Citizenship, Religion and Revolution in Cuba

Carolyn Watson

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[Signature]
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[Signature]

[Signature]

[Signature]
CITIZENSHIP, RELIGION AND REVOLUTION IN CUBA

BY

CAROLYN E. WATSON

Honours Bachelor of Arts
Master of Arts

DISSERTATION
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
History

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

December
2009
Dedication

For Alessandra, hoping one day she understands.
Acknowledgements

Many years ago when I was in the first year of my doctoral program in Latin American History, a friend of mine, also doing a PhD, but in Biology, confessed that she did not understand how the solitary research required for degrees in the Humanities could be sustained. Several years later, I confess that research in the Humanities is not as solitary an endeavor as it may seem. So many people have contributed in different ways to the completion of this dissertation.

My dissertation committee at the University of New Mexico, especially my Chair, Dr. Elizabeth Hutchison, was enormously supportive during the proposal, research and writing of the dissertation. Meetings via email, long distance phone calls, and over coffee at a couple of international conferences helped me to reconceptualize the framework of the dissertation and refocus some of the chapters. You put a considerable effort into this project that has not gone unnoticed. I thank you for your advice, insights and deadlines. You have taught me a lot.

My friends, Drs. Janet Conway and Lee Cormie, provided welcome advice and encouragement during different stages of the writing, and Dr. Cormie later provided more specific critiques as my outside reader. You helped to make the final months of writing less stressful and forced me to leave my work at more reasonable hours of the day than I allowed myself. Thank you for contributing to my peace of mind.

In Cuba, so many people contributed to the dissertation research that I am afraid I will forget someone. In Havana, I must thank Aurelio Alonso for putting me in touch with the researchers in the Departamento de Estudios Socioreligiosos (DESR) of the Centro de Investigaciones Psicologicas y Sociologicas (CIPS) who shared their work
with me and facilitated my research. Aníbal Argüelles Mederos and Ileana Hodges Limonta discussed their research with me and gave me access to unpublished manuscripts that contributed to the dissertation. Dr. Jorge Ramírez Calzadilla, who never got to see the results of my research, deserves special mention. Without his guidance and support my research in Cuba would not have been possible.

In Havana I would also like to thank the staff of the Archivo Nacional, the Arzobispado, the Instituto de Etnología and the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí for locating the many documents I requested. Tomás Fernández Robaina has also contributed to this dissertation over the years through his extensive knowledge of both Ocha-Ifá and the history of Cubans of African descent. I consider myself fortunate to have been able to develop and maintain our friendship.

Joel Suárez Rodes, at the Centro Memorial Martin Luther King, assisted in negotiating the bureaucracy associated with conducting research in Cuba and provided me with several publications from the Caminos press. He was also instrumental in putting me in contact with practitioners in Havana and Matanzas. Without their contribution the dissertation would have been incomplete.

In Matanzas I must first express my gratitude to the Centro Kairos and Samuel Rodríguez for lodging me the duration of my two research trips to the city and for introducing me to Kimbo who made the interview portion of my research there possible. I hope that we can continue our collaborative relationship in the future. I also express a debt of gratitude to all of the babalaos, iyalochas and babalochas who graciously gave me their time for intensive interviews. Your knowledge and opinions are greatly valued and respected and I thank you all for sharing a part of your lives with me.
In the Archivo Provincial of Matanzas I must thank all the staff who searched for documents and tried to answer my many questions, but especially Caridad and Magaly with whom I worked most closely. I would also like to thank Ernesto Chávez Álvarez for a spontaneous trip to the used book store down the street from the archive.

In the tedious job of transcribing the interviews I conducted with practitioners, I appreciate the work of Martin Torres-Mason and María Candelaria Hernández Mogollán. I thank you for your patience and perseverance in a difficult task.

The people of Cuba have also earned my gratitude. In a decade of travelling and conducting research in different parts of the island, I have met many people from all walks of life who have taught me about their country, its culture and politics, and themselves. Their diverse experiences and opinions have helped to shape my views, personal and political, about Cuba.

I must also recognize the Tinker Foundation and the University of New Mexico’s Latin American and Iberian Institute for a Field Research Grant in 2003 that helped to launch the field research for this dissertation in Cuba. With additional support from a Research Project Travel Grant and a Student Research Allocation Grant I was able to undertake a considerable portion of archival research in Havana during the first months of 2004. A PhD Fellowship, also from the Latin American Iberian Institute, facilitated the completion of my field research in Cuba in 2005 and 2006.

Finally, although last on my list, Carlos is perhaps the person who I appreciate the most. Your support and encouragement during the research and writing phases of the dissertation, as well as in the challenges of day to day life, have made all the difference. I thank you for everything.
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ABSTRACT

Throughout the twentieth century, various Cuban regimes have tried to eliminate the practice of religions of African origin by combining repressive legislation and coercive social practices that stigmatized practitioners as culturally backward, socially deviant, and mentally deficient. Religious practitioners, however, used the state apparatus to continue worshipping their African deities, sometimes challenging government officials’ excessive application of the law or devising ways to evade their scrutiny. Through an analysis of archival documents, newspapers, works produced by practitioners, oral history interviews and published ethnographies, this dissertation examines the strategies practitioners of Ocha-Ifá – also known as Santería – employed as they continued practicing the religion of their ancestors and participating in the national projects of the twentieth century.

Focusing on the period after the 1959 revolution, this dissertation argues that revolutionary policies that were designed to discourage the practice of religions of African origin actually facilitated its continued practice and development in unintended
ways. By analysing practices in one particular religion of African origin in Havana and Matanzas, the regions of greatest concentration of Ocha-Ifá, this study suggests that citizenship, identity and belonging were negotiated terrain over which neither the revolutionary government nor practitioners of Ocha-Ifá had absolute control. This dissertation builds on the recent research on race and the participation of Cubans of African descent in politics and society during the twentieth century by focusing on the activities of one particular sector of Cuban society. It is unique in historicizing a sector of Cuban society that has thus far only appeared as part of larger scholarly interpretations concerning race or religion in Cuba.
# Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction ...........................................................................................................1
   A Note on Sources .....................................................................................................................4
   Background to the Subject .......................................................................................................12
   The Literature on Ocha-Ifá .....................................................................................................23
   Arguments of the Study ...........................................................................................................30
   Organization of Chapters .........................................................................................................38

Chapter Two: Citizens and Brujos(as) .....................................................................................44
   Introduction .............................................................................................................................44
   Sal si Puedes: Brujería and Race Anxiety in the Early Republic ............................................49
   Raids, Seizures and State Harassment ......................................................................................62
   Afrocubanismo: Between Persecution and Appropriation ....................................................76
   Religion Joins Politics: Ocha-Ifá in the 1940s .......................................................................92
   Conclusion ..............................................................................................................................103

Chapter Three: Entre los santos y la revolución .................................................................105
   Introduction .............................................................................................................................105
   Religion and Revolution .........................................................................................................107
   Race or Culture? .....................................................................................................................114
   Change and Continuity ..........................................................................................................127
   Gendering Ocha-Ifá ................................................................................................................139
   The 1976 Constitution and the Tesis y Resolución on Religion ............................................146
   The Revolution and Practitioners Twenty Years Later .........................................................152
   Conclusion ..............................................................................................................................158

Chapter Four: La ceremonia de la letra del año: rival visions of Ocha-Ifá ............................160
   Introduction .............................................................................................................................160
   La ceremonia de la letra del año ............................................................................................166
   The Ifá Organizations and the letra del año ..........................................................................172
   From the Casa Templo to the Streets: The 1980s ................................................................175
   The Special Period and the IV Congreso del Partido ............................................................182
   Africa or Cuba, Race or Ethnicity? .......................................................................................197
   Conclusion ..............................................................................................................................210

Chapter Five: Brujas, Female Priests and Other Heresies ..................................................212
   Introduction .............................................................................................................................212
   Victor Betancourt Estrada ......................................................................................................214
   Pata y Cabeza: Initiation According to Means .....................................................................219
   Agayú and Olokún: From Matanzas to Havana ....................................................................224
   Gélèdè: Reinventing the Bruja ..............................................................................................227
   Female Priests: Las Iyánifás ..................................................................................................236
   Heterosexual Dominance of Ifá ............................................................................................250
   Conclusion ..............................................................................................................................258

Chapter Six: Conclusion ............................................................................................................261

Glossary .................................................................................................................................272

Bibliography ...........................................................................................................................277

Archives .................................................................................................................................277

Manuscripts and Unpublished Materials ...............................................................................277
Newspapers and Periodicals .................................................................277
Interviews ..........................................................................................278
Published Primary Sources ...............................................................279
Secondary Sources ............................................................................281
Chapter One: Introduction

In January 1959 as the insurgents of Cuba’s revolutionary Movimiento 26 de Julio (M-26-7) entered the city of Havana, many olorishas and babalasos (practitioners of the religion of African origin Regla de Ocha-Ifá, or just Ocha-Ifá) interpreted several symbolic events as good omens for Ocha-Ifá and the revolution. These olorishas and babalasos saw in the red and black flag of the M-26-7 the colours of Elegguá, the orisha (deity) of the crossroads. Elegguá’s presence, they said, presaged fundamental change. Several days later when Fidel Castro arrived in Havana, the religious practitioners interpreted a white dove landing on his shoulder during his first speech as a message from the orisha Obatalá, the son of God, that Obatalá had chosen Fidel Castro to guide Cuba.¹

These anecdotes provide a point of departure for a study of the Cuban Revolution and Ocha-Ifá between 1959 and the present, because they position practitioners as protagonists of their own history, illustrating the way in which some olorishas and babalasos mobilized their religious beliefs in supporting the new government. The fact that the revolutionary regime did not always treat or view practitioners and their religion favourably forms part of a complex analysis of how race, gender, culture, ideology and citizenship were contested sites of identity and belonging in the new Cuba. This study explores the ways in which practitioners of Ocha-Ifá used their religious beliefs and practices to participate in the revolutionary project and to challenge perceived inadequacies and/or limitations.

¹ Andres Oppenheimer, Castro’s Final Hour (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992) 44; these stories continued to circulate at the beginning of the twenty-first century, especially among practitioners who believe Fidel Castro to be initiated to Ocha-Ifá. Kimbo, for example, cited this event as evidence of Fidel Castro’s initiation. Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, March 2006.
During Cuba’s first two republics from 1902-1933 and 1934-1958, olorishas and babalao could only hope for token gestures from politicians; however, after 1959 several government policies, including those inherited in part from previous generations of intellectuals and politicians, provided practitioners with new space in which to manoeuvre. Free and compulsory education, universal healthcare, price controls and state control over employment ensured that all Cubans had access to basic necessities. The regime’s desire to rescue and preserve autochthonous Cuban culture led to the creation of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional in 1963, and its inclusion of practitioners as performers and informants enabled practitioners to express themselves artistically, religiously and politically, both on the national and international stage. Policy designed to forge closer relations between Cuba and the developing world, especially Africa, reinforced Cuba’s African heritage, leading some to research their religious traditions in Cuba and abroad and others to join religious houses for the first time. Not all of these popular interpretations of revolutionary policy were manifestations of results intended by the government, but they do demonstrate that the cultures of peoples of African descent “emerged and succeeded to the extent they could ‘manipulate’ dominant institutions within the opportunities and constraints of specific local arenas.”

By examining the discourse and actions of government authorities and practitioners, I demonstrate that citizenship was a negotiated framework through which “transformative, dialogic routines and rituals took place.”

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There are several reasons why I chose to focus my research on Ocha-Ifá, the first two being reasons of practicality. First, Ocha-Ifá, composed of two related Yoruba religious traditions, is the most accessible religion of African origin to outsiders, that is, those not initiated. As long as practitioners do not feel that they are being asked to reveal too much ritual knowledge, they tend to be more willing to meet with and talk to outsiders than practitioners of Palo Monte, a religion of Bantú origin based on working with the dead, for example. Gender was also a consideration that determined ease of access to both practitioners and their religious space. The Abakuá society is restricted to men and does not allow women to witness its ceremonies, much less learn any of its functions. Palo Monte, while accepting of women, is more male dominated than Ocha, and also more secretive as to its rituals and beliefs. Even Ifá, in spite of its prohibition against admitting women, is more approachable and babalao are generally willing to talk about the religion, their beliefs and their role in maintaining them.

The remaining reasons for focusing on Ocha-Ifá are related to its subject place in Cuban history. At the beginning of the twentieth century it was among a number of religions of African origin practiced by Africans and their descendents, as well as a small number of white Cubans. By the end of the twentieth century it was clearly the most widely practiced religion of African origin practiced by Cubans from all backgrounds, although still dominated by those of African descent. Accurate numbers concerning practitioners do not exist; however, the visibility of practitioners in society is striking. Over the course of the last century Ocha-Ifá and its practitioners were frequently mistaken for ñaños and brujos, terms applied to the practitioners of the Abakuá societies and Palo Monte, respectively. Practitioners of all religions of African origin
were targets of general state repression aimed at curbing the crimes Abakua and Palo Monte members were believed to commit. By the end of the twentieth century, practitioners of Ocha-Ifá succeeded in uniting, to some extent, to establish umbrella organizations that could unite small *casa templos* (house temples) in different parts of the island with larger houses in Havana. Ocha-Ifá has also managed to place itself at the top of a religious hierarchy that views other religions of African origin as less pure. This concept of purity is not related to the degree in which one religion is more African or Cuban, but has to do with ideas concerning spiritual purity; religions that work with the dead, rather than deities or *oríshas*, are conceived of as less pure among practitioners of Ocha-Ifá. Researchers of the twentieth century accepted these notions of ritual hierarchy and have contributed to the privileging of Ocha-Ifá.⁴ These kinds of subjective experiences and negotiations provide a particularly rich terrain for examining shifting notions of identity and belief in the twentieth century.

**A Note on Sources**

Conducting research in Cuba poses special challenges that I am sure those conducting research in other regions do not face. These challenges have both informed and constrained the framework of this dissertation. When I began conducting field research in January 2004, I did so through the Fundación Fernando Ortiz, and under the supervision of one of its researchers. A series of difficult events during this initial phase of archival research led to a re-evaluation of this venture and, back in North America, I sought alternate institutional support in Cuba.

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In late 2004, a friend put me in touch with Jorge Ramírez Calzadilla at the Centro de Investigaciones Psicologicas y Sociologicas (CIPS) in Havana, who agreed to supervise my research in Cuba. Dr. Ramírez Calzadilla provided letters of reference to facilitate my access to archives in Havana in the spring of 2005, when I began the main portion of research in Cuba. Sadly, when I returned the following spring to finish my research, Dr. Ramírez Calzadilla was gravely ill and no longer able to provide much logistical support for my research. Other researchers at the CIPS were also unsuccessful in assisting me, which limited my access to the Archivo Nacional de Cuba.

Smaller archives in Havana, such as the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí, the Arzobispado and the Museo de Regla, as well as the regional archive in Matanzas, were easier to access and proved to contain a wealth of documentation on Ocha-Ifá. The documentary evidence concerning practitioners and government officials in this dissertation is, therefore, tipped more toward Matanzas in the pre-revolutionary period, rather than providing a balanced discussion of religious practice in Havana and Matanzas, as I had planned. Conversely, newspapers and periodicals I was able to access were those published in Havana in the twentieth century and, therefore, favour Havana. Regional newspapers are kept in some archives, but are very fragile, as are the archives themselves as a result of hurricanes and lack of structural maintenance, making researchers’ access to the archives unreliable and often restricted. These newspapers and periodicals do, however, provide insights into aspects of mainstream Cuban culture in certain periods and contain summaries of police reports and court trials. Practitioners of Ocha-Ifá moved uneasily between these two extremes of crime and culture in the twentieth century, and they often appear as detainees, defendants or entertainers in these
contemporary newspapers. With the triumph of the Cuban Revolution newspapers ceased publishing the police and court summaries. *Bohemia* continued to be a good source for examining issues of a cultural nature, ranging from racial discrimination to artistic representations of Ocha-Ifá in the revolutionary period, in part because journalists made an effort to cover events outside of Havana.

In Havana and Matanzas I was able to examine documents from the *Fondos Asociaciones* that registered and regulated religions of African origins from the late 1800s to the 1970s. These documents contain correspondence between religious practitioners and the different levels of government with which they had contact. Most documentation was a result of simple organizational compliance with remitting required information, but sometimes included documents related to confrontations with the police, other officials, or the neighbours. The vast majority of organizations had male-dominated *directivas*, although women usually appeared on the list of general members. The *Fondos Asociaciones* do not provide many insights into religious beliefs or practices but in cases where confrontations with government officials occurred, these records provide very clear indications of what government officials thought of the practices of Cubans of African descent, how religious practitioners were treated – which was by no means consistent – and how practitioners themselves interpreted and manipulated these situations.

In Matanzas the *Fondo Religiones Africanas* contain documents pertaining to the extra-organizational activity of practitioners of religions of African origin, such as requests for permission to celebrate *fiestas* (celebrations), lists of *cabildos de nación* in a given period, requests to form *cabildos*, and occasionally complaints against noise and
scandals originating in the practices of certain cabildos. Communications between the police and higher levels of regional government regarding the activities of religious organizations are found in these fondos. They provide some insight to the conditions under which the religious organizations functioned, the restrictions government placed on them, and the sometimes arbitrary nature of law enforcement officials. It is rare to find documents created by practitioners or at the behest of practitioners, except letters requesting permission for religious activities, but again, these fondos help to establish the landscape for pre-revolutionary, and in many cases pre-independence, religious practice.

As with the Fondos Asociaciones, I examined documents from the Fondo Religiones Africanas as far back as the mid 1800s so that I could form a clear understanding of both the organizations and the types of evidence potentially available for the twentieth century. Women are more visible in these collections, by virtue of their frequent requests of celebrations. The visibility of women in these types of documents suggests they had a more public role than organizational records indicate. In cases of conflict, however, men were the majority of the defendants, perhaps because of their leadership roles in the registry.

Some of the richest archival sources for teasing out the activities of practitioners and state policy toward Ocha-Ifá in different periods are the Fondos Audiencia and Gobierno Provincial de Matanzas. These fondos contain information obtained from the police, both municipal and provincial, concerning the alleged criminal activity of practitioners of religions of African origin. These documents, which range from letters to trial summaries, note the race of defendants and plaintiffs, as well as that of the witnesses for both sides. They consist of records concerning crimes that range from possession of
brujería objects to murder. The majority of the brujería trials I analyse were found in these two fondos, as were conflicts between religious practitioners and other sectors of society. Male practitioners are over-represented in these collections, although women appear occasionally as defendants, or witnesses, particularly in cases of brujería.

Published ethnographies also contributed to my research in several ways. In some cases they provided evidence to help sustain arguments concerning the objections republican governments’ objections to the ritual behaviour of practitioners. Government documents rarely provide details concerning objectionable “prácticas contra la moral,” but ethnographical data recording participant observation can help to illuminate some of those objections. Ethnographic studies also provide some evidence concerning the ways in which some practitioners used their religion in the struggle against Batista, either as a form of protection from Batista or in support of the insurgency that toppled him in 1959.

By the 1980s archival documents produced by practitioners through the Registro de Asociaciones and similar regulatory bodies disappear. Legislation introduced with the 1976 Cuban Constitution abolished laws requiring religions of African origin to register with the Ministerio de Justicia, eliminating a rich source of documentation. Certainly, police records should continue to show requests for permission to celebrate religious fiestas or initiate people to Ocha-Ifá, as well as complaints or other action taken against practitioners, but these documents are not available to foreigners. Lack of access to certain collections of documents makes the study of Ocha-Ifá difficult during this period, but there are alternative sources available that reveal the activity of some practitioners during this time.
Although some practitioners produced religious manuals in the mid twentieth century, practitioners started producing their own documents more consciously in the 1980s. The results of the ceremonias de la letra del año, in addition to predicting the events and occurrences of the coming year, also revealed tensions among practitioners, desires to restructure ritual practice, and opinions on national and international politics.

