td>(Sp. saintly, holy) holy person, saint; used in Santería to refer to Catholic saints associated with the Orisha; sometimes used as generic term referring to the Orisha themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>santero/a</td>
<td>(Sp. caretaker of a sanctuary,(^6) maker or seller of religious images, a person excessively devoted to the saints(^7)) within Santería refers to devotee, more properly to any initiated priest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sopera</td>
<td>(Sp. tureen) large porcelain pots used to hold the fundamentos embodying each Orisha along with their tools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tambor</td>
<td>(Sp. drum) see bembé.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yubona</td>
<td>(Yr. watcher) second godparent, assists primary godparent during initiations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^4\)(Alonso 1966, 1155, Alonso 1958, 3709). The encyclopedia of idioms describes historical and modern Spanish from the twelfth to twentieth centuries. This description of "Santería" is from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries.

\(^5\)(Smith 1996, 657).


\(^7\)(Smith 1996, 657-56).
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