By the late 1990s two groups of babalaos had made these letras del año available on the internet. Practitioners also began to use the internet as a venue for publishing their stories and opinions on Ocha-Ifá during the 1990s, but especially in the last five to ten years. These online publications serve as excellent sources of information on subjects that more mainstream Cuban publications do not address.

In addition to documents consciously produced by practitioners, I also conducted thirteen oral history interviews with practitioners of Ocha-Ifá. My informants were from Havana and Matanzas, were practitioners of Ocha-Ifá – babalaos, babalochas and  iyalochas – and served as sources mostly for the period 1980-2005, although some informants provided information for chapters covering earlier periods. In Havana I employed several methods of contacting practitioners. On some occasions interviews resulted from casual meetings, as was the case with Juan Ramón Velázquez whom I met in the Arzobispado while we were both conducting research. I was also interested in speaking with specific individuals, however, like Victor Betancourt and Antonio Castañeda, because they were the leaders of religious houses and/or movements. I could not get in touch with these people directly and, therefore, asked Cuban friends or acquaintances if they knew these people and were willing to provide an introduction.
Aurelio Alonso facilitated my interview with Victor Betancourt, who invited me to an initiation ceremony of eight children to Ifá. I sat on a stool in the patio of Betancourt’s house with the families of the children to witness the final two hours of the ceremony. Then, after the children and their families had retreated to other areas of the house, Betancourt sat down for my interview that lasted about one and a half hours. During a break in the interview Betancourt asked someone to bring him his okpele, or divining chain consisting of eight metal disks, which he tossed on the ground. He interpreted the pattern in which the disks fell to mean that the interview was very strong and could impact many people.5

Conducting interviews in Matanzas was a very different situation than Havana. Matanceros are more conservative than habaneros and were more reluctant to grant interviews about their lives unless someone they trusted provided a solid reference. I had contacted Joel Suárez Rodes from the Centro Memorial Martin Luther King (CMMLK) in Havana regarding lodging in Matanzas, and he put me in touch with the Centro Kairos, the CMMLK’s sister organization in Matanzas, and its director, Samuel Rodríguez. The Centro Kairos, in addition to lodging me, put me in touch with one of its staff, Kimbo, who was also a babalocha and lived in the nearby barrio la Marina. Kimbo provided personal introductions to all of the people I interviewed in Matanzas and we selected participants based on criteria I discussed with him, such as the number of men and women and limiting the number of babalos I spoke with. Ifá has become such a popular specialization among men in recent years that a good majority of male practitioners with whom I spoke were initiated to Ocha at some point, but dedicated their lives to Ifá by the

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time I began conducting interviews. Not wanting to eclipse Ocha, I limited my interviews with babalao.

Most of the people with whom I spoke in Havana and Matanzas had been initiated at least ten years prior to my interview and had a considerable amount of knowledge of the religion, as well as its practice over extended periods of time. Many had participated as aleysos, or non-initiates, in some capacity for years prior to initiation. Several informants with whom I spoke were initiated in the 1950s, most as children, and had varying memories of religious practice prior to the revolution. These interviews assisted in analysing the subjectivity of practicing Ocha-Ifá in a form that was otherwise non-existent for the late twentieth century. My interviews began with a series of questions to determine basic information, such as age, initiation to Ocha-Ifá and occupation, and then proceeded to questions concerning the individual’s experiences as a practitioner of a religion of African origin in relation to the state, his or her community, and the family. From this point in the interview I used responses to previous questions to direct the rest of the interview. As I was interested in specific issues, such as attitudes to homosexuality, women, and perceptions of treatment from state authorities at different levels, I worked these questions into all interviews if they did not arise from an individual’s narrative.

Irregular and uneven access to the Archivo Nacional had a significant impact on the writing of this dissertation. A comparative study of Havana and Matanzas was not possible, nor was a truly regional study of Matanzas, as a considerable number of documents concerning politics and government in Matanzas have been relocated to the Archivo Nacional in Havana. This dissertation, therefore, makes stong suggestions
concerning the practice of Ocha-Ifá during the twentieth century, based on the evidence I was able to access, rather than drawing strong conclusions and providing a more complex analysis of state-practitioner relations.

**Background to the Subject**

Ocha-Ifá is a religion practiced throughout Cuba that involves direct and indirect communication with the *orishas*, deities who control human destiny. The *orishas* demand worship and offerings in return for guiding humans through the world and protecting them from danger. Throughout the twentieth century, Ocha-Ifá gave Cubans of African descent, and a minority of white Cubans, solutions to situations that were beyond their control, such as illness and unemployment, by forming communities that looked after their members. *Olorishas’* knowledge of curative plants allowed them to provide cures for each other’s illnesses during times when they could not afford to visit a doctor, or when western medicine failed to help. In the event that a member of the community lost his or her job, the community provided for the family and helped the person to find new employment. If an *olorisha* was unsure of how to proceed in relation to a specific problem in his or her personal or professional life, he or she could consult the *orishas* for advice and guidance. This matrix of material and spiritual interaction provides a unique window through which to examine group identity vis-à-vis mainstream society, as well as notions of citizenship because it provides some insight into the workings of a significant sector of civil society.

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Ocha-Ifá in Cuba dates to the colonial era, primarily the early nineteenth century, when Spain began increasing sugar production on the island and importing large numbers of slaves from Africa’s Bight of Benin to work on the plantations. This relatively late arrival of large-scale slavery had two important impacts on the country: well into the nineteenth century a large number of slaves were African born (in 1870, 75%) and they retained their cultural and spiritual beliefs. Whether or not these religious beliefs corresponded to Yoruba religious traditions is the subject of considerable debate.

There are two scholarly trends that attempt to explain why the Yoruba belief system became dominant in Cuba by the twentieth century. One of these focuses on the number of people belonging to a particular ethnic group, or series of ethnic groups, which were enslaved and sent to Cuba, and the other argues the dominance of cultural practices. George Brandon and Michele Reid subscribe to the numbers theory, arguing that the Yoruba at 30-34% made up the largest single ethnic group of enslaved Africans taken to Cuba between 1850 and 1870. It is therefore logical that such large numbers of a given ethnic group would have a significant impact on the belief systems of other Africans they encountered in Cuba.

Recently, scholars have re-examined previous counts and estimates of slaves entering Cuba, which were never exact, and suggest that slave traders often “assigned” ethnic origins to individuals or groups based on the port in which they were purchased or

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8 George Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World, the Dead Sell Memories* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) 55.

9 Brandon uses Moreno Fraginals’ data to arrive at his 34% 1850-1870 and Reid extends the period from 1817-1880 to arrive at 30%. Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World, 58; Michele Reid, “The Yoruba in Cuba: Origins, Identities, and Transformations,” in *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World*, edited by Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004) 115.
loaded onto ships. Based on this interpretation of slave statistics, David Eltis argues that after 1790 when Cuba received over 95% of its slaves, slaves arrived from all over sub-Saharan Africa. Yoruba speakers could not have accounted for more than 12% of those enslaved and sent to Cuba during the entire slave trade. Bahia, Brazil, on the other hand, received 40% of its slaves from Yoruba-speaking regions.\(^\text{10}\) Eltis further argues that throughout the nineteenth century the Yoruba mingled with a variety of different African ethnic groups such as the Susu, Igbo, Yao and Lunda who were from all different regions of the continent.\(^\text{11}\) Numbers, therefore, cannot account for the strong presence of Yoruba cultural manifestations, but an alternative explanation for this phenomenon does not yet exist.

Scholars tend to agree, however, that the Yoruba in West Africa prior to British colonization of the region tended to worship only one or two orishas that belonged to their village and/or family. Oyó was the last and greatest kingdom of the Yoruba before the region was conquered by the British in the nineteenth century.\(^\text{12}\) The Oyó Yoruba allied themselves with the Hausa in the north, and as expert horsemen conquered the Egba, Eguado, Owu and Dahomey kingdoms during the eighteenth century.\(^\text{13}\) The Oyó kingdom fell around 1830 as a result of decades of mismanagement by chiefly councils that appointed weak kings to preserve their own authority. Fulani jihadists from the


\(^\text{11}\) Eltis, “The Diaspora of Yoruba Speakers,” 33.


\(^\text{13}\) Matory, Sex and the Empire that is No More, 8.
north ultimately destroyed the old capital, and the Oyó Yoruba fleeing south were captured by European slave traders.\textsuperscript{14} At its peak the Oyó Empire had control over most of the Yoruba and Dahomey regions of present day Nigeria and the Benin Republic.\textsuperscript{15} When the Yoruba were kidnapped, enslaved and taken to the New World, they arrived with the knowledge of only the orishas with which they had been raised and taught to worship. The Yoruba slaves did not therefore take a coherent and complex religious system with them to Cuba; they developed that system in Cuba as a result of the particular circumstances in which they found themselves, particularly by the end of the nineteenth century. In West Africa women typically cared for the orishas’ shrines and were initiated as possession priestesses who communicated the orishas’ messages to humans through trance. Men worshipped the orishas, but were not usually possession priests.\textsuperscript{16} Of the over two hundred orishas identified in West Africa, less than fifty survived into twentieth century Cuban ritual practice and only slightly more than twenty were commonly worshipped by the end of the twentieth century. Most of these orishas are connected in some way to the Catholic saints. The impact of Catholicism on the religion continues to be debated.

There are two main theories that account for connections between Catholicism and Yoruba orisha worship in Cuba. One argues that because of the European dominated plantation economy, slaveholders and colonial authorities imposed Spanish language, culture and religion on all slaves, so that they could understand what their masters and

\textsuperscript{14} Matory, \textit{Sex and the Empire that is No More}, 13-14.


\textsuperscript{16} Matory, \textit{Sex and the Empire that is No More}. 
overseers expected of them. Unintentionally, this cultural integration also provided slaves from different regions, ethnicities, and language groups with the ability to communicate with each other and describe their experiences. In addition to forcing acculturation, integrating ideology often promoted cultural appropriation between Africans who used Spanish language and religion as their common ground for the formation of societies, communication with each other, and religious and cultural expression. Africans frequently used Christian saints in place of their gods in order to hide their beliefs from the Spanish or blended the characteristics of their gods with the saints in a syncretic manner, so that it became impossible to separate their characteristics. The extent of this blending, however, is the subject of much debate.

Anthropologist Andrew Apter, in contrast, that the Christian religious symbols were Africanized. The “reinterpretation of Catholic saints as African gods in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santeria, and Brazilian Candomble – a process that Herskovits characterizes in psychological terms – was recast by the model of Yoruba deep knowledge as a mode of political revaluation and revision.” Apter views the connection of Catholic saints with Yoruba orishas as “a form of collective appropriation, the saints were Africanized by New World blacks as double agents in their religious sanctuaries and societies. If the public identity of a saint was European Catholic, then its secret,


18 Using Christianity to mask worship of African gods is the explanation often provided by practitioners of Santería while most scholars agree that some form of syncretism or blending is a more accurate way of describing the relationship between Santería and Catholicism. For examples see Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World*, 77; Fernández Olmos and Parvasini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, 29.

deeper, and more powerful African manifestation could be invoked and manipulated by initiates.”

For Apter, blending or syncretism did not occur in Cuba; slaves manipulated European perceptions of this process as a form of cultural resistance.

David H. Brown uses the term “creolization” to explain and describe the social dimension of cultural, spiritual and artistic blending that occurred in Cuba among Africans and between Afro-Cubans and non-Afro-Cubans, as well as the cultural dimension articulated earlier by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price. For Brown, creolization refers to “the new ways in which [forms] were used, by whom and under what circumstances.” Brown uses creolization not merely as another term for blending or merging, but rather “as a way to analyze the historical reconstitution and transformation of African-derived cultures in the Americas through the “creation” of new “social bonds.”

For the purposes of my research, Brown's interpretation of creolization provides a useful basis for examining and explaining the divergence in divination practices and methods, interpretation of signs, and organizational framework as they pertain to political action or expression. I argue that this fluidity of belief and practice allowed orishas to manipulate revolutionary rhetoric and practice, even as elements of the revolutionary government sought to relegate religions of African origin to Cuba’s past. A history and culture of adaptation made orishas politically flexible.

Orisha worship in Cuba retained its Yoruba character until the end of the nineteenth century. As Cuban ethnographer Natalia Bolívar argues, two Lucumí or

20 Apter, Black Critics and Kings, 238.


Yoruba living in Havana at the turn of the twentieth century, Lorenzo Samá and Latuan, decided that, in order to avoid confusion between Yoruba ethnic practices and individual cults in Cuba, they needed to unite all of the *orisha* cults under one system that they called Regla de Ocha (the rule of the *orisha*), or simply Ocha.\(^{23}\) This unification of distinct cults enabled the Lucumí or Yoruba religious identity to spread east across the island, including to regions previously dominated by Arará (Dahomeans) and Congo or Bantú religions.\(^{24}\) Men and women could be initiated to and possessed by the *orishas* in Ocha practice.

Unlike *orisha* worship, Ifá was a Yoruba divination priesthood that communicated with the *orishas* via an oracle, not possession. The archaeological evidence from Ile-Ife (Ife house) suggests that it grew from scattered villages to a politically centralized urban centre some time around the tenth century C.E. It became the cultural and political centre of Yorubaland around the twelfth century through a complex political and religious system organized around the king or Ooni.\(^{25}\) In addition to allying with the great kingdoms of West Africa, the Ife Yoruba also reinvented myths of creation that explained both their divine origins and justified the spread of Ifá to regions outside of Ife. The Yoruba myth of creation tells that Oduduwa sent out sixteen sons to found the first kingdoms. In this version, all Yoruba originated from a common ancestor and location and were able to establish their kingdoms legitimately.\(^{26}\)

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\(^{25}\) Ogundiran, *Archaeology and History in Ilare District(Central Yorubaland, Nigeria)* 1200-1900 A.D., 19.

historical documents indicate that Ifá was an exclusively male religious office; however, some researchers insist that the Yoruba did not exclude members on the basis of gender. Most researchers argue that babalaoš (Ifá priests) could be found all over the Bight of Benin, not only in Yoruba territory, by the nineteenth century, indicating that Ifá divination was in demand and important to other religious and political traditions. However, very few babalaoš arrived as slaves in Cuba.²⁷ It is still unclear whether or not women were ever initiated into this religious tradition in Africa, but in Cuba, men were the only initiates and practitioners until the twenty-first century.

David H. Brown has traced the origins of Ifá in Cuba to the 1820s or 1830s through a combination of extensive oral histories and archival research, and a babalao (priest of Ifá) named Atandá. He has also identified a handful of other men who arrived later in the nineteenth century as babalaoš, living either in Havana or Matanzas, but working almost exclusively in Havana by the turn of the twentieth century.²⁸ Most researchers insist that the men trained in Ifá who arrived in Cuba as slaves and survived to the late nineteenth century had not completed their religious training in West Africa before their enslavement. They therefore did not have complete knowledge of Ifá and had to reconstruct it through collective effort, and often pure invention, in Cuba.²⁹ There may be some truth to this notion.

Miguel Ramos argues that women, not men, had most of the ritual knowledge of both Ocha and Ifá at the turn of the twentieth century, although knowledge does not

²⁷ See for example Brown, Santería Enthroned, 18.
²⁸ Brown, Santería Enthroned, 76.
²⁹ For example Brandon, Santería from Africa to the New World, 120.
necessarily translate into initiation to Ifá, or the possibility of divining via an oracle. Ma Monserrat González (Apotó, Obá Tero) was a Yoruba woman of Egbado (a Yoruba ethnic group) origins and Changó possession priestess who arrived in Cuba sometime around the 1840s or 1850s.\(^{30}\) She is best known for introducing the worship of Oduduwa (also Odú, Odua) and Olokún to Cuban orisha worship and for commissioning the only set of surviving Egbado drums some time in the late nineteenth century.\(^{31}\) Men and women may, therefore, have both had important roles in reconstructing the Ifá priesthood in Cuba. Exactly when Ocha and Ifá united is not entirely clear, although oral histories conducted with late twentieth century practitioners suggest the immediate post-abolition period, perhaps into the 1920s.\(^{32}\) David H. Brown argues that as babalao became more numerous, and more knowledgeable through the appropriation of knowledge from women, they began to take over some of the religious activities conducted by women. This area requires further research.

Throughout the colonial period African religious or recreational activities had been restricted to Sundays and holidays and they always took place under the watchful eye of colonial authorities, or the Church, through the formation of cabildos de nación. Under the cabildo system, Africans of the same ethnicity could meet and hold religious or recreational activities that colonial authorities hoped would eventually become more Catholic than African through Christian guidance. In reality, however, the Catholic Church played a minimal role in catechizing Africans, and the cabildos continued to


\(^{31}\) Ramos, “La división de la Habana,” 44.

\(^{32}\) Researchers do not exactly point to the unification of Ocha and Ifá, it is implied tangentially in their work. To date the work of Miguel Ramos and David H. Brown are the most explicit. See Ramos, “La división de la Habana,” 45-50; Brown, Santería Enthroned, 20.
function under African belief systems. Republican authorities continued to regulate and monitor the activities of practitioners of religions of African origin via legislation implemented during the colonial period in 1888. Under this new framework, in which colonial authorities sought to phase out the African *cabildos de nación*, the new *Ley de Asociaciones* established the framework for the formation and regulation of associations or societies that were supposed to ease the transition from slavery to free labour. By enabling Africans and Cubans of African descent to establish mutual aid societies that would address the specific needs of former slaves, the *Ley de Asociaciones* was intended to allow colonial authorities to monitor the recreational activities of a particular sector of society, while at the same time teaching Africans and Cubans of African descent what late colonial authorities understood as acceptable behaviour.³³ The purpose of this law was to regulate religious, political, social and other organizations of all Cubans, regardless of race or national origin, which included unions and *gremios* (trade associations) of workers.

Associations did not restrict membership, unless members themselves placed restrictions on such things as age, payment of membership fees, or other criteria, and could include as members Africans, their Cuban-born children and anyone else they deemed acceptable. Membership, while often following ethnic heritage, did not explicitly exclude individuals based on that ethnic heritage. It is possible to find associations with strong Lucumí or Yoruba traditions and religious practices that accepted Congo or Mandinga descended individuals as members. Alternatively, as a

possible explanation for the increased practice of Ocha-Ifá, Silvina Testa has demonstrated, as Ocha expanded east across the island from Havana and Matanzas in the last decade of the nineteenth century, it absorbed other ethnic identities and imposed Lucumí or Yoruba ritual structure on them. Her case study of Sagua la Grande in the province of Las Villas traces the introduction of Ocha in 1888, via the Havana-based babalao Adechina or Remigio Herrera, in which Congo and Gangá religious traditions were replaced by the Lucumí, although practitioners continued to identify as Congo or Gangá. 34 Practitioners continue to pass on their family fundamentos (sacred items that could be stones, bone or other items) of non-Lucumí origin into the twenty-first century, even though they also have the fundamentos belonging to the Lucumí orishas. 35

But religion did not always form the basis for unity among Africans and their descendants in Cuba. Miguel Ramos has identified a ritual split that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century in Ocha practice between Havana and Matanzas. Ma Monserrat González, who had given the first Odúa to a babalao, was of the Egbado Yoruba and, while living in Havana, promoted Egbado-style worship and initiation among practitioners. At the same time Latuan, the woman who shares credit for the unification of the orisha cults, was of Oyó (another ethnic group, also the most dominant in early nineteenth century Yorubaland) origins, and sought to change the Havana initiation method from the simple ceremonies of the Egbado Yoruba, who had arrived first in the late eighteenth century, to the more elaborate ceremonies of the Oyó Yoruba, who arrived in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Conflict between the Oyó and

34 Testa, Como una memoria que dura, 85.
35 Testa, Como una memoria que dura, 110.
Egbado women reached a point where Latuan’s ritual reputation and success enabled her to exclude Ma Monserrat from ritual practice in Havana. Ma Monserrat returned to Matanzas where her reputation grew and her legacy lived on in her ritual descendants.36 Ethnic identifiers continue to exist in Ocha-Ifá through variations in the dialect of ceremonial language, *patakines* or legends of the various *orishas*, and ritual practices, but they can deviate, overlap, and converge, all within the same family or branch. These ethnically distinct ritual practices are today often identified as Havana and Matanzas styles, rather than Oyó and Egbado, and practitioners often accuse each other of having incorrect knowledge, or of conducting rituals incorrectly. They refuse to recognize the distinct histories and developments of different Yoruba ethnic groups in Cuba.37

**The Literature on Ocha-Ifá**

Religions of African origin in Cuba have been popular subjects of study for more than a century. After the Spanish-American-Cuban War that ended in 1898, Cubans felt a need to prove their ability for self-government in order to shake off the tutelage of the United States. Their colour, as perceived by the Americans, was an indication of the lack of preparation and capacity for governing. But, as several researchers have pointed out, Cubans were racially mixed by 1898 and could not, therefore, point to race as the basis of their own inferiority. They instead began to focus on behaviour as the gauge to measure the advancement of their society, and many Cubans of African descent failed to meet the


dominant standards of “acceptable behaviour.” As a result of this discrimination, most of the earliest research on religions of African origin, and Ocha-Ifá specifically, was based in the fields of anthropology, criminology and medicine, and linked religions of African origin to low intellectual development, poverty, unemployment, and criminality.

Fernando Ortiz is the most well-known of these early researchers of religions of African origin, and his research was heavily guided by Italian criminologist Césare Lombroso, whose work focused on a “criminal type” that could be identified by physical markers. Instead of focusing on the physiognomy of the *brujos* (the term Ortiz applied to practitioners of religions of African origin), however, Ortiz described the belief systems, rituals, objects, language and clothing that comprised the religious traditions of the people he studied. Ortiz’ research resulted in the widespread persecution of practitioners of religions of African origins for the first two decades of the twentieth century. Aline Helg, Alejandra Bronfman, and Ernesto Chávez Álvarez have all documented the extent to which homes were raided, objects confiscated, and practitioners jailed for their alleged criminal activity. If practitioners of religions of African origins had not yet committed an act of violence, it was assumed to be merely a question of time before their beliefs led them down that path.

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In the 1920s, in an attempt to restore pride and self-respect to a nation still not free of US intervention in its domestic affairs, artists and intellectuals answered the call to discover and celebrate autochthonous Cuban culture. They found in religions of African origin the basis for *Afrocubanismo*, an artistic, musical and literary movement that sought to showcase the African contribution to Cuban culture. Of course, these efforts were advanced by the fact that similar movements, such as the Harlem Renaissance and *Indigenismo*, emerged at the same time, making *Afrocubanismo* part of an international movement to celebrate the culture of some of the most neglected populations in the Americas. Although *Afrocubanismo* diluted much of the music and art that originated with the religions for mainstream consumption, it contributed to more positive representations of both Cubans of African descent and religions of African origins. Fernando Ortiz, once again, appeared at the forefront of this movement and continued his anthropological investigation into Cuba’s African heritage. Scholars rarely attempted to historicize the religion or its practitioners, beyond mentioning its African origins. *Afrocubanismo* was, however, the first cultural movement to recognize the value of religions of African origin, even if ethnographic studies stemming from it promoted the preservation of knowledge and artefacts in museums in the belief that ritual.

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43 One significant exception to this practice is Ruth Landes’ *City of Women*, which examined Brazilian Candomblé (the Brazilian equivalent of Cuban Santería; with similar historical parallels in terms of slavery, Yoruba origins, and Catholic influences) in the 1930s. Landes argues that practitioners of Candomblé in Bahia were completely excluded from economic and political participation in the region and used their religion to compensate for a lack of economic resources, political action, and responsive society. Ruth Landes, *City of Women* (New York: MacMillan, 1947).
practice would soon become extinct. This focus of intellectual inquiry continued into the 1950s under the term “folklore.” In this endeavour Ortiz was joined by other Cuban researchers, such as Rómulo Lachatañeré and Lydia Cabrera, who conducted extensive ethnographical research in the 1930s-1940s and 1940s-1950s, respectively.

After the 1959 Cuban Revolution, studies of religions of African origin exploded and became subjects of interest to Cubans and non-Cubans alike. In Cuba, research followed the course set by Ortiz in the 1920s and maintained an anthropological focus on folklore, although there are some works examining the topic from a sociological or artistic perspective. Non-Cubans have approached the subject from anthropological, ethnographical, musical, literary, sociological and artistic points of view. Regardless of the discipline, this post-revolution research has significantly expanded the knowledge and understanding of the origins, rituals, objects, and language of the people who practice religions of African origin in Cuba.

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44 This was the view taken by Fernando Ortiz and his protégés by the 1940s. The revolutionary government adopted this view.

45 Ortiz’ later works include *Los Instrumentos de la musica afrocubana* (Havana: Dirección de Cultura del Ministerio de Educación, 1952-55); *Glosario de afronegrismos* (Havana: El Siglo XXI, 1924); *Contrapunteo del tabaco y el azucar (advertencia de sus contrastes agrarios, economicos, historicos y sociales, su etnografia y su transculturacion)* (Havana: J. Montero, 1940). Cabrera’s most well-known work is, *El Monte* (Havana: Ediciones C.R., 1954). Rómulo Lachatañeré’s work was recently published in Cuba under the title *El sistema religioso de los afrocubanos* and is a compilation of his writing up to his untimely death in 1952.


Few researchers, however, have attempted to historicize religions of African origin broadly, much less Ocha-Ifá specifically, and the lack of documentary evidence can certainly account for the paucity of historical research. Existing histories dealing with Ocha-Ifá generally comprise parts of analyses concerning religion or race during the Revolution, and are therefore part of larger narratives. The Catholic Church and the Cuban state after 1959 form the bulk of historical studies of religion in Cuba, and although most of them pay some attention to Ocha-Ifá or other religions of African origin, mere mention of government policy in support of or against these religious traditions does not provide an analytical framework for explaining how or why the revolutionary government legislated as it did. Nor do these studies reveal the ways in which practitioners accepted, denied, questioned or ignored such legislation. To date Alejandro de la Fuente is the only Cubanist to examine Ocha-Ifá from the perspective of religious persecution throughout the Revolution, without subsuming it entirely under generalized religious persecution. De la Fuente argues that the leadership of the Revolution tried to discourage Santería’s practice, in contrast to its treatment of Catholicism. These leaders saw Santería as primitive superstition that fostered violence and criminality. Proper education and opportunity within the Revolution, they argued,

48 For examples see Carlos Moore, Castro the Blacks and Africa (Los Angeles: Center for Afro American Studies, University of California, 1988); de la Fuente, A Nation for All; Eugenio Matibag, Afro-Cuban Religious Experience (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996).


50 Although I prefer to use the term Regla de Ocha-Ifá or just Ocha-Ifá, I maintain the terminology used by other researchers in discussing their work.
would eliminate Cubans’ need to practice Santería. Revolutionary policy designed to discourage the practice of religions of African origin also had unintended consequences that enabled practitioners to further develop their ritual practice. By examining some of the ways in which practitioners interpreted state policy in the late twentieth century, this study contributes to analyses of popular and official thoughts on citizenship and responsibility.

Although Ocha-Ifá is primarily a religion of African origin, a significant number of white Cubans have practiced it since the early twentieth century. In his study of *Afrocubanismo* in the 1920s and 1930s, Robin Moore found that as well as celebrating Afro Cuban art and music, some white Cubans also became initiates of Afro Cuban religions. George Brandon also noted that during the nineteenth century, in the municipality of Regla, Havana, much of the non-African descended population practiced Santería. Scholars who study Ocha-Ifá as an exclusively African phenomenon subsequently miss important features of the religion as it developed in Cuban society. According to sociologist Michael Banton,

\[\ldots\text{individuals use physical and cultural differences to create groups and categorize by the processes of inclusion and exclusion. Ethnic groups result from inclusive processes and racial groups from exclusive processes. When groups interact, processes of change affect their boundaries in ways determined by the form and intensity of competition.}\]

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51 de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 292-293.

52 Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness*, 223.

53 Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World*, 83-84.

Therefore, where one sector of society could classify practitioners of Ocha-Ifá in general terms as Afro Cuban, African or black based on physical and cultural indicators, different sectors of the religious population could classify each other in more ethnic terms based on shared, but not identical, cultural indicators. Late twentieth century calls for the creation of a pan-Yoruba identity based on religious affiliation, not race or ethnicity, demonstrate this process of reassessment.\(^{55}\) The degree of inclusion or exclusion and the context of the boundaries created determine a range of choices, including the formation and transformation of ethnic identities.\(^ {56}\) It is these subtle, yet powerful, distinctions that must be examined as part of an analysis of Ocha-Ifá and race.

Despite the limited studies available that treat the subject of Ocha-Ifá and politics in Cuba, studies of religions of African origin and politics in other regions suggest avenues of inquiry for Cuba. Works on Brazil by Ruth Landes, Roger Bastide, Rowan Ireland and Diana de G. Brown address the complex relationships linking religion and the state, race, gender, national identity, and citizenship in the twentieth century.\(^ {57}\) Bastide, Brown and Ireland draw upon anthropological fieldwork, contemporary police records, terreiro (the land and buildings used in Brazil for Candomblé) documents, and oral histories. Ireland’s approach to the study of contemporary Brazilian religions has contributed significantly to my analysis of Ocha-Ifá. He argues that the beliefs, images and stories of the religions he studied defined the boundaries between private concerns

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\(^{55}\) The Asociación Cultural Yoruba has called for the unification of all people practicing the Yoruba religions in the world using such terms as hermanar and unificar in several letra del año ceremonies since the late 1990s.

\(^{56}\) Banton, as quoted by Barot in "Introduction," 6.

and public matters. Religious identity defined rights and responsibilities with regard to public issues, such as the role of the citizen and the expectations concerning political leaders. Myths and symbols in each belief system revealed embedded assumptions about what constitutes legitimate authority in dealing with policies. These myths and symbols go further by suggesting policy objectives on issues such as material progress and assumptions about the efficacy of human action.58 These contemporary Brazilian religions provide people with a framework in which to act and relate to society.

**Arguments of the Study**

The central concern of this study is the multiple subjectivities of practitioners of Ocha-Ifá during the Cuban Revolution. Citizenship, as simultaneously “a political status assigned to individuals by states, a relation of belonging to specific communities” and “a set of social practices that define the relationships between peoples and states and among peoples within communities,” provides a flexible framework for analysing notions of identity and belonging among practitioners.59 This study focuses on the communities and social practices rather than the political status because they facilitate an analysis of the subjectivity of citizenship that “link [the] experiential and discursive dimensions of citizenship” to those excluded from full citizenship based on their subject positions.60

The issue of citizenship for Africans, and Cubans of African descent, first appears in Cuban historical records during the 1868 attempt to break away from Spain. The white

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58 Ireland, *Kingdoms Come*, 43.


60 Canning and Rose, “Introduction,” *Gender, Citizenships and Subjectivities*, 5.
leaders of the rebellion in the east freed their slaves, convinced them to join in the struggle for independence from Spain and called them citizens.\textsuperscript{61} Without independence, a nation, or a constitution, however, citizenship could only be conceived of in terms of community or culture, until independence from Spain was finally secured in 1898. Citizenship, therefore, implied the union of blacks and whites in a common cause and, by default, referred to men. Those who had not fought could not be citizens.

The first Cuban Constitution, drawn up in 1901 during the US occupation of the island, made legal citizens of all those born on the island, or to Cuban parents outside of Cuba. Former African slaves and \textit{peninsulares} (Spanish born) became naturalized citizens.\textsuperscript{62} The impact that citizenship had on the lives of Cubans was determined by other variables. Only Cuban males over the age of twenty-one, who could read and write, or who owned personal property worth $250, or who had served in the Liberation Army, were allowed to vote, but this classification at least included former African slaves and their descendants.\textsuperscript{63} Louis Pérez, however, has pointed out that the ability to read and write was also a voting requirement that effectively denied suffrage to a large number of Africans and Cubans of African descent.\textsuperscript{64} Gender was a variable that prevented women from voting until 1934.

\textsuperscript{61} Ferrer, \textit{Insurgent Cuba}, 1-2.


\textsuperscript{64} Louis A. Pérez Jr., \textit{Cuba, Between Reform and Revolution} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 212.
There are some common themes that emerged and re-emerged throughout the twentieth century as Cuban governments attempted to come to terms with Cuba’s history as a slave colony belonging to Spain. Although the 1901 Constitution guaranteed the free profession of all religions as long as they respected Christianity and public order, it left the interpretation of public order to law enforcement officials. In order to prove its capacity for self-government, Cuba’s first republican administration sought to prohibit all behaviour not corresponding to its understanding of an independent republic. Africans and their descendants were frequently targeted for practicing their religions, playing African-derived music, or simply behaving in a manner deemed unacceptable to government officials. State harassment and persecution of those practicing religions of African origin prevented them from enjoying their rights and responsibilities as full citizens, leading them to alternate forms of defining themselves and their place in the nation. This incomplete acceptance of Africans and their descendants created what Charles Taylor calls a ‘politics of recognition’ in which those in power and the marginalized drew boundaries of inclusion and exclusion as a means to contesting these boundaries in the new republic.

During the first several decades of the twentieth century Cubans of African descent experienced citizenship subjectively in their dealings with intellectuals, and politicians. Brujería and the brujo served as the locus of republican anxiety, but practitioners of religions of African origin often confronted and contested the power of

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65 Article 26, “Constitucion de la Republica de Cuba, Constitucion de 1901.”


local authorities to limit their ritual activities, using their knowledge and understanding of
the Constitution to appeal to higher levels of state power for legal support. National
campaigns in the first decades of the twentieth century to identify and prevent the spread
of brujería gave way to intellectual and artistic quests to find and celebrate
autochthonous Cuban culture, at the heart of which were practitioners of Ocha-Ifá.
Practitioners used their ritual heritage to perform variations of their musical traditions and
their ritual knowledge inspired artistic production. Afrocubanismo, as this intellectual
and artistic movement was called, faded from the scene by the 1940s, but was revived in
some ways after the 1959 revolution. Culture emerged as a code word for religions of
African origin and race, rather than black or African, words republican governments
argued betrayed the legacy of José Martí. Insisting that Presidents, like Machado and
Batista, were initiated to Ocha-Ifá provided practitioners with some form of expressing
disapproval of their behaviour. It also enabled Cubans of African descent to attempt to
alter, or at the very least, control their behaviour through ritual offerings to the orishas.

In order to make citizenship more inclusive for all Cubans, the 1940 Constitution
made illegal and punishable all discrimination based on sex, race, colour or class. It also
guaranteed the right to free association and public gatherings, including marches, as well
as the free profession of the religion of choice, provided that it respected Christian
morality and public order.⁶⁸ Governments of the 1940s and 1950s did not uphold the
most progressive of Cuba’s constitutions, however, and Cubans of African descent,
especially those practicing religions of African origin, continued to experience serious
limitations to their exercise of citizenship.

⁶⁸ República de Cuba, “Constitución Política de 1940.”
The 1959 Revolution altered the terms on which citizenship would be defined and experienced for the remainder of the century. Although the revolutionary government did not draw up a constitution until 1976, it made clear that citizenship would be linked to service to the nation and Revolution. Intellectuals and artists renewed the efforts of the 1920s and 1930s to promote and preserve autochthonous Cuban culture. As occurred during *Afrocubanismo*, practitioners of African origins also participated, joining such entities as the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional*.\(^{69}\) This type of cultural citizenship, as conceived of by Aihwa Ong, is defined by “the cultural practices and beliefs produced out of negotiating the often ambivalent and contested relations with the state and its hegemonic forms that establish the criteria of belonging within a national population and territory.” It is a “dual process of self-making and being made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society.”\(^{70}\) Practitioners of religions of African origin became an identifiable sector of society as much through their persistence in practicing their religions, as through the state’s attempts to eliminate that practice. In seizing upon revolutionary policy to perform their religion as culture, practitioners manipulated that policy in unintended ways. Enriquito, a well-known *babalao* from Havana (La Jata), believes that the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional* (CFN) transformed Ocha-Ifá from an insignificant practice of marginalized people to being something important.\(^{71}\) Former performers with the CFN have expressed the role they and the ensemble had in educating,

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\(^{69}\) Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness*, 41-61.


\(^{71}\) Fernández Robaina, *Hablan Paleros y Santeros*, 88.
not only Cubans, but audiences around the world about their religion.\(^{72}\) Concepts of religion as culture went much farther after 1959 than they had in the 1920s and 1930s to break down social barriers and reproduce representations of the culture of Cubans of African descent.

Paradoxically, as it facilitated efforts to create cultural institutions founded on religions of African origin, like Ocha-Ifá, the revolutionary government also began to discourage their practice and emphasize their contribution to delinquency. But unlike the early decades of the century, practitioners rarely found themselves accused of or charged with serious crimes simply because they belonged to religious organizations. As discovered by the babalocha Carlos Fidel Tellechea, whose unfortunate encounter with the MININT is related in chapter three, practicing a religion of African origin was not a crime, but using it to counsel citizens to commit crimes against la patria, consciously or not, was. As in the first years of the republic, however, religions of African origin were often believed to be the cause of an offence, not necessarily the individual himself.\(^{73}\) Religion, in the guise of culture, became the only race-based form of organizing, partly because the revolutionary government attributed religions of African origin to Cubans of African descent, and also because practitioners of these religions refused to dissolve their religious associations or stop practicing their religion. Culture, whether at the level of national projects of redefining Cuba, or on the level of personal worship, became an

\(^{72}\) Juan Garcia, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007; María Dolores Pereira, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007.

\(^{73}\) Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, “La Sociedad Africana Nuestra Señora de la Caridad” Finca la Julia, 29 August 1951-16 November 1961, Fondo Asociaciones, leg. 1, exp. 42.
important discourse through which Cubans of African descent, more specifically practitioners of Ocha-Ifá, could make claims on citizenship and national belonging.\textsuperscript{74}

The Preamble to the 1976 Constitution formalized revolutionary notions of service to the nation as criteria for citizenship. Cuban citizens were the heirs and those who would carry on the creative work and traditions of combat, strength, heroism, and sacrifice forged by their ancestors consisting of Cuba’s aboriginal people, African slaves those who fought for independence in 1868 and 1895, and the workers, peasants, students and intellectuals who struggled against imperialist domination, political corruption, lack of rights and freedoms, unemployment and exploitation for fifty years.\textsuperscript{75} To be a full, revolutionary citizen, the decree specified, it was necessary to identify with Cuban struggles for independence and the Revolution that would guarantee certain rights and freedoms. The right to profess and practice any religion was guaranteed in Article 54, but subsections two and three put the state in charge of regulating the activities of religious institutions, making it illegal and punishable to use faith or religious belief against the revolution, education or work responsibilities.\textsuperscript{76} Decades of experience performing cultural citizenship enabled practitioners of religions of African origin to more easily integrate their beliefs and practices with revolutionary ideology.

The “demystification” to which the CFN contributed had a cumulative and lasting impact in Cuba that enabled the simultaneous development of an African-centric orientation to Ocha-Ifá, the unification of babalao, and increased initiation to the

\textsuperscript{74} Canning and Rose, “Introduction,” Gender, Citizenships and Subjectivities, 5.


\textsuperscript{76} Republica de Cuba, Constitucion Politica de 1976.
religion. By the 1980s practitioners who had grown up and come of age during the revolution began to test the political waters by uniting for public religious ceremonies to auger the events of the coming year. The *ceremonia de la letra del año*, an annual prediction of the events or occurrences of the coming year, served as much a commentary on Cuban politics and society, as a critique of the practices of other organizations. Among such appraisals were questions as to the ritual authority of various individuals in conducting the ceremony; the authenticity, Cuban or African, of the ceremony; and the degree of support from the religious community for one ceremony over another.77 Tensions over these issues have reached such a height in recent years that two main groups of *babalao* mutually excluded the other from cultural and academic conferences on the Yoruba religions. Practitioners now use versions of revolutionary discourse to form inclusive and exclusive relationships among themselves.

In addition to race and religion, gender has also been a limiting factor in citizenship during the twentieth century. In spite of the gains women made through employment, education and improved healthcare, they are still underrepresented in high level positions within the government and have been casualties of economic restructuring that favours male employment.78 In Ocha-Ifá a similar trend occurred, beginning in the 1930s and 1940s that limited the roles women could fulfill. Once mentors to *babalao* and innovators in ritual practice, by the end of the twentieth century women were

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77 These themes surface year after year in the discourse of the two main groups conducting *ceremonias de la letra del año*: the Comision de la Letra del Año Miguel Febles Padron and the Asociación Cultural Yoruba, 1986-present.

preparing and cooking the ritual food and cleaning the altars, as assistants to men. Babalaos simultaneously became more numerous, especially after the 1959 revolution, resulting in a gendered polarization of Ocha-Ifá by the end of the century. As Ifá became a goal for male practitioners, Ocha was feminized as the religious option for women and men who could not become babalaos. One babalao, however, dared to challenge the gender hierarchy in Ocha-Ifá and began initiating women to Ifá, believing that, as in the secular world, women were capable of more than cooking and cleaning.

Although the concept of citizenship has changed considerably over the last century in Cuba, practitioners of religions of African origin, and in this case Ocha-Ifá, became adept at negotiating and manipulating legal definitions of citizenship and belonging. Their efforts to create cultural citizenship out of the incomplete citizenship they experienced, as Africans and their descendants, who refused to abandon their religious practices, were recognized in important ways as part of the nation’s heritage. In spite of its shortcomings, the revolutionary period, especially from the late 1980s, provided the first real opportunity for Cubans of African descent to exercise their citizenship rights.

**Organization of Chapters**

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. Chapter one serves as a background to Ocha-Ifá in the twentieth century and sets the stage for the remaining portion of the dissertation. The temporal framework covers the period of independence to the Cuban Revolution and serves to demonstrate that the framework within which the

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Cuban state and society would view and deal with Ocha-Ifá, and indeed religions of African origin generally, throughout the twentieth century was established in the first two to three decades of the republic. *Brujería*, the purported inherent predisposition to criminality, and the folkloric value of religions of African origin as survivals, all gained resonance among different sectors of Cuban society during these years, leaving a durable mark in the national psyche that has not yet been extirpated. Perhaps not surprisingly, this period also set the tone for the development of strategies that practitioners of Ocha-Ifá would use throughout the century to challenge state violations of their rights as Cubans citizens, demand social recognition of the value of their beliefs and, most importantly, continue practicing the religion of their ancestors. This chapter recasts historical material to examine state-practitioner interaction in order to demonstrate that practitioners of Ocha-Ifá, while subject to state violence, were also protagonists of these struggles for recognition.

Chapter two begins the examination of Ocha-Ifá and its practitioners in the context of the Cuban Revolution. In spite of its goal to change Cuban society radically, the revolutionary government maintained policies of previous regimes that did not contradict its ambitious socioeconomic vision. The Spanish colonial government had implemented the *Ley de Asociaciones* in 1888 to regulate the formation and activities of a variety of organizations, including those of religions of African origin. Every single government of the twentieth century maintained this law until 1976 when the Cuban Constitution eliminated it. Once again, a search for autochthonous Cuban culture resulted in state-sponsored promotion of cultural events and institutions based on Ocha-Ifá at the same time that the revolutionary government scorned its practice for contributing to
“superstitious beliefs” rather than scientific atheism. Because Cubans and foreigners frequently identified Cuba with Ocha-Ifá, or more popularly, Santería, and hence backwardness, religions of African origin became a central part of the debate on the past and future of the nation, and the image it would present to the world.\(^\text{80}\) Performing Ocha-Ifá as culture or folklore, conversely, could reinforce Cuba’s rich heritage.\(^\text{81}\)

Defending the revolution physically and ideologically from US invasion became a growing concern for the government after the invasion of Playa Girón in 1961. Authorities projected their anxieties onto any individual or group not perceived to be supportive of the revolution. Practitioners of religions of African origin often came under scrutiny, as did homosexuals. Authorities and the media also connected Ocha-Ifá and homosexuality, discursively labelling them weak and of questionable loyalties.\(^\text{82}\) The utilization of gender as a powerful tool for inclusion and exclusion in the revolutionary project, the exclusion of homosexuals, and the projection of that identification onto practitioners of religions of African origin, led practitioners to re-identify themselves and their religion vis-à-vis the dominant discourse on gender and sexuality.

By the mid 1980s a movement to standardize the ritual and practice of Ocha-Ifá emerged through the public organization of several groups of \textit{babalaos} purporting to revive the pre-revolutionary tradition of conducting a ceremony to auger the coming year. Much of the discourse produced by the two main groups of \textit{babalaos} that form the subject of chapter three focuses on the centrality of Africa in Cuban traditions, and the

\(^{80}\) de la Fuente, \textit{A Nation for All}, 286.

\(^{81}\) Brandon, \textit{Santería from Africa to the New World}, 102-103.

experience and authority of those guiding projects of religious revival. As the economic situation worsened in the 1990s, the babalaos increasingly used their annual ceremony to define acceptable economic pursuits enabling practitioners to survive the Special Period that often paralleled revolutionary rhetoric concerning individual integrity and responsibilities to society. In recognizing the difficulties Cubans experienced during this time, the babalaos also validated societal fears and concerns regarding food shortages, housing shortages, malnutrition-induced illnesses, and the prospects for overcoming these.

The final chapter continues to examine the process of revival during the 1990s within Ocha-Ifá through an analysis of one babalao’s late twentieth century innovations and reinventions of ritual and practice. Although best known for his initiation of women to Ifá, or Iyáni Ifá as babalao Victor Betancourt calls the female version, I argue that the ceding of ritual space to women must be examined in the broader context of Betancourt’s religious project. Betancourt believes that Ocha-Ifá as practiced in Cuba is more complete than what is practiced in contemporary Nigeria, and, therefore he researched and revived a number of practices that were more common in Cuba in the early twentieth century. Some of these practices, such as a simplified initiation ceremony and the direct initiation to two orishas previously only received indirectly, made initiation to Ocha more affordable to Cubans who could not afford the elaborate ceremonies that were standard by the 1990s. Moreover, because many of these revived practices continued to exist in Matanzas, Betancourt’s introduction of them to Havana stimulated criticism on ethnic terms framed in the context of religious practice.
The conclusion summarizes the main points of this study and makes suggestions for further study of Ocha-Ifá in twentieth century Cuba.

A note on terminology: In this study I prefer to use the term Ocha-Ifá to discuss the religion of Yoruba origin in Cuba. Santería is a more popular and widely used term, even among practitioners, although researchers often use Santería to refer to religions of African origin collectively, Spiritism or some combination of these. The term Ocha-Ifá is more specific terminology of one particular African ethnic group, rather than a preferential term as it is for some practitioners who believe the term Santería gives the religion a commercial tone along the lines of “cafetería” or “dulcería.” In citing other peoples’ work or practitioners I maintain the terms used by these individuals.

Similarly, terminology regarding race can be equally problematic. In general I prefer to use African (in the early twentieth century) or Cuban of African descent, rather than black or Afro-Cuban, because it enables an identification and discussion of a particular sector of society over the course of the last century without anachronistically applying ideologically laden terms. Where archival documents use moreno (black), pardo (mixed, mestizo), or mulato (mixed, mestizo) I maintain that terminology. The Cubans I interviewed between 2005 and 2007 used a variety of terms to refer to themselves or Cubans of African descent that reflected their own subjective positions in society. White Cubans almost always referred to Cubans of African descent as negros, while Cubans of African descent referred to themselves and each other variably as negro, mulato, moreno or African. Rarely did they use the term afrocubano except in reference

to cultural expressions, such as music. Moreover, the relatively consistent, historical references to African ancestors and African cultural practices in the documentary evidence suggests that even though they considered themselves Cuban, many practitioners of Ocha-Ifá also consciously identified as the descendents of enslaved Africans. The usage of “Cuban of African descent,” therefore acknowledges this self identification.

Unless otherwise noted all translations are my own.
Chapter Two: Citizens and Brujos(as)

“It is sad, sir, that being legal our fiestas are daily interrupted by order of the local Chief of Police to the extreme of prohibiting us playing the güiro which is distinctive of our religion and the music we make use of to enjoy ourselves in African style; I do not believe, Mr. Governor, that this is just. If the Chief of Police of Sabanilla believes that we are delinquent he should report us to the courts of Justice but never act as judge with order and command to deprive us of our fun…”

- Angel Díaz, President of the Asociacion Religiosa Africana Las Mercedes de Sabanilla del Encomender in a letter to the Provincial Governor of Matanzas, 15 October 1907.

Introduction

On 20 May 1902 Cuba became a republic. Two months later, in its founding reglamento, the members of La Sociedad Africana San Juan de Matanzas informed the provincial governor that their first religious fiesta would consist of funeral honours for “the martyrs [of independence] and all those of the African nationality that had died.” It was the first and last correspondence “San Juan” had with the republican government. In its brief ‘official’ existence, however, the members of “San Juan” made two important statements that defined the relationship practitioners of religions of Ocha-Ifá would have with Cuban society and the state throughout the twentieth century. In holding funeral honours for the martyrs of independence, the Africans and their descendents composing

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1 “Es triste senor que siendo una cosa legal diariamente se no[s] interrumpan nuestras fiestas por mandato del Jefe de Policia local al extremo de prohibirnos el toque del guiro que es el distintivo de nuestra religion y la musica que empleamos para divertirnos a uso Africanico; No creo Sr Gobernador que esto sea justo. Si el Jefe de Policia de Sabanilla cree que delinquimos debe denunciarnos a los tribunales de Justicia pero nunca fungiendo de juez con ordeno y mando pribarnos de nuestra diversion…” Angel Díaz, Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, “Comunicaciones sobre restricciones a los bailes de tambor en relacion con la solicitud de la Asociacion Religiosa Africana Las Mercedes de Sabanilla del Encomender, 12 September – 28 November 1907,” Fondo Religiones Africanas, Leg. 1 No. 51.

“San Juan’s” membership recognized the price Cubans had paid in lives lost for freedom from Spain. All Cubans had suffered and lost, independently of their racial or national origins. But in specifying that “all those of the African nationality that had died” “San Juan’s” membership, headed by Juan Villamil, was more ambiguous. Was “San Juan” referring to those of the African nationality who had died in the war for independence? Or was it a reference to those of the African nationality who had died in Cuba as slaves, poorly paid wage labourers or domestic servants? Many African religious beliefs involved worshipping one’s ancestors. Were those the Africans to whom “San Juan” was referring? The answers to these questions will never be known with any degree of certainty, but I suggest that the separate emphasis on the martyrs of independence and those of the African nationality who died was an attempt by the members of “San Juan” to establish a specific identity. Certainly, referring to the martyrs of independence identified the members of “San Juan” with the new nation and their recognition of collective sacrifice in that endeavor. Separate mention of the Africans who died, however, suggests a more uncertain identification with Cuba’s past and present, or future.

As Kim Butler notes for the African diaspora in the years following abolition, “the choice to stay or the imposibility of an African return meant the acceptance of citizenship in their countries of residence. The terms of that citizenship, however, had yet to be negotiated.”

Repressive government policies that emerged in the years following the founding of the republic attempted to erase the history of Cuba’s peoples of African descent, but as the members of “San Juan” did, many continued to honour their African ancestors as a way to identify as citizens of the new republic.

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Cubans of African descent who practiced religions of African origin frequently bore the brunt of the blame for US occupation, the murder of white children, and at the very least “prácticas contra la moral [practices against morality].” White Cubans used José Martí’s concept of racial democracy, that made Cubans brothers in the struggle for independence from Spain, to argue for a single Cuban identity or citizenship that did not recognize race, only Cubans. But that raceless Cuban identity was premised on European appearance, behaviour and culture that Cubans of African descent could not achieve, or want to achieve, regardless of their ability to assimilate to elite, white society.

Recent studies produced since the 1990s have endeavored to unravel Martí’s philosophy of racial democracy that twentieth century Cuban governments embraced rhetorically but rarely practiced. In Our Rightful Share, Aline Helg examines the participation of Cubans of African descent in political projects from the abolition of slavery to the 1912 massacre of members of the Partido Independiente de Color (PIC), arguing that there were limits to the racial democracy proposed by José Martí and enacted after independence. Racial equality was often opposed by white elites through an ideology that justified the inferior position of Afro Cubans by means of stereotypes that transformed blacks into threats. Helg sees racial democracy as a mediated philosophy manipulated by the elite.

Ada Ferrer followed Helg’s work with Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation and Revolution 1868-1898 to argue that the ideology of racial democracy was a myth that served white aspirations for independence from Spain, and later the US, while denying

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Cubans of African descent full participation in the nation. The Liberation Army, and later the first republican government, gave Cubans of African descent access to positions of power only under extraordinary circumstances to ensure their loyalty and participation in national projects as envisioned by white Cubans. Alejandro de la Fuente has since argued that, although racial democracy was a myth wielded by white elites to marginalize Cubans of African descent, subordinated groups recognized this manipulation and used the nation-state’s cultural project to their own advantage. The myth of racial democracy, therefore, limited the political options of its creators.

In the first study to examine citizenship in the first forty years of the twentieth century, Alejandra Bronfman argues, in *Measures of Equality: Social Science, Citizenship and Race in Cuba 1902-1940*, that the tensions produced through the myth of racial democracy created a process through which political identity and citizenship were transformed. Bronfman builds on Ferrer’s and de la Fuente’s arguments to demonstrate how the elite and the disenfranchised impacted each other, producing identities that neither had imagined nor desired, but nonetheless came to identify Cuba in the period just prior to the Cuban Revolution.

The period from roughly 1900 to 1959, the temporal framework for this chapter, is perhaps one of the most thoroughly covered periods of Cuba’s history. The works of Louis A. Perez Jr. and Jorge I. Domínguez provide thorough analyses of the political,

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economic and social history of Cuba prior to the 1959 revolution. Numerous studies of
the Cuban Revolution have also examined the early republican period to provide a
context for one or more facets of the developments in Cuba post 1959. But because these
works focus on national and international politics, they tend to portray the competing
political projects of the elite, ignoring the popular classes whose experiences also
competed with elite visions of the nation.

This chapter engages with the recent literature on race, citizenship and identity to
analyse the ways in which Cubans of African origin who did not attempt to assimilate to
elite society understood and interpreted their position as citizens in Cuba prior to the
1959 revolution. Although it is sometimes difficult to determine the religious affiliation
of Cubans of African descent in this period, I will for the most part focus on those who
identified religiously as Lucumí or practitioners of Ocha-Ifá. Through this analysis I seek
to establish three main points: the parameters by which twentieth century governments
would understand and treat religions of African origin were established in the first three
decades of the twentieth century, through a combination of repressive legislation and
artistic celebration that practitioners of Ocha-Ifá sometimes manipulated to their
advantage; Ocha-Ifá (and other religions of African origin) served as one of the few ways
Cubans of African descent could organize based on racial or ethnic identity after political
organization based on race was made illegal in 1911; Cuban society had become so
permeated by religions of African origin, particularly Ocha-Ifá, that it was impossible to
eliminate it from popular thought or expression. As de la Fuente argues, practitioners

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8 For examples see Louis A. Perez Jr., Cuba, Between Reform and Revolution (New York: Oxford
University Press, 1995); Cuba Under the Platt Amendment (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press,
were not passive recipients of elite ideology; they understood it and interpreted it to their advantage even as it served to limit their behaviour and demonize their beliefs.⁹ Occasionally, the religious practices of Cubans of African descent fulfilled their socio-political goals in ways the Cuban state never imagined.

**Sal si Puedes: Brujería and Race Anxiety in the Early Republic**

Alejandra Bronfman has argued that *brujería* characterized both the concept and response of white Cuban society, and the newly formed government, to the population of Africans and their descendents that remained as visible reminders of Cuba’s history of slavery in the first two decades of the newly created republic.¹⁰ All religions of African origin, or any other unidentifiable practice of Cubans of African descent, were merged into the category of *brujería* and condemned. Although Bronfman argues that *brujería* was not a crime, the number of archival records detailing the arrest and trial of individuals charged with *brujería* suggests otherwise. The most famous and sensationalized links between crimes and *brujería* were the death and disappearance of the *niña* Zoila in Havana in 1904 and the *niña* Cecilia in Matanzas in 1919, which will be explained below. Accusations of *brujería* were for the most part, however, provoked, not by the murder or disappearance of white children, but by behaviour or activity deemed unacceptable in the new republic.

While archival sources do not specify, there is some indication that accusing Cubans of African descent of practicing *brujería* served a more sinister interest even before Cuba won its independence, let alone established a republican government. In

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⁹ de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 17.

May 1897, for example, during the final war for independence, Narciso Mauresa and Manuel Orozco, two security officers (vigilantes) in the city of Matanzas, arrested the moreno Benito Jorrín based on an anonymous accusation about “un moreno desconocido” who went through the country selling prendas (charms or talismen) for brujería. Among the items the police found on Jorrín when they arrested him were a quantity of money, a medallion and a corto de plumas (literally a bunch of feathers or a talisman). The money and medallion, Jorrín admitted, came from the sale of prendas, and he explained that the corto de plumas was a remedy for a blood disorder from which he suffered. It had been made by an old Lucumí man in Bolondrón. In addition to determining whether or not Jorrín was a brujo, the judge called several witnesses who could provide character references to confirm Jorrín’s identity.\textsuperscript{11}

In 1886, Matanzas, at the time of abolition, had the largest number of enslaved workers. In 1895, at the onset of the independence war, the labour force of the province was composed largely of former slaves and their descendants.\textsuperscript{12} Benito Jorrín, in 1897, therefore stands out in some ways as atypical because he was not a rural labourer, but earned his living as a salesman. The judge in Matanzas questioned several people regarding Jorrín’s possible involvement in brujería (including his concubine, the morena Anastacia Auroras). All those questioned denied knowledge of Jorrín’s practice of brujería. Regarding his identity, however, the judge conferred with his peers in the Matanzas town from where Jorrín claimed to be. Both the judge and alcalde (mayor) of

\textsuperscript{11} Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, “ Expediente instruido en la celaduria del Distrito Norte sobre identificación del moreno Benito Jorrín, acusado de brujería 28-29 May 1897,” Fondo Gobierno Provincial de Matanzas – Colonia, Negociado Orden Público Celadurias de Barrios.

\textsuperscript{12} Ada Ferrer, \textit{Insurgent Cuba}, 158.
Bolondrón sent telegrams to Matanzas verifying that they knew Jorrín and that he had property on the ingenio (sugar mill) San Rafael. After two days of testimony the judge from the celaduría (jail) of the distrito norte of Matanzas was satisfied that Jorrín was superstitious, not a practitioner of brujería, and that he was “de buenos antecedentes [from a good background],” but only released him after confirming both his identity and character.\(^\text{13}\)

The case against Benito Jorrín was perhaps a portent of what was in store for Cubans of African descent less than ten years later. The wars for independence had always been characterized as promoted and carried out by Cubans of African descent and, indeed, the fear of Africans and the possibility of Cuba becoming another Haiti had curtailed significantly the independence aspirations of many white Cubans throughout the century. When the two white security officers (vigilantes) Mauresa and Orozco arrested Jorrín on charges of brujería, their real intention was to interrogate a moreno they suspected of being involved in the insurgency. As a relatively prosperous man of African descent, Jorrín owned a house in the city of Matanzas and some land in Bolondrón. Ada Ferrer has argued that the province of Matanzas was where emancipation had appeared to create the least amount of change in the lives of black rural workers, expectations of white landowners and employers, and the pattern of class and race relations, so Jorrín certainly stands out within this tendency.\(^\text{14}\) He traveled between his two properties frequently, and his work as an itinerant salesman took him all over Matanzas, bringing

\(^{13}\) Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, “ Expediente instruido en la celaduría del Distrito Norte sobre identificación del moreno Benito Jorrín, acusado de brujería 28-29 May 1897,” Fondo Gobierno Provincial de Matanzas – Colonia, Negociado Orden Público Celadurias de Barrios.

\(^{14}\) Ferrer, Insurgent Cuba, 158.
him into contact with many people. To white Cubans, any Cuban of African descent might be a sympathizer or a participant in the insurgency. Although he could not be detained on such weak suspicions, anonymously presented charges of brujería could enable Mauresa and Orozco to look into Jorrín’s activities. The fact that he owned property and had a good reputation with the officials of Bolondrón secured Jorrín’s freedom. Those accused of brujería after the founding of the republic would not always fare so well.

After 1898, the US “civilizing mission” attempted to eliminate traditions of African origin by urging Cuban officials to forbid African dances and drumming in the cabildos de nación and prohibit brujería, although with little support from the Cuban police who believed it to be a harmless, lower-class practice.\(^\text{15}\) Cuban authorities did, however, concur with the Americans on the disruptive nature of African dancing and drumming. Prior to the US occupation, the Fondo Religiones Africanas in the Archivo Provincial de Matanzas demonstrates that the Matanzas police regularly granted permission for Africans to celebrate fiestas with tambores in the African style. Women regularly appear in these records as those requesting permission for such activity. For example, in 1899 Juana Saldarriaga, Ma Monserrate González and Feliciana Peniche, all described as morenas or Africans, requested permission to tocar tambor on a variety of dates.\(^\text{16}\) Men, such as Blas Cárdenas, also requested permission to tocar tambor.\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{15}\) Helg, Our Rightful Share, 96.

\(^{16}\) Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, Fondo Religiones Africanas, “Solicitudes de licencias para celebraciones típicas africanas,” leg. 1 No. 2, 24 May 1845-30 December 1899; Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, Fondo Religiones Africanas, “Comunicación referente al cabildo “La Caridad” que funcionó en Santa Isabel 67,” leg. 1 No. 19, 16 December 1899.

\(^{17}\) Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, Fondo Religiones Africanas, “Comunicaciones sobre el cabildo “La Merced” radicado en Buen Viaje,” leg. 1 No. 49, 27 April-30 December 1899.
Except for Juana Saldarriaga, all those requesting permission to *tocar tambor* were clearly identified as having registered *cabildos* and all permissions requested in 1899 were granted, despite warnings to the governor from lower-level officials that *se tocará tambor*.

A lack of documentation for Havana in the same year limits any conclusions regarding similar application of the law in that region, but in April 1900, the *alcalde* of Havana issued an ordinance prohibiting the use of “*tambores, de origen africano* [drums, of African origin]” in all types of gatherings, be they public or private. He also forbade street processions or *comparsas* and any other type of manifestations “*que conduzcan simbolos, alegorias y objetos que pugnan con la seriedad y cultura de los habitantes de este pais* [that require symbols, allegories and objects going against the seriousness and culture of the inhabitants of this country].”

Activities of African origin and, by extension, Africans themselves were not included in the capital of the republic.

Robin Moore has noted that far from prohibiting drumming and *rumba*, an African-derived dance elite society characterized as vulgar and uncivilized, the municipal ordinance stimulated creativity. Cubans of African descent evaded the prohibition against using African drums by creating the “*rumba de cajón,*” a traditional African-derived *rumba* played on wooden crates rather than drums. Authorities also sometimes attempted to subdue African-derived practices by incorporating them into European-derived traditions. Carlos de la Torre, *alcalde* of Havana in 1902, for example, removed


the ban on street gatherings by incorporating the *comparsas* into the pre-Lenten carnival in an attempt to control and supervise African cultural practices.\(^{20}\)

In Matanzas, restrictions on the religious activities of Cubans of African descent were slightly different than in Havana. In September 1900, 384 individuals in the city of Matanzas signed a petition requesting that the government prohibit all religious manifestations in the streets (*la vía pública*). The *alcalde* denied the request, insisting that “*se ha ofrecido amparar las creencias religiosas de todos los vecinos* [we have pledged to support the religious beliefs of all inhabitants].”\(^{21}\) The *cabildos de nación* had long and rich traditions of celebrating their *orishas* by taking an image of their patron saint to the church to be blessed by the priest before marching the image through the streets on the way back to the *cabildo*. The procession was accompanied by drums, but the real drumming did not begin until reaching the *cabildo*.\(^{22}\) Because Matanzas was such a small city and *cabildos* tended to be concentrated in the *barrio* Altos de Simpson, where cross-class contact was inevitable, middle and upper class citizens attempted to limit their exposure to African cultural manifestations by banning the practices of Cubans of African descent. As in the case of US attempts to prohibit *brujería* in Havana, the *alcalde* (mayor) of Matanzas did not find public processions particularly harmful. The *Ayuntamiento* (City Hall) did, however, issue an ordinance that same year prohibiting

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\(^{21}\) Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, Untitled, 7 September 1900, *Fondo Religión*, leg. 2 No. 56.

\(^{22}\) The Archivo Provincial de Matanzas’ *Fondo Asociaciones* and *Fondo Religiones Africanas* contain rich descriptions from both practitioners and authorities concerning the celebration of feast days during the colonial period.
dances known as Santa Barbara y Santos.\textsuperscript{23} These had been some of the most popular fiestas prior to independence and their prohibition sparked conflict between regional authorities and practitioners alike.

Bronfman has pointed out that the US occupying forces had originally intended to overhaul Cuba’s entire legal system, but, realizing it was an enormous task, ultimately decided to amend existing legislation as necessary.\textsuperscript{24} Therefore, Order 487 of 2 December 1900 created a special Registro de Religiones in the Ministerio de Justicia to oversee religious organizations, but it maintained the original colonial legislation with regard to establishing an organization and concerning its rights and responsibilities. This law remained virtually unchanged until December 1937 when it became illegal for organizations with international or antidemocratic politics (code for Communist) to exist.\textsuperscript{25} The reorganization of ministries did not significantly affect practitioners of religions of African origin. They were still required to register with the authorities, request permission to celebrate fiestas, and remit membership and financial information to the registering body. The only change was in the ministry to which correspondence had to be directed.

If the first constitution of the republic was a source of pride for all Cubans, it was also a source of despair. The 1901 Constitution made citizens of all those born on the island or to Cuban parents outside of Cuba. Former African slaves and peninsulares

\begin{flushleft}23 Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, “Comunicaciones sobre restricciones a los bailes de tambor en relacion con la solicitud de la Asociacion Religiosa Africana Las Mercedes de Sabanilla del Encomendor 12 September – 28 November 1907,” Fondo Religiones Africanas, leg. 1 No. 51.
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\begin{flushleft}24 Bronfman, Measures of Equality, 23.
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(Spanish born) became naturalized citizens.\textsuperscript{26} Suffrage was restricted to Cuban males over the age of twenty-one, who could read and write, or who owned personal property worth $250, or who had served in the Liberation Army, but this classification at least included some former African slaves and their descendents.\textsuperscript{27} Louis Pérez argues, however, that the ability to read and write as a voting requirement effectively denied suffrage to a large number of Cubans of African descent.\textsuperscript{28} Cuba’s right to govern itself was entirely dependent on how the US occupation forces assessed its capacity for self government, and nationalist leaders urged Cubans to be on their best behaviour to prove themselves to the Americans.\textsuperscript{29} The inclusion of the detested Platt Amendment, that enabled the US to intervene in Cuban domestic affairs as it saw fit, as a condition for occupation forces pulling out of the island, contributed further to the Cuban obsession of proving its civilization and capacity for self government. Nationalists had premised Cuban unity on the notion of racelessness and the view that the union achieved in combat against the Spanish had produced not black and white Cubans, but only Cubans. This ideology may have worked against the Spanish, but it did not work so well against the US occupiers who wanted, but did not expect, Cubans to appear more like them physically and culturally. Nationalist leaders therefore performed civilization by appointing and


\textsuperscript{28} Pérez Jr., \textit{Cuba, Between Reform and Revolution}, 212.

\textsuperscript{29} Ferrer, \textit{Insurgent Cuba}, 188.
promoting educated, white Cubans to prominent positions in government, and marginalized or outright rejected Cubans of African descent.\textsuperscript{30}

But appointing white Cubans to government positions to the exclusion or marginalization of Cubans of African descent was not the only way Cubans attempted to perform civilization. By means of the state apparatus, Cubans also sought to eliminate the practice or expression of African religious or cultural practices through harassment, imprisonment, the seizure of sacred ritual objects, and denial of permission to celebrate rituals and \textit{fiestas}. \textit{Brujería} continued to function as the republic’s pretext for curtailing the activities and punishing the behaviour of Cubans of African descent who did not measure up to republican standards of civilization. Several cases from Havana in 1902 illustrate the wide range of activity defined as \textit{brujería} and the diverse actors involved in the arrests.

In January 1902, mere months before the inauguration of the nation, in Central Havana, Doña Manuela Soriano brought charges against the \textit{parda} (mixed race) Ignacia Díaz for putting a large quantity of oil and pepper in the hallway of her house, an act Doña Manuela believed to be \textit{brujería}. Ignacia Díaz was detained and sent before the \textit{Juez Correccional} (Corrections Judge) of the district.\textsuperscript{31} In August 1902, also in Central Havana, the police detained the \textit{morenos} (blacks) Martín Urrutia Calvo and Adolfo Cay for making cures through \textit{brujería}. Like the \textit{parda} Ignacia Díaz, they too were sent before the \textit{Juez Correccional} of the district.\textsuperscript{32} The arrest of the \textit{moreno} Miguel Blanco

\textsuperscript{30} Ferrer, \textit{Insurgent Cuba}, 191-192.

\textsuperscript{31} “Brujería,” Crónica de Policía, \textit{Diario de la Marina}, 7 January 1902, edición de la tarde, 4.

O’Farrill, in Central Havana, just days after Urrutia and Cay provides slightly more information regarding the objection Cubans had to brujería after independence. Although *Diario de la Marina* did not indicate who was involved in his detention, Blanco had been found near a wall laying out objects used in brujería – a headless rooster, opened down the middle, and some chickpeas. As in the other cases, Blanco was put before the *Juez Correccional* of the district.  

*Diario de la Marina* never published the outcomes of the arrests or detentions, so it is clear that justice was not necessarily a motivating factor in the brujería cases. Moreover, no one had been reported as injured or otherwise harmed by the alleged acts of brujería so public safety was not a factor in arresting pardos and morenos either.

Alejandra Bronfman has argued that the Havana police force set its sights on issues of hygiene, rather than brujería itself, as punishable offences. Hygiene made the presence of decaying material in the home or near water supplies the basis on which Cubans of African descent could be convicted for brujería, although it does not appear the hygiene concerns were a motivating factor as the Havana daily did not mention it.  

Brujería seems to have served as a pretext through which authorities could intervene in the lives of Cubans of African descent. The case of “brujería en la finca ‘Sal si Puedes’” in the province of Matanzas is more clearly instructive of attempts to cleanse society of behaviour and practices that many Cubans deemed incompatible with independence and republicanism.


In the small Matanzas town of Alacranes an anonymous letter of 27 December 1904 sent to the governor of the province accused the morenas María Antonia Castañer and Avelina Hernández, residents of the finca “Sal si Puedes,” of practicing brujería. No other crime or violation of the law was cited. Upon investigating the house where the women lived, the Chief of Police found what he considered evidence of brujería – various pieces of different coloured fabric, knives, crucifixes, chalk, stones, bottles containing a “fetid liquid” and two dolls dressed in red that María Antonia explained to him belonged to and were Santa Barbara. The Chief of Police seized the objects and detained the two women. The women, however, explained that they did not practice witchcraft, but used the objects seized for entertainment. They also admitted to having sacrificed a goat in October and to attracting morenos from different areas to dance the tango with the tambor during fiestas. María Antonia and Avelina identified the moreno Amelio José and el chinito Victoriano as the regular drummers at their fiestas. The women also identified the pardos Andrés, Yaque and Alejandro, who lived on the finca Ynes, as friends who could vouch for them, but the three men denied their friendship.35

Except for one drummer, all identified as suspects in brujería on “Sal si Puedes” were identified as moreno or black, based on early twentieth century racial classification. El chinito, the second drummer, could have been of mixed African and Chinese ancestry, but the three pardos from the finca Ynes were almost certainly of mixed African and white ancestry in the eyes of the authorities. Whether or not the three pardos identified themselves as such, they appear to have used official opinions regarding their race to

35 Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, Fondo Religiones Africanas, “ Expediente sobre practica de la brujería en la finca “Sal si Puedes” de Alacranes con detención de las morenas María Antonia Castaner y Avelina Hernández 27-30 December 1904,” leg. 1 No. 98.
distance themselves, not only from the *morenos*, but from the practice of *brujería* or other African-derived religious or cultural practices. Most religious associations in Havana and Matanzas of the early republican period specified which of their members were African and direct descendants of Africans in their membership lists. While it is unclear whether or not authorities exercised a greater degree of leniency with these organizations, as opposed to organizations composed entirely of mixed-race members, the fact that *casa templos* made a point of specifying the African character of their organizations suggests it may have been a strategic consideration.

Being African-born did not help María Antonia and Avelina, although their house clearly functioned as an unregistered *casa templo*, perhaps devoted to Santa Barbara/Changó as the dolls seem to indicate. Regular dancing and drumming *fiestas*, as well as the sacrifice of a goat, all indicate religious activity of African origin, probably in the Lucumí or Yoruba tradition. Moreover, María Antonia declared herself to be a native of Africa. *Alcalde* Cruz of Alacranes, however, did not consider African birth justification for *brujería*, nor was he certain that the seizure of ritual objects was sufficient punishment, and decided to detain the women indefinitely to prevent them from practicing *brujería*. Not only was the women’s practice of a religion of African origin labelled or mistaken for *brujería*, it was considered a contagion from which society had to be protected. Even friends of the accused recognized the severity of the charges and interrogations and failed to support the women to protect themselves from prosecution.

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36 See the *Fondos Asociaciones* in the Archivo Nacional de Cuba and the Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, as well as the *Fondo Religiones Africanas* in the Archivo Provincial de Matanzas.

37 Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, “Expediente sobre practica de la brujería en la finca “Sal si Puedes” de Alacranes con detención de las morenas María Antonia Castaner y Avelina Hernández 27-30 December 1904.”
Whether or not brujería itself was illegal, a great deal of discretion was left to the judge trying the case. Even during the independence war it was not unheard of for a judge to rule in favour of an accused, as the case of Benito Jorrín demonstrated. What was rare, however, was for the accusers to receive punishment for violating the rights of Cubans of African descent that were guaranteed in the constitution. In May 1906 the moreno Gregorio Pestaña reported the mestizo José Elías Rodríguez to the Matanzas police for having an altar (un altar de brujería) in his house. White police officer Federico González y Castillo entered Rodríguez’ house against Rodríguez’ will to conduct an investigation. Upon questioning, however, González y Castillo denied that he entered the house merely on the suspicion that Rodríguez practiced brujería, but that he did so based on Pestaña’s report that he had heard Rodríguez say he wanted to kill Marco Martínez, a man of an undeclared race, through brujería. Martínez testified that he did not know Rodríguez, although both lived in the same neighbourhood and worked as jornaleros, or dock labourers.  

The judge was not impressed with the police officer’s behaviour and charged him with “a crime against the rights guaranteed in the constitution [un delito contra los derechos que garantiza la constitución].” González y Castillo was fined 100 pesos. He then hired a lawyer who managed to have him acquitted of the charges. However, in June 1906, both the alcalde of Matanzas and the Juez de Instrucción suspended González y Castillo.

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y Castillo from his job and salary. The judge in this case, Manuel de la Portilla, was the same one responsible for acquitting Benito Jorrín of charges of brujería during the war for independence several years earlier, and regularly approved requests to celebrate toques de tambor. Cubans of African descent could never entirely count on the fair application of the law, but in the city of Matanzas, Manuel de la Portilla seems to have recognized the difference between harmless religious activities and acts of criminality.

**Raids, Seizures and State Harassment**

The November 1904 murder of the toddler known as Zoila in Güira de Melina near Havana led to the arrest of a former Lucumí slave named Domingo Boucourt who was known as a brujo and lived forty-five miles away from Güira de Melina. Also arrested were Julián Amaro and Jorge Cardenas, two Cubans of African descent living in Güira de Melina. Public outrage soon led to the arrests of a number of other Cubans of African descent, all linked to a Congo Real cabildo and the three original detainees. Boucourt and a man arrested in the second wave of detentions received the death penalty, and the other defendants received prison sentences of varying terms. The murder of a child and the subsequent hysteria stirred up by the trial, and press coverage of it, was sufficient to increase white anxiety concerning African cultural practices. However, the publication of a book in 1906, informed in large part by Zoila’s murder, written by a young Cuban criminologist served to link religions of African origin to brujería and to

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40 Unfortunately the portion of the expediente concerning González y Castillo’s defence is in such bad shape that it is impossible to read, except for the portion declaring him free as long as he report to the Juzgado twice a month. Archivo Provincia de Matanzas, Untitled document, 17 May 1906; untitled document 12 June 1906, “ Expediente relativo a causa seguida contra Federico González Castillo por un delito relacionado con brujería 30 April – 18 July 1906.”

41 Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, 109-111.
brand Cubans of African descent as inherently disposed to criminality for the next several decades.

Fernando Ortiz’ *La hampa afrocubana: Los negros brujos (apuntes para un estudio de etnología criminal)*, published in 1906, claimed a nexus between race, religion and crime in Cuba.\(^{42}\) In ignoring white practitioners of *brujería*, Ortiz’ study was able to link *brujería* to the African race and crime, arguing that even educated, literate Cubans of African descent, born in Cuba, were at risk of regressing.\(^{43}\) Ortiz’ emphasis on the murder of Zoila served to inextricably link African religious practices to the murder and sacrifice of white children at the hands of black men. He advocated new legislation to deal with *brujería* and recommended that African-born *brujos* be kept in complete isolation for life, while Cuban-born blacks could be re-educated through labour and limited seclusion. Instruments and objects used in religions of African origin should be confiscated and destroyed, except the most significant, which would be displayed in a museum. Ortiz also called on blacks who had become educated and able to integrate somewhat into white, mainstream society to provide support for the anti-fetishist campaign.\(^{44}\) Not all of Ortiz’ recommendations were enacted, but raids of *casa templos* and seizure of their ritual objects became common in Havana and, later, in Matanzas.

Although the 1901 Constitution guaranteed the free profession of all religions as long as they respected the Christian religion and public order, it left the interpretation of public order to law enforcement officials.\(^{45}\) Following Ortiz’ recommendations and a


\(^{43}\) Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, 112.

\(^{44}\) Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, 112-113.

\(^{45}\) Article 26, “Constitucion de la Republica de Cuba, Constitucion de 1901.”
subjective interpretation of public order, police raided *casa templos* (religious houses) and confiscated religious artefacts in the name of “science” and good government. Cubans of African descent could be included in the Cuban nation out of loyalty and gratitude for their sacrifice in fighting Spain, but those engaged in religions of African origin could be seen as disloyal, even if the Constitution protected their right to practice them. Legislation requiring practitioners of religions of African origin to register with the state made the “discovery” of *casa templos* easier and provided a pretext for entering *casa templos* and conducting investigations to determine their contents.

Practitioners of Ocha-Ifá used all manner of tactics to avoid harassment and defend what they considered their rights as Cuban citizens to both associate and worship in the style of their African ancestors. Angel Díaz, whose excerpted letter was quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, was willing and able to defend his rights based on his understanding of republican law, and with the means available to him. Díaz was the president of the *Asociación Religiosa Africana Las Mercedes de Sabanilla del Encomendor*, a small town located in the province of Matanzas. Although the members of this group had complied with the 1888 legislation requiring them to form associations instead of *cabildos*, “Las Mercedes” maintained the religious character of the *cabildo* period, rather than the expected recreational or associational character the Spanish had hoped would emerge. It is possible that “Las Mercedes” once existed in some form as a *cabildo de nación*, or that some of the membership had once formed a *cabildo*, and the *sociedad* was simply a reinvention of an existing organization.

In September 1907 the *alcalde* of Union de Reyes (under whose jurisdiction Sabanilla functioned), Enrique Quevedo, wrote to the provincial governor in Matanzas

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complaining that the recently established *Asociación Religiosa Africana Las Mercedes* celebrated “*bailes para Santa Barbara y Santos hasta las altas horas de la noche* [dances for Santa Barbara and Saints until all hours of the night],” bothering the neighbourhood and contravening an order from the *Ayuntamiento* prohibiting such gatherings. The *alcalde* continued,

> the complaints produced by some residents of the neighbourhood, particularly people of colour, who see in the acts that said society carries out a permanent exposition of the deep moral perturbation that slavery produced, have collected evidence that I have confirmed, and from which evidently results that their [Las Mercedes] objective is none other than to realize, through the authorization of their *Reglamento*, all that which is not permitted individually by the authorities of the District.  

The claim that people of colour initiated the case against “Las Mercedes” suggests that some Cubans of African descent accepted white exhortations that they integrate into white society and sought to support Ortiz’ anti-fetishist campaign. The “people of colour,” significantly, did not refer to “Las Mercedes” activities as *brujería*, but rather “deep moral perturbation,” a phrase that attempted to draw them closer to dominant white society.

The *alcalde’s* insistence that the republic tolerated certain activities when performed as a group but not as an individual initiative supports Bronfman’s argument that there was a tendency for Cubans, authorities or citizens, to link illicit religious practice to private houses or public spaces and licit religious practice to *cabildos* or

47 “…las quejas producidas por algunos vecinos de la localidad, particularmente personas de color, que ven en los actos que ejecuta dicha sociedad una exposicion permanente de la honda perturbacion moral que produjo la esclavitud, dieron lugar a una informacion que he practicado respecto a aquella, y de la cual resulta evidente que su objeto no es otro que el de realizar, mediante la autorizacion de su Reglamento, todo aquello que no se permita individualmente por las autoridades del Distrito.” *Alcalde Enrique Quevedo*, Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, *Fondo Religiones Africanas*, “Comunicaciones sobre restricciones a los bailes de tambor en relacion con la solicitud de la Asociacion Religiosa Africana Las Mercedes de Sabanilla del Encomendor 12 September – 28 November 1907,” leg. 1 No. 51.
Certainly the accusations of brujería were brought against individuals acting alone or outside of a recognized association. The complaints about “Las Mercedes” could not necessarily fall under the category of brujería because the government legally recognized it and activities were carried out within the legal framework of the Registro de Asociaciones. The alcalde, therefore, had to use different tactics to put “Las Mercedes” out of commission.

On 14 September 1907 the alcalde had the Chief of Police visit the locale of “Las Mercedes” to check its books. Each organization had to draw up a reglamento, which functioned as a constitution or set of operational guidelines, hold regular elections for offices, maintain a treasury and financial documents, and communicate regularly with the Registro de Asociaciones regarding changes to the association, its membership or finances. Many associations maintained poor records and some maintained none at all, other than the documents necessary for their founding. In general, the documentary evidence from these types of associations contains little more than a first reglamento, directiva and membership list. Those that were unfortunate enough to have conflictive relationships with the local authorities or their neighbours, fortunately for historians, contain rich information from police reports, the courts and sometimes witnesses, as to the nature of their activities.

It is unclear whether or not the Chief of Police ever inspected the books belonging to “Las Mercedes,” because they were not in the locale at the time of his visit; however,


49 Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, “Comunicaciones sobre restricciones a los bailes de tambor en relacion con la solicitud de la Asociacion Religiosa Africana Las Mercedes de Sabanilla del Encomendor 12 September – 28 November 1907.”
Angel Díaz sent a letter to the provincial governor of Matanzas to complain of the intrusion. Although illiterate, Díaz was not unaware of his rights. With the help of a scribe, Díaz invoked his claims to citizenship by saying, “Sir, all citizens of the Republic have the right of association; moreover they may exceed their compliance with the Law of Associations and comply with all of its requirements…”

The rest of the letter explained the rights of citizens and asked for justice under those terms. Agreeing with Díaz, the governor of Matanzas informed the alcalde of Union de Reyes that he could maintain the November 1900 order of the Ayuntamiento prohibiting the “bailes de Santa Barbara y Santos” but stated that “Las Mercedes” could celebrate other fiestas.

Díaz was not satisfied. Believing that he and the other members of “Las Mercedes” had complied with the requirements of the Ley de Asociaciones, he wrote another letter to the governor explaining how sad it was that “Las Mercedes” was constantly harassed by the local Chief of Police while carrying out legal activities. Díaz explained that the activities were part of his religion and that the harassment was thus unfair. In late October Díaz again sent a letter to the governor complaining that the police chief denied “Las Mercedes” permission to celebrate a fiesta by arguing that it was prohibited. The governor once again informed the alcalde that only certain fiestas were prohibited by law, and, in a final letter of 1 November 1907, again emphasized that bailes...
were allowed as long as they did not “serve as pretexts for punishable practices [no sirvan de pretexto para practicas punibles].”\textsuperscript{51}

The available documentation concerning the dispute between “Las Mercedes” and the alcalde of Union de Reyes does not indicate if it was ever resolved, but it does demonstrate that in spite of the incomplete citizenship Cubans of African descent enjoyed in the first years of the republic, they were not unaware of their rights or responsibilities as citizens. Angel Díaz, the illiterate president of “Las Mercedes” knew that Cubans of African descent had the right to form associations and practice the religion of their ancestors, and he used that identity to argue with and confront the governor. Díaz formed his argument based on the rights held by all Cuban citizens and he exercised those rights in his practice of the religion of his ancestors.

In spite of the eloquence with which Angel Díaz articulated his rights and frustrations, the degree of antagonism between practitioners of religions of African origin, such as the members of “Las Mercedes,” and the alcalde of Union de Reyes, was relatively rare. When confronted, most practitioners retreated further underground to remote regions of cities, towns and villages, or to the countryside, where there were few neighbours to report them. Because religious organizations had to register with the Ministerio de Justicia, however, all practitioners were subject to some degree of pressure to conform to republican society through an imposed organizational structure that, in title at least, mirrored republican government and the payment of dues and taxes. It is perhaps for this reason that women, as citizens who could not vote, much less govern, rarely

\textsuperscript{51} Gobernador de Matanzas, “Carta al Alcalde Enrique Quevedo,” 1 noviembre 1907. Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, “Comunicaciones sobre restricciones a los bailes de tambor en relacion con la solicitud de la Asociacion Religiosa Africana Las Mercedes de Sabanilla del Encomendador 12 September – 28 November 1907.”
appear in the *directivas* during this time. But Cubans of African descent were proud of
their heritage and found ways to express that pride even as they appeared to conform to
the demands of the republic.

Where practitioners refused to compromise was in their identity. Listing all of the
members of its *directiva* with the title “Don” before their names, the *Sociedad Africana
Santa Teresa de Máximo Gómez*, a small town in the province of Matanzas, sent its initial
*reglamento* to the governor of Matanzas on 5 September 1912. The first article explained
that the locale of “Santa Teresa” would be “*en extremo oeste de este pueblo de Máximo
Gómez en terrenos de la finca nombrada Helvecia* [in the extreme west of the town of
Máximo Gómez on the land of the *finca* named Helvecia]” to provide a spirit of
confraternity that would be shared among individuals of a same race to preserve a love
toward “*la nación progenitora* [the ancestral nation].” 52 In this founding statement, the
members of “Santa Teresa” did not identify as Cubans, they promoted a dangerous,
alternative identity that it was not willing to abandon. The members of “Santa Teresa”
were not only Cubans of African descent, they were Africans.

Pledging to preserve a love toward their ancestral nation, however, was a bold
move in September 1912, just over two months after the massacre of the *Partido
Independiente de Color*. The PIC was formed in 1906 after the liberal rebellion by
participants of that rebellion and the war for independence to work toward integrating
Cubans of African descent into state patronage networks that ultimately would enable
them to acquire positions in government. 53 In 1910 José Miguel Gómez’ Liberal

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52 Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, *Fondo Asociaciones*, “La Sociedad Africana “Santa Teresa” de
Máximo Gómez 5 septiembre 1912 – 15 diciembre 1946, leg. 1 exp. 30.

government banned the PIC on the grounds that it promoted racial division and made it illegal to form political parties based on race. The PIC’s leaders demanded reinstatement as a party in 1912 and organized an uprising in May of that year. Armed bands set fire to cane fields and intercepted telegraph and railway lines in Oriente and Santa Clara provinces. Government troops and vigilantes in Oriente assassinated the two leaders, Pedro Ivonet and Evaristo Estenoz, and massacred an unknown number of participants.54 “Santa Teresa” accounted for that change in legislation, however, with article four of its reglamento prohibiting religious and political discussions in the locale.55 Perhaps the Ministerio de Justicia did not consider encouraging a love for Africa among Cubans a political purpose or goal of the sociedad – and the members of “Santa Teresa” may not have either – but it was an eloquent expression of group identification and organization. The location of the sociedad on the outskirts of the town ensured that any celebrations or discussions, religious or political, would not bother its neighbours. Aline Helg has argued that people of colour realized they constituted a racial minority and had few possibilities of confronting the white majority directly; therefore, they adapted their goals and strategies to fit into this reality. Religion and culture became important to independent organization.56

In Union de Reyes members of La Sociedad Africana “La Caridad” were more precise in identifying themselves as Africans. Article three of their reglamento listed their objective “to celebrate in harmony with the freedom of cults recognized by the Law

56 Helg, Our Rightful Share, 15.
periodic *fiestas* of a religious nature conforming to the rites that African people observe in the ceremonies to the saints, to which they are devotees…”\(^\text{57}\) As Cubans of African descent usually specified which members of a given society were African born, it is significant that “La Caridad” did not. They may not have been African born but as with “Santa Teresa” members of “La Caridad” continued to identify as Africans and insisted on continuing to practice their religion as they knew the law allowed. Religions of African origin functioned as alternative interpretations of social unity and racial solidarity than those the elites promoted.\(^\text{58}\)

Still other Cubans of African descent maintained ambiguity in the proposed objectives and activities of their societies or relocated them to avoid conflicts. The *Sociedad “Hijos de San Lázaro” de Jaguey Grande* in the province of Matanzas used both tactics to evade the watchful eye of the state. The *reglamento* of 1914 lists its objective as the reunion of people known to members of good reputation and loving God and “*sus semejantes* [his resemblances].”\(^\text{59}\) Certainly the founders of “San Lázaro” could have been referring to the saints as the “resemblances” (*semejantes*) of God, but article nineteen of the *reglamento* also specified that the society would celebrate *bailes* on all Saturdays, Sundays and the day of its patron in “*en observancia y respecto de los

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\(^{57}\) “Celebrar en armonía con la libertad de cultos reconocida por la Ley las fiestas periodicas de carácter religiosa conforme a los ritos que las personas africanas oberservan en los ceremoniales a los santos de que son debotos[sic]...” Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, *Fondo Asociaciones*, “La Sociedad Africana “La Caridad” de Unión de Reyes 5 septiembre 1912 – 22 julio 1931,” leg. 1 exp. 29.


antepasados [observance and respect of the ancestors]. The use of the saints to represent the orishas in secular society was a common practice since at least the late eighteenth century in Cuba, and both Cubans of African descent and white Cubans knew it, but they understood the function in different ways. Where the apparent use of Catholic saints in African religious ceremonies appeared confused or even blasphemous to whites, Cubans of African descent were always clear that San Lázaro was really Babaluaye, the orisha of pestilence. The founders of “San Lazaro” considered the orishas the resemblances of the Christian God and the saints in their reglamento.

Perhaps more onerous than having to use the saints as the orishas’ secular representatives, or register with the Ministerio de Justicia, was the demand that societies keep detailed records on elections, membership, and finances and remit that information on a regular basis to the Registro de Asociaciones. Illiteracy rates among Cubans of African descent were as high as 72% in the first decades after independence. Most societies did not communicate with the Registro because they could not do so without the help of a scribe, and most did not seek help until government officials located their members and threatened them with closure of the society. Some societies responded immediately, perhaps in the fear that they would be charged with another, more serious crime, and remitted election results, while others simply claimed the society no longer existed. Another way to avoid awkward correspondence was to simply relocate from Jaguey Grande, which the members of “San Lázaro” did in 1915. It was 1934 before the Special Police located its members in Agramonte, Matanzas and obliged them to provide

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61 Pérez Jr., Cuba, Between Reform and Revolution, 212.
their directiva and financial information. Although it failed to maintain regular communications with the Registro, “San Lázaro” continued to function in Agramonte until at least 1940 and archival documents do not indicate members were charged with any crimes or infractions.

If repression of religions of African origin was arbitrary in the first decades of the twentieth century, the disappearance of the niña Cecilia from the city of Matanzas in 1919 elicited the most severe repression ever witnessed in one city. According to Ernesto Chávez Álvarez, Cecilia Dalcourt was a light skinned mestiza who allegedly disappeared while on a visit with her family one evening. A search of the area did not reveal a body until several days later, when the body of a child was found in an open grave of the Matanzas cemetary. A number of practitioners of religions of African origin were arrested and accused of murdering her in a sacrifice to Ogún (the orisha of iron). Prosecutors could never prove the Cubans of African descent had kidnapped and murdered Cecilia, although one of the accused allegedly hanged himself in the prison of San Carlos y San Severino shortly after his arrest.

The Havana-based newspaper Diario de la Marina fed the fears of Cuba’s white population in its sensationalized reporting of both the disappearance of Cecilia Dalcourt and the investigation to determine the cause. Until suspects were actually detained, Diario de la Marina simply reported the disappearance of a child, but once Cubans of

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64 Chávez Álvarez, El crimen de la niña Cecilia, 21.
African descent were questioned or arrested, which would not be an unusual tactic given that Cecilia’s family was also of African descent, the charge of *brujería* emerged.\(^{65}\) As Chávez Alvarez determined, the newspaper never got to the truth of the story, but the reports sparked lynchings or attempted lynchings in Regla, Havana, and Bellamar, Matanzas.\(^{66}\) White fears of Cubans of African descent, and reinforcement of that fear through the mainstream press, contributed to the further marginalization of those practicing religions of African origin.

In 1991 Cuban researcher Ernesto Chávez Alvarez wrote the most detailed account of the child’s disappearance to date. He provides a number of theories to account for Cecilia’s disappearance, none of which involve *brujería* or cannibalism. He also counted the deaths of eight children between 1904 and 1923, initially blamed on “*negros brujos*,” in different parts of the island. Three of the cases were ultimately attributed to family members who had mutilated the bodies to allay suspicion and make the deaths appear to have been ritually motivated. In the other five cases it was impossible to prove that the deaths were related to ritual sacrifice, and, except in two cases, the accused were acquitted for lack of evidence.\(^{67}\) Chávez Álvarez argues that the cases of kidnappings being blamed on “*negros brujos*” occurred at times when there were influxes of Antilleans to the island and were motivated by fears that the island would become racially black.\(^{68}\) He also noted, significantly, that the last two cases of kidnappings in the

\(^{65}\) See *Diario de la Marina, edición de la mañana* and *de la tarde*, 24 June-30 June, 1919, 1.


\(^{68}\) Chávez Álvarez, *El crimen de la niña Cecilia*, 34-35.
period occurred in Ciego de Avila and Santa Cruz del Sur, where there were large
tions of Jamaican and Haitian immigrants. The accused in both cases were Antillean
imigrants.\textsuperscript{69}

The appendices to Chávez Álvarez’ book contain transcriptions of interviews he
conducted with practitioners in the 1970s who lived in Matanzas at the time of Cecilia’s
disappearance and were subjected to state abuse because they practiced a religion of
African origin. Most tell stories of police raids and efforts to hide religious artefacts on
the roofs of houses or in latrines so they would not be found and confiscated. They also
tell stories of more active resistance to this abuse of power. One informant told Chávez
Álvarez that all the \textit{santeras} of Matanzas met shortly after the alleged kidnapping of
Cecilia to ask San Lázaro to bring a plague to the city. They then went door to door
throughout the city for seven days and seven nights with a vat of herbs, so that everyone
could take advantage of their presence to cleanse themselves and avoid the coming
epidemic. Blacks, whites, \textit{santeros} and non-\textit{santeros} put two fingers into the vat to
cleanse themselves and left a few centavos as well. The \textit{santeras} then threw the water
from the vat into a sewer so it would reach the sea, while all the herbs and money were
put in a large sac and thrown far away. Shortly after this procedure an influenza
epidemic struck the city and only those who had cleansed themselves were saved.\textsuperscript{70}

The influenza epidemic was more than likely the same epidemic plaguing most of
the world following World War I and not a result of the \textit{santeras’} actions, but it is
significant that practitioners believed it occurred as vengeance for the way they had been

\textsuperscript{69} Chávez Álvarez, \textit{El crimen de la niña Cecilia}, 37.

\textsuperscript{70} Chávez Álvarez, \textit{El crimen de la niña Cecilia}, 173.
treated after Cecilia’s disappearance. The degree of retribution had to match the degree of suffering inflicted on Cubans of African descent, which in some cases resulted in death, but the participation of whites and non-practitioners indicates that the power of the orishas was widely feared and respected. The fact that only the santeras had called on San Lázaro/Babaluaye for help also supports claims regarding the power that women had in early twentieth century ritual practice.

In spite of, or perhaps in reaction to, institutionalized repression that either witnessed the seizure or destruction of sacred objects, the harassment, jailing and even killing of their family members and friends, Cubans of African descent continued to practice and develop the religions of their ancestors throughout the first decades of the new republic. They openly challenge what they identified as unfair or discriminatory behaviour on the part of government officials, and, when they were unsuccessful, they devised other methods of resistance, ranging from evading the authorities to conducting rituals of revenge. The capacity of practitioners to constantly reinvent themselves and their beliefs and practices in the turbulent twenty year period after independence ensured that they would continue to carve out new space as a result of social and political changes in the 1920s to the 1940s.

Afrocubanismo: Between Persecution and Appropriation

If the first two decades of the twentieth century were characterized by false accusations, police raids, and general harassment for Cubans of African descent, the following twenty to twenty-five years witnessed some improvements as Cubans, disillusioned and frustrated with continued US intervention in national politics, sought to identify and celebrate autochthonous Cuban culture – culture that did not originate with
or continue under the control of the US. Much to the chagrin of white, conservative Cubans and assimilationist Cubans of African descent, the liberal elite and intellectuals identified Cubans of African descent as the bearers of autochthonous Cuban culture, labelling it as Primitive Modernism, worthy of both celebration and research.

The “Dance of the Millions” that characterized the period of World War I, during which time Cuban sugar was in great demand and attained high prices on the international market, ended in 1920 creating widespread unemployment. In Cuba the economy always determined political stability, or lack thereof, and with politics once again the only means to earning a living, allegations of electoral fraud led to US intervention in 1921. After installing Alfredo Zayas as President, US Special Representative in Cuba General Enoch H. Crowder demanded a number of reforms in all aspects of national, provincial and municipal government to eliminate corruption and graft and make the Cuban political system more stable.

Under US pressure to reform Cuban politics and society, Zayas also targeted the more popular classes of Cubans of African decent when he issued a law in November 1922 banning ceremonies consisting of bailes al estilo lucumi (dances in the Lucumí style) that were accompanied with “incomprehensible,” but “profane,” songs and noisy instruments. The law went on to say that fiestas known as bembe “proceden siempre al robo, secuestro o asesinato de algun niño de la raza blanca, cuya sangre pide tras el baile y la invocacion a sus santos…”[always precede the stealing, kidnapping or killing of some child of the white race, for whose blood it asks following the dances and the

71 Bronfman, Measures of Equality, 104.

72 Pérez Jr., Cuba Under the Platt Amendment, 207.
Invocation of their saints…” Contrary to what Zayas may have thought, Cubans of African descent dancing in the Lucumí style were not the source of disruption in Cuban politics or society, although many Cubans complained of the noise African drums produced. Nor were practitioners of religions of African origin murderous cannibals. The law simply served to make Zayas appear to be attempting to ‘civilize’ Cuban society so that the US would once again remove its authorities from Cuban soil and, as in 1899-1902 and 1906-1909, the elite made Cubans of African descent the scapegoat for its own rivalries and incompetence.

Maintaining a low profile in the face of continued harassment and persecution became the goal of many religious organizations after the unsolved disappearance of Cecilia in Matanzas. Although most casa templos continued to use the phrase “sociedad africana” in their titles, their reglamentos indicated a desire to avoid the watchful eye of the state. La Sociedad Africana “San Manuel” de Socorros Mutuos y Recreo de Jovellanos, Matanzas, of Arará origin, listed its activities as billiards, dominoes, chess, masquerade balls and dramatic activities, covers for divination activities and religious celebrations, in its founding charter of 1920. In 1923, however, President of “San Manuel,” Esteban Baró wrote to the provincial governor explaining that because of the laws and the society’s respect for them, the members of “San Manuel” did not want to celebrate the African fiestas for fear of breaking the law. Arguing that the predicament caused “verdadero perjuicio a esta sociedad [real damage to this society],” Baró


74 Chávez Alvarez noted that all religions of African origin in the city and province of Matanzas were persecuted following Cecilia’s disappearance and presumed death. El crimen de la niña Cecilia.
explained that the members wanted to celebrate the anniversary of the founding of the society with dances, music and religious fiestas, as they desired, and hoped the governor could grant their wishes.\textsuperscript{75} In citing knowledge of the law, Baró expressed his desire to be a good citizen as interpreted by state authorities, but he also wanted to express the hardship this interpretation of citizenship and obeyance of the law caused a particular collective identity.

The governor, maintaining a legal posture, reminded Baró that the November 1922 law prohibited “fiestas consistentes en bailes al estilo lucumí, especialmente el conocido por “Bembe,” así como cualesquiera otras ceremonias contrarias a la cultura, la moral y las buenas costumbres [fiestas consisting of dances in the Lucumí style, especially the one known as “Bembe,” as well as other ceremonies against the culture, morality and good customs],” all of which was coded language for African-derived cultural or religious practices.\textsuperscript{76} As other societies had done, “San Manuel” changed its location several times in the following years, perhaps in attempts to evade authorities and carry out activities for which it was unable to obtain police permission. By 1927, this tactic no longer worked and the police arrived in the middle of “San Manuel’s” December fiesta to stop it.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{75} Letter Esteban Baró to Governor of Matanzas, 23 November 1923, Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, Fondo Asociaciones, “La Sociedad Africana “San Manuel” de Socorros Mutuos y Recreo de Jovellanos, 26 December 1920 – 1 June 1967,” leg. 1 exp.34.

\textsuperscript{76} Letter from Governor of Matanzas to Esteban Baró, 23 November 1923, Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, “La Sociedad Africana “San Manuel” de Socorros Mutuos y Recreo de Jovellanos, 26 December 1920 – 1 June 1967.”

\textsuperscript{77} Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, “La Sociedad Africana “San Manuel” de Socorros Mutuos y Recreo de Jovellanos, 26 December 1920 – 1 June 1967.”
“San Manuel” had probably experienced the same hardship as other religious houses in the city and province of Matanzas experienced following Cecilia’s disappearance. No new legislation had been introduced to further restrict African-derived religious or cultural manifestations since 1922, but increased vigilance in the region appears to have served as a deterrent. As other practitioners had done in the past, the members of “San Manuel” took matters into their own hands to defend their right to have their fiesta, and went to the Prosecutor of Matanzas to report the police officer who had cut their 1927 celebration short. The documentation available does not indicate whether or not “San Manuel” was successful in lodging a complaint against the police but records into the late 1960s demonstrate that challenging authority and demanding respect for what Cubans of African descent considered their rights as Cubans often worked in their favour, even if authorities did not recognize all of their demands.

Gerardo Machado’s presidency created a new framework in which Cubans of African descent were able to assume greater visibility and seize new opportunities as a distinct race. Under his platform of regeneration, Machado promised to build new roads, new schools and new social services. He catered to US interests even as he encouraged the discovery and promotion of autochthonous Cuban culture as a way to serve the national project and promote alternatives to US culture. He also appealed strategically to race, rather than class, for support in order to decrease the strength of unions and

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80 Pérez Jr., Cuba, Between Reform and Revolution, 249.

labour leaders. A new law in 1925, aimed at upholding morality and good customs that prohibited “el uso del tambor o instrumentos musicales al sabor africanos, u otros análogos y en las que sus componentes ejecuten contorciones con sus cuerpos que ofenden a la moral y que sus gritos y cantos perturben el sosiego público...[the use of the drum or musical instruments of African taste, or other analogous ones and in which their constituents contort their bodies in ways that offend morality and whose shouts and songs disturb the peace...],” belied a trend already underway to celebrate some of the culture of Cubans of African descent. The 1925 law served primarily to prohibit comparsas in an attempt to keep the streets clear of people, but later served to limit large gatherings of people in opposition to Machado’s increasingly repressive action against multiple sectors of society in the following years.

Machado’s appeal to Cubans of African descent was not aimed exclusively at attracting political support. Robin Moore noted that during the 1910s, wealthy white politicians and businessmen began contracting son (secular music of African origin based on percussion instruments) groups to play for exclusive parties in private residences, sometimes lasting days at a time. Musicians could earn hundreds of pesos in a few days and Machado was known to have held several during his years as president. Moore argues that middle class condemnation of son made it more appealing to the elite – dancing son at private parties was an indication that the individual did not have to worry

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82 Bronfman, Measures of Equality, 108

about his, or her, public reputation.\textsuperscript{84} Appropriation, however, did not necessarily mean acceptance.

Whether or not early elite appropriation of African-derived culture, like dancing \textit{rumba}, stimulated liberal intellectual interest in the cultural value of African-derived practices is not clear; however, by the mid 1920s Machado supporters, like Fernando Ortiz and Juan Marinello, began to extol the folkloric value of African-derived practices in response to Machado’s call to discover Cuba’s autochthonous culture. But Cuba was not the only country concerned with its ethnic heritage at that time. Different regions of South America, most notably Peru, emerged with \textit{Indigenismo}, a movement that sought to redress the history and culture of indigenous peoples.\textsuperscript{85} The Harlem Renaissance celebrated the creativity and achievements of people of African descent in the US. In Latin America and the US people without African or indigenous heritages also became involved in the movements, either because it was fashionable or because they had a genuine interest in the lives and culture of America’s peoples of African or indigenous descent. Cuba, in this sense, was no different and international interest and approval of such a movement provided Cubans with a degree of legitimacy they did not necessarily receive at home.

Some of the most well-known Cuban singers, musicians and artists that emerged in this period had acquired their talents and skills as practitioners of one or more religion of African origin. Rita Montaner, Bola de Nieve (Ignacio Villa) and Arsenio Rodríguez, to mention only a few, became famous for their performances of Afrocuban music in the

\textsuperscript{84} Moore, \textit{Nationalizing Blackness}, 100.

\textsuperscript{85} José Mariátegui was the most well known among the \textit{Indigenistas}. 
1920s. Although the African elements of the different styles, such as *son*, jazz and salon music, were glossed over with European rhythms, and made more palatable for white audiences in Europe and North America, as well as Cuba, they were successful in infusing some African elements into a Cuban culture that had previously only been conceived of and recognized in conservative terms as originating in Europe.\(^{86}\) Moreover, intimate knowledge of the sacred music characteristic of one or more religions of African origin provided these performers with a degree of authenticity that white imitators lacked, enabling their performers to mediate between the middle and popular classes of Cubans of African descent.\(^{87}\)

Intellectuals also contributed to the *Afrocubanismo* movement through various and sometimes contradictory venues. Fernando Ortiz published two studies of the popular culture of Cubans of African origin in the 1920s that marked a significant departure from his work on criminology, and founded a society for the study of Cuban folklore that sought to provide the nation with a Cuban identity through the valorization of its arts and culture.\(^{88}\) Although Ortiz predicated his studies on the assumption that folklore must be studied before it disappeared completely, he did, as Alejandra Bronfman points out, at least tie African-derived customs into national traditions.\(^{89}\)

At the same time as he began to research religions of African origin for their folkloric value, Machado commissioned Ortiz to revise the penal code, which he did, arguing that delinquents could be identified before committing crimes based on

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\(^{86}\) Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness*, 120.


\(^{88}\) Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness*, 125, 126.

biological, psychological, social and political factors – just about anyone could be pre-judged as delinquent.\textsuperscript{90} Not surprisingly Cubans of African descent figured predominantly in Ortiz’ definition of delinquents. Machado now had intellectual backing for repressing individuals or groups opposed to his government or policies.\textsuperscript{91}

Despite its popularity among intellectuals and the elite, the majority of Cubans did not embrace \textit{Afrocubanismo} in any way and, in spite of the numbers of musicians from the province of Matanzas who became famous in Havana during the 1920s-1940s through their participation in \textit{Afrocubanismo}, the behaviour of Cubans of African descent continued to be viewed as threatening to morality and good customs, if not national security, especially in times of economic downturn. In May 1927 the police were called to Calle Maceo in the town of Sabanilla, where the \textit{Sociedad Santa Barbara} was located, as the result of an undisclosed crime that took place in the society’s locale.\textsuperscript{92} An examination of “Santa Barbara’s” address and membership list reveals that it was essentially the same religious society as “Las Mercedes” that had experienced persecution twenty years earlier. Rather than relocating in 1907 when it ran into trouble with the \textit{alcalde} of Union de Reyes, “Las Mercedes” tried to reinvent itself. In 1918 its members requested registration as a mutual aid society under the name \textit{La Sociedad “Santa Barbara” de Sabanilla del Encomendador}. “Santa Barbara’s” objective was the celebration of the \textit{junta}, or religious \textit{fiesta}, as it “\textit{conforme a sus propios ritos}”\textsuperscript{92}.

\textsuperscript{90} Bronfman, \textit{Measures of Equality}, 125.

\textsuperscript{91} Pérez Jr., \textit{Cuba Under the Platt Amendment}, 264.

\textsuperscript{92} Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, \textit{Fondo Asociaciones}, “La Sociedad “Santa Barbara” de Sabanilla del Encomendador, 21 agosto 1918 – 8 agosto 1932,” leg. 1 exp. 33.
to its own rites)” that were legal and permitted by law. Significantly, the *reglamento* did not mention Africa, ancestors or race as “Las Mercedes” had. This was not a change of name as there was no request in the *Registro* for such a change. Additionally, the *Sociedad Santa Barbara* submitted its own *Reglamento*.

In his letter to the governor of Matanzas the *Juzgado Municipal* of Sabanilla did not explain what the alleged crime consisted of or whether any harm had come as a result of it. The official from the *Juzgado* explained that upon arriving at the society the police found “objects destined to the cult of fetishism or *brujería*” and confiscated over 40 items found in the vicinity of an altar. Charged was Pablo Navarro, a member of “Santa Barbara” for “*prácticas contra la moral, y contra Alfonso Ruiz* [practices against morality, and against Alfonso Ruiz].” The officer could find no indication of the society functioning in accordance with the law, or any documentation of any kind, and urged the governor to take the appropriate action as it was functioning “*contra la moral y las buenas costumbres* [against morality and good customs].”

Although the documentation does not specify Pablo Navarro’s crimes or intentions toward Alfonso Ruiz, nor does it indicate who Ruiz was, there was a significant change in the way members of this society were treated in 1927. In 1907 celebrating certain types of *fiestas* was sufficient grounds for government officials to infringe upon the rights of citizens to practice their religion. Twenty years later,

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93 Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, “La Sociedad “Santa Barbara” de Sabanilla del Encomendador, 21 agosto 1918 – 8 agosto 1932.”


however, “immoral practices,” in whatever way authorities chose to interpret the phrase, could provide sufficient grounds for investigation, if nothing else. Including an offence against another individual, though, could justify the confiscation of ritual objects and the closing of a *casa templo*. Ortiz’ criminal code enabled practitioners of religions of African origin to be classified as delinquents without having committed a crime. Certain behaviour and physical characteristics, according to Ortiz’ formulations, could predict it. The interpretation and application of these laws were ultimately left to local authorities who probably had their own interests at heart, irrespective of which way they leaned politically.

In spite of their open disdain for Cubans of African descent and their religious practices, contemporary politicians often made symbolic gestures toward them in order to garner their support. Practitioners of religions of African origin in the 1920s identified Dictator Gerardo Machado as an “*hijo*” of Changó based on his impulsive and violent temperament that characterized Cuban politics during the time. Practitioners did not necessarily believe that he was actually initiated to Ocha-Ifá, or any other religion, although many certainly believed he had been, but they used their religious beliefs in an attempt to pacify him and Machado played the part. Bronfman argues that Machado propelled the politicization of blackness in his appeals for support on terms of race, rather than class, in an attempt to avoid fuelling the labour movement. Appearing to support a religion of African origin also enabled him to play a role in racial politics.

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In 1928 Machado celebrated the Sixth Pan American Conference by inaugurating the Parque de la Fraternidad Panamericana in the block next to the Cuban Capitol. He planted a Ceiba tree with the soil from the twenty one republics present at the Conference. The rest of the park was planted with palm trees. Ethnographer Rómulo Lachatañeré explained in the 1930s that practitioners of Ocha-Ifá believed that Changó lived in a Palma Real, but that the Ceiba, whose roots descend from its branches to anchor themselves in the ground, sheltered his rage. Although Lachatañeré believed that practitioners interpreted the planting of the Ceiba as an order from Changó to Machado to protect him from his enemies, the sacrifices and offerings that collected at the base of the tree also suggest attempts to placate the fiery orisha and calm Machado. Practitioners of religions of African origin were also labourers, members of unions and other political organizations that had suffered severe repression during the machadato. If they could not achieve political and economic stability through secular means, they would have to appeal to the orishas.

In spite of the popularity of Afro cubanismo that celebrated the music of Ocha-Ifá or Palo Monte and the folklore of practitioners, there were few positive popular images of religions of African origin in Cuban society. Even many Cubans of African descent attempted to distance themselves from their African roots through expressions of open hostility toward the religions, derogatory comments about their practitioners, and assimilation to the dominant, white society. The fact that most Cubans of African descent – regardless of education, aptitude or political connections – earned considerably less and had disproportional access to professions, political office and social venues than

their white contemporaries did not stimulate any kind of racial solidarity or sympathy across classes. Middle class Cubans of African descent were perhaps most critical of *afrocubanismo*. The only African contributions to Cuban culture they recognized were those that emulated European styles. They banned African-derived music and dances in their social clubs and tried to distance themselves from the popular classes of Cubans of African descent by integrating into dominant Cuban society in the best way they could. Sometimes assimilation meant cultural imitation and sometimes it meant *adelantando la raza* (advancing the race) by marrying lighter skinned people of African descent and, if possible, whites.

Gustavo Urrutia was one of the few exceptions among this middle class. An educated Cuban of African descent, Urrutia acquired a column in the conservative newspaper *Diario de la Marina* in 1928 to discuss race. In his radio broadcasts of the 1930s Urrutia explained that his goal for the column was to discuss Martí’s vision of race and carry out “*una propaganda de exegesis y reivindicación negra y de cordialidad interracial* [a black campaign of exegesis and vindication of interracial cordiality].”

Urrutia saw racial discrimination as economic in origin and criticized the collaboration of Cubans of African descent with whites in producing *Afrocubanismo*, in which blacks were a spectacle in a white world, and artistic expression a new category of servitude that he called “elegant servitude.” The black mission, according to Urrutia, was folkloric,

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100 de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 168.


102 This was the strategy María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno used. Daisy Rubiera Castillo, *Reyita, the Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

investigative and expositive. It should serve as a sociological vindication because art was a valid social element in and of itself. Moreover, Cubans of African origins should present and explain African religions as religious and social phenomena among them that are not degrading, but moral – if recognized as institutions as cultured and moral as those of whites, there would be no need to abolish them or look upon them unfavourably.

Finally, Urrutia argued that blacks who were ashamed of their history and their traditions deserved as much sympathy and understanding as the Spanish because “es más esclavo, más ignorante y más infeliz que sus progenitores africanos [he is more a slave, more ignorant and more unhappy than his African progenitors].” Certainly Cubans of African descent who continued to follow the religion of their ancestors had been practicing this policy for decades and never lost sight of the value it had for them or Cuban society.

Although practitioners of religions of African origins contributed their artistic and religious talents to Afrocubanismo, it is not clear whether or not Afrocubanismo impacted religions of African origin. An examination of the associations registered with Havana’s Registro de Asociaciones in the 1930s and 1940s demonstrates that Afrocubanismo did influence a number of white Cubans who founded societies to study Afrocuban culture and even named their Spiritist societies after Lucumí slaves. It was much rarer to find


religious societies founded by Cubans of African descent who assumed the Afrocuban identity. Most continued to identify as African, not Cuban or Afrocuban.

Of all the Ocha-Ifá organizations I was able to identify as being founded prior to the Cuban Revolution, only one adopted the identity of Afrocubana when it registered with the state in 1937. Attempting to prove its moral character to the Registro, Afro cubano San Pedro insisted its goal was the “la defensa de la moral cristiana y del orden público [defence of Christian morality and public order],” and promised to report all fetishists trying to retard the full growth (entorpecer el mayor auge) of the association. In keeping with the character of the afrocubanismo movement, however, Article 15c of the reglamento also stated that the president would exhibit “las reliquias de su devotacion en memoria de sus antepasados y de acuerdo con la moral y sus costumbres [the objects of their devotion as remembrance of their ancestors and in agreement with the morality and their customs].” In appropriating the language of the state that used “immorality” and “acts against public order” to curtail their activity and promising to report fetishists, “San Pedro” sought to both allay suspicion and challenge popular views of Ocha-Ifá. The religious activities of “San Pedro” were not immoral or fetishist. The objects of their devotion would not be confiscated as objects of brujería because “San Pedro” had decided only to exhibit sacred objects, upholding Christian morality being its primary goal. Once again deferring to Christianity, Cubans of African descent used the means available to them to preserve their religious traditions.

107 Several well known babalaoos of the period were listed in the membership of the organization. Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Fondo Asociaciones, “Reglamento,” “Afrocubano San Pedro 30 marzo 1937 – 11 diciembre 1952,” No. del fondo 1, leg. 204, exp. 4744, inventario 1.

Cubans of African descent did have some allies among the middle class who either heeded Urrutía’s advice or arrived at Urrutía’s conclusions on their own. Rómulo Lachatañeré was one of the few middle class Cubans of African descent who practiced the religion of his ancestors and promoted it as socially and culturally valuable through a number of publications. He also belonged to the Partido Comunista Cubano (PCC) and had been trained in ethnography by Ortiz himself. In spite of this relationship, Lachatañeré criticized Ortiz’ early work on brujería for the harm that criminalizing it did to the religious beliefs and the people who practiced the religions. In his 1938 book ¡O, Mío Yemayá! Lachatañeré provided an alternative name and explanation for brujería in the vocabulario section at the end of the book:

SANTERÍA. In a discriminative sense, brujería. This term expresses the Yoruba cult, disfigured and diluted in a superior religion, as the Catholic one, and has maintained, to a certain point, its primitive purity in virtue of the fundamental root of all religions: superstition. For this reason I do not believe that the black, in the time of his submission, converted to Catholicism through violence, but through his great superstitious character, and has balanced his animistic beliefs with Catholicism, maintaining them in perfect harmony.

Laden with the judgemental, Eurocentric language of Afrocubanismo, Lachatañeré’s definition was, nonetheless an attempt to vindicate Ocha-Ifá or Santería as legitimate expressions of faith and spirituality, rather than brujería. Linking Santería to Catholicism, he hoped, would help to close the distance between African and European beliefs.


110 “SANTERÍA. En sentido discriminativo, brujería. Este término expresa el culto yoruba, desfigurando al diluirse en una religion superior como la católica, y que ha mantenido hasta cierto punto, su pureza primitiva en virtud de la raíz fundamental de todas las religiones: la superstición. Por este motivo, no estimo que el negro, en la época de la sumisión, se convirtió al catolicismo por la violencia, sino por su gran caudal supersticioso, y ha balanceado sus creencias animistas con el catolicismo, manteniéndolas en una armonía perfecta.” Lachatañeré, “¡O, Mío Yemayá!,” in El sistema religioso de los afrocubanos, 90-91.
Some of the white Cubans involved in *Afrocubanismo* did, however, come to respect religions of African origin. Robin Moore suggests that a few even became initiated to Ocha-Ifá. Although probably with ulterior motives in mind, Fulgencio Batista was also initiated during the period of *Afrocubanismo* that witnessed a certain amount of visibility of African-derived cultural practices, political corruption, violence and instability, and another US occupation. Because Batista was successful in defeating Machado through the 1933 Sergeants’ Revolt advancing him to the position of colonel, practitioners believed that only a power as strong as Machado’s Changó could have defeated him. Later, Batista chose the flag of his September 4 movement, as he replaced civil government with the military. The colours coincidentally represented both the different regimental insignia of the Army and the *orishas* in the Ocha-Ifá pantheon. Practitioners popularly believed Fulgencio Batista to be an “*hijo*” of Orúnmila, as the *dueño* (owner) of the oracle, and interpreted the flag as a *trabajo* (an amulet or talisman) to guarantee his power. It was Orúnmila, or more specifically Ifá that had enabled Batista to overthrow Machado, maintain power through the 1930s via stand-in presidents, and finally win election in 1940.

**Religion Joins Politics: Ocha-Ifá in the 1940s**

The decade of the 1940s began on a high note. A new constitution inaugurated in 1940 attempted to expand the rights of individuals, support the demands of workers, and eliminate the possibility of further US intervention in Cuba’s domestic affairs. It gave suffrage to women, provided for free elections and legalized labour organizations, giving workers the right to strike. It also made discrimination based on sex, race, colour or class

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illegal. The 1940 Constitution was by all accounts the most progressive constitution in Cuba’s history, but it was not enforced. As Louis Perez points out though, political success in the next two decades rested on which political group promised to most faithfully interpret and implement the main clauses.

The Cuban Communist Party (PCC) was founded in the 1920s but while it criticized the exploitation of Cubans of African descent in the workplace, it also advocated, until the mid 1930s, the relocation of all blacks and *mulatos* to Oriente province with the goal of creating two countries on the island – one black, the other white. Pedro Serviat, an early member of the PCC, who professed support for black Cubans and condemned all forms of discrimination, also believed that the religious practices of blacks were not common except as “*creencias de la parte más atrasada, que comparten, en muchos casos, con la parte más retrasada de la población blanca* [beliefs of the most backward portion that they share, in many cases, with the most delayed portion of the white population].” In its foundational years and for all its attempts to provide an alternative to Liberal and Conservative governments, the PCC did not distinguish itself in its interpretation of racial democracy.

By the 1930s, however, the PCC realized that it would have to acquire the support of Cubans of African descent in order to be a viable political option in Cuba, and its leadership recognized the value of societies of Cubans of African descent as a means to

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113 Pérez Jr., *Cuba, Between Reform and Revolution*, 281.


115 Pedro Serviat, Instituto de Historia de Cuba, *PSP*, “A la Comisión,” no date, 1/2:4/34.2/6-20.
both promote the PCC’s agenda and attract the support of a significant portion of Cuban society. Blas Roca, also a member of the PCC, had a more sympathetic and enlightened view of Cubans of African descent and their religious beliefs, probably because he was also one of them. Among establishing the right to real equality of possibilities with whites and guaranteeing their effective participation in all branches of work according to their proportion of representation, Roca advocated within the PSP the freedom to profess all cults, or none at all, the only limitation being respect for moral and public order.¹¹⁶

With the ultimate goal to gain the political and electoral support of Cubans of African descent, by convincing them that the PCC was the only organization struggling for their rights to profess their religion, as well as for their rights as blacks to equality of possibilities with whites, the PCC had to comply with its own agenda.¹¹⁷

Different labour unions promoted Cubans of African descent to leadership positions in the 1940s, the most significant of whom were Jesús Menéndez of the sugar workers, Aracelio Iglesias, of the Maritime Workers Union, and Lázaro Peña of the Central de Trabajadores Cubanos (CTC).¹¹⁸ Menéndez, Iglesias and Peña were also practitioners of Ocha-Ifá.¹¹⁹

The rise of Cubans of African descent to prominence in the PCC (Partido Socialista Popular, PSP, after 1944) and labour unions produced some remarkable alliances. Sometime in the mid 1940s, during Fulgencio Batista’s presidency, in the city

¹¹⁶ Blas Roca, Instituto de Historia de Cuba, PSP, “De acuerdo con las cuestiones planteadas en el discurso informe del camarada Blás Roca,” no date, 1/2/4/34.2/24-26.

¹¹⁷ No author, Instituto de Historia de Cuba, PSP, “Por los derechos a la igualdad de posibilidades para los negros,” 1/2/4/34.2/107-116.

¹¹⁸ Pérez Jr., Cuba, Between Reform and Revolution, 307.

¹¹⁹ Menéndez’ and Iglesias’ religious affiliation is common knowledge but the revolutionary government has never confirmed Peña’s affiliation, although most practitioners insist that he was initiated to Ocha-Ifá. On Peña’s involvement see for example, María Teresa Vélez, Drumming for the Gods: the life and times of Felipe García Villamil, santero, palero and abakua (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 200) 90.
of Matanzas, iyalarisha (female practitioner of Ocha) Fermina Gómez began conducting an annual celebration and sacrifice to Yemayá-Olokún. Gómez led a procession that included practitioners and union members (often one and the same), in which a life size statue of the Virgen de Regla, housed in the locale of the Gremio de Estibadores (port workers union) was paraded through the streets of Matanzas to the bahía and then she, her ahijados, and other orishas (practitioners of Ocha) would leave the Bahía de Matanzas in a boat with Olokún drums (drums specific to communicating with that orisha) and live animals to be sacrificed to Olokún (the orisha of the deep sea). Unlike most orishas worshipped in Cuba, Olokún does not have a physical representation and the Virgen de Regla (as Yemaya, orisha of salt water, motherhood and healing) served as the representation of both. The festival became legendary as much for the broad participation of matanceros as for the rumour that each time participants went out in the boat, the sea (Olokún) kept one behind. Although the sacrifices to the deep sea stopped with Gómez’ death, the annual parade continued into the 1970s until dogmatic union members threw the statue of the Virgen de Regla to the ground, breaking one of her hands.¹²⁰

From the point of view of Ocha-Ifá this alliance between the union and an Ocha house made perfect sense. Port workers loaded and unloaded ships in Matanzas’ harbour, work that could be dangerous should the jornalero (day labourer) stumble with a full load on his shoulders and fall into the water. The jornaleros also relied on the sea for work, so it was in their interests for it to be calm and conducive to the shipping industry. More

¹²⁰ Kimbo, Juan Garcia and Dolores Pereira told me this story, in various forms, in 2006 and 2007. I was able to visit the home of the family that now houses the virgin, but they would not allow me to record the interview or photograph the virgin; Mercedes Valdez provided the fullest account, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007.
importantly, however, many jornaleros who worked in Matanzas’ harbour also lived in the barrio la Marina and were practicing babalochas, babalaos, ñañigos, or paleros who relied on one or more religions of African origin to survive day to day challenges. The civilian governments that followed Batista, who had the good fortune to govern the country during World War II when the sugar industry was booming, repressed labour organizations. Jesús Menédez and Aracelio Iglesias were killed during Grau San Martin’s attempts to gain control of labour organizations. The annual parade, therefore, probably sought protection in the orishas, as well as affirmation of identity.

The 1940 Constitution had made illegal and punishable all discrimination based on sex, race, colour or class. It also guaranteed the right to free association and public gatherings, including marches, as well as the free profession of the religion of choice, provided that it respected Christian morality and public order, under Article 35. Although no government of the 1940s or 1950s upheld the constitution in its entirety, it remained difficult to act arbitrarily against a sector of society without some recourse to the law. By 1943, when the members of La Virgen de Regla in Santa Clara, Las Villas ran into problems with the law, invoking Article 35 of the Constitution, preserving public order, was practically the only means to legally lodge a complaint.

Founded in December 1939 as a mutual aid and recreation society for Africans and their children La Virgen de Regla’s expressed goals were to instruct members, “enhance morality in all of their actions,” and provide them with entertainment and

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121 Pérez Jr., Cuba, Between Reform and Revolution, 282.
122 Pérez Jr., Cuba, Between Reform and Revolution, 288.
123 República de Cuba, “Constitución Política de 1940.”
permissible activities in order to establish harmony and friendship among families.\textsuperscript{124}

Celebrations were to be held four times a year on 4 December, 13 June, 7 September, and 17 December, dates corresponding to the feast days of Santa Bárbara/Changó, San Antonio/Eleggua, the Virgin of Regla/Yemayá, and San Lázaro/Babaluayé, respectively.

In 1943 Señores Juan Hernández and Manuel Fernández, residents of Calles Pastora, Ciclón and Toscano in Santa Clara sent a letter to the special police of Las Villas saying that instead of holding spiritual activities [which the Reglamento had never claimed] the society dedicated itself to \textit{bembés} (religious ceremonies with drumming), lasting sometimes two to three consecutive days. Hernández and Fernández requested that the provincial government investigate the activities writing, “…ya que creemos que \textit{Vd no le permitirá que ellos vulnerán las leyes de nuestra República}…[...as we believe that you will not permit them to violate the laws of our Republic...].” They also insisted that it was impossible to live in the neighbourhood for the “escándalos y los \textit{BEMBES que dan esta clase de personas} [scandals and BEMBES that this class of person provokes].”\textsuperscript{125}

Señores Fernández and Hernández utilized coded words to stand in for “white,” “black,” and “public order.” The “our” in this case refers first to white Cubans and secondly to Cubans of African descent who, at the very least, no longer practiced religions or traditions of their African ancestors and accepted the racial order of Cuban society. Not only were the members of La Virgen de Regla not part of the Republic of

\textsuperscript{124} Archivo Nacional de Cuba, \textit{Registro de Asociaciones}, “La Virgen de Regla, Santa Clara, Las Villas,” exp. 25929, leg. 1224.

\textsuperscript{125} Archivo Nacional de Cuba, \textit{Registro de Asociaciones}, “La Virgen de Regla, Santa Clara, Las Villas,” exp. 25929, leg. 1224.
Cuba, they were allegedly in violation of the law. The “escándalos,” although not specified, were any activity white Cubans considered going against public order and “esta clase de personas” was code for those Cubans of African descent who refused to assimilate to white society. In contrast to Las Mercedes/Santa Barbara of Sabanilla, Matanzas, La Virgen de Regla did not have to appeal to the provincial governor to affirm its right to practice the religion of its choice. An investigation into the allegations could not find anyone living in the neighbourhood with complaints against La Virgen de Regla or, more significantly, Señores Hernández and Fernández.

Since the 1920s prácticas contra la moral or prácticas contra el orden público had served as just cause for harassing and arresting practitioners of Ocha-Ifá and other religions of African origin, without being clear as to their meaning. Ethnographical research conducted in the 1940s, however, provides some insights on a phenomenon long relegated to the shadows. Some time in the 1940s Rómulo Lachatañeré wrote in an article that “there exists a cult [casa templo] in Havana in which the majority of its members, men and women, are people who practice abnormal sexual relations.” The cult, or casa templo functioned under the devotion of Yemayá (orisha or deity of the sea) and was directed by an elderly, well known and respected iyalocha (female priest of Ocha), with a reputation for working with “jóvenes homosexuales de ambos sexos [young homosexuals of both sexes].” The sodomitas (sodomites), as Lachatañeré called the members of the casa templo, were believed to attend that particular casa templo because of an affinity in the choice of their ángel guardian (guardian angel, tutelary orisha).

126 Lachatañeré, “El origen de los cultos y su modo de funcionar,” in El swistema religioso de los afrocubanos, 223.

127 Lachatañeré, “El origen de los cultos y su modo de funcionar,” 224.
According to Lachatañeré’s description of the practitioners themselves, the “hijos” (sons) of Yemaya were “sodomitas por lo regular [regular sodomites]” and the “hijas” (daughters) of Yemaya were either heterosexual or “al menos normales en sus relaciones sexuales [at least normal in their sexual relations].” The “hijas” of Obatalá (orisha of wisdom, knowledge), however, were generally tribaditas (tribades, lesbians), while the “hijos” were not homosexuals. Lachatañeré continued in his description by writing that the “hijos” of Yemaya, when in “ecstasy” (the term Lachatañeré uses for possession by the orisha), behave in a very feminine manner and the “hijas” of Obatalá stomp the ground “con sus pisadas hombrunas y gastan energías que no son del uso feminino, quizá qué influencia en el subconscientepueda ejercer este fenómeno [with their mannish steps and expend unfeminine energies, perhaps the manner in which this phenomenon influences the subconscious].”

It is perhaps tempting to consider how Freud and psychoanalysis had influenced Lachatañeré’s reading of this particular casa templo and the activities of its members, and Lachatañeré restrained himself from doing so, but that is not my reason for introducing this intriguing glimpse into the ritual practice of Ocha. I suggest instead that it was the type of behaviour Lachatañeré described, whether performed by homosexual practitioners or not, that formed the objectionable prácticas contra la moral that so enraged decades of republican officials and non-practitioners. Because practitioners behaved like their tutelary orisha upon possession, regardless of the gender of either, it would not have been unusual for men to behave ‘like women’ and women to behave ‘like men,’ which would

129 Lachatañeré, “El origen de los cultos y su modo de funcionar,” 224.
certainly have clashed with republican attempts to prove Cuba’s civilization and capacity for self government to the US occupiers at various times into the 1930s.

Although Lachatañeré does not condemn the behaviour of the practitioners he identified as homosexual, as government officials did, beyond using the popular terms of the 1930s, he provides no indication, outside of ritual practice, that members of the casa templo were in fact homosexual. His description of practitioners’ behaviour in ecstasy could very well have been fulfilled by heterosexual practitioners with the same tutelary orishas. Ruth Landes reported a similar phenomenon in Brazil, also in the 1930s. In Brazilian Candomblé, however, men who allowed the orishas to possess them were believed to be homosexuals, which was not the case in Cuba.\footnote{Ruth Landes, \textit{The City of Women} (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994) 37.} Men and women were equally capable of being possessed without calling into question their sexuality. It is difficult to know the impact Lachatañeré’s article had at the time. It was not published until 2004 when it was included in a compilation of his life’s work, but it might have circulated in the more intimate circles of fellow intellectuals and perhaps sectors of the government.\footnote{Editor’s note, \textit{El sistema religioso de los afrocubanos}, 93.} Given the periodic mention of immoral behaviour linked to the bodily movements of practitioners during fiestas, the possession of practitioners by the orishas was likely the stimulous for much of the republican legislation aimed at controlling them.

The civilian rule of the 1940s was marked by graft, corruption and public scandal so when Batista once again seized control of the government in 1952 many Cubans were happy to see the end of the Autenticos.\footnote{Pérez Jr., \textit{Cuba, Between Reform and Revolution}, 289.} Every organization became a possible threat to
Batista’s regime from 1952 forward, however, and his government responded with varying degrees of repression. Newspapers and labour unions were bought off; the Catholic Church received charitable donations; and unions received both donations and money for pension funds.\(^{133}\) Organizations with the potential to create problems, but not worth a financial investment, were legally cancelled to prevent members from associating.

Elections scheduled for 1954 were predetermined to keep Batista in power and, as he lacked the popular support he had in 1933, he resorted to bribery and repression to deal with opposition.\(^{134}\) In 1952, however, the fact that the President of the Republic might be one of them did not spare practitioners of Ocha-Ifá. The Registro de Asociaciones cancelled a number of religious organizations that very year under the pretext that they had failed to comply with the Ley de Asociaciones. Many, indeed, had failed to remit financial records or membership lists, but this oversight only became a problem in 1952. Batista feared the power of the orishas in the hands of those opposed to, or suffering under, his dictatorship.

The lack of documentation for associations of religions of African origin in the 1950s makes it difficult to characterize their participation in national life during that period. Certainly, many societies founded in the first part of the century continued to function, as records from the Registro de Asociaciones contain election and financial records for those years, but little else. Most societies did not draw attention from law enforcement authorities, who were probably more concerned with defending the Batista

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\(^{133}\) Pérez Jr., *Cuba, Between Reform and Revolution*, 302.

government and maintaining their privilege than with harassing Cubans of African
descent carrying out prácticas contra la moral.

Enrique “Enriquito” Hernández, the grandson of a former Conga slave, was born
in 1918 in Encrucijada, Santa Clara and was initiated in the 1950s to “the different
African ethnicities [las distintas étnias Africanas]” out of an interest in Africa, the
history of his family, and the history of his people. A babalao and tata nganga
(practitioner of Palo Monte) living in Havana by the mid twentieth century, Enriquito
claimed he never had problems with either Batista or the revolutionary government that
followed him. 135

Practitioners allied with babalao Bernardo Rojas, rumoured to be Batista’s
padrino (godfather, the babalao who initiated him) also experienced no problems.136 In
1948, under Carlos Prío’s government, a small group of family (rama) heads of babalaos,
led by Rojas, began meeting each December to conduct a ceremony to augur the coming
year.137 The ceremonia de la letra del año, the babalaos claimed, predicted events of
national interest and suggested solutions for ameliorating or overcoming negative
occurrences. If Batista was mildly interested in the letra del año in 1952, his interest
grew as the decade wore on and opposition to his dictatorship increased.

As the insurgents swept into Havana on 31 December 1958, Rojas and the other
babalaos determined the reigning letra for 1959 would be Baba Ejiogbe, a sign

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136 There is some disagreement among practitioners as to which babalaos initiated which presidents to
Ocha-Ifá, but most late twentieth century practitioners cite Rojas as the one who initiated Batista in the
1930s. Victor Betancourt Estrada, Interviewed by the author, Havana, November 2007; also Kimbo,
Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007.
137 Aníbal Arguelles Mederos and Isabel Rubiera Verdecia, “La Ceremonia de apertura del año en la Regla
indicating good and bad, double fortune, and ruled by Elegguá (represented by the
colours black and red), the orisha of the crossroads. Whether or not it was this news that
reached Batista compelling him to flee the island that night, or whether he made a
practical, military decision to flee as the insurgents neared Havana may never be known,
but the babalaos predicted the downfall of one of the most brutal governments in Cuba’s
history. They were not sure how to characterize the new one.

**Conclusion**

Practitioners of religions of African origin experienced a great deal of change
during the first six decades of the twentieth century. After gaining their freedom from
slavery in the 1880s they fought to secure Cuba’s freedom from Spain. Service to the
nation guaranteed them citizenship, but that citizenship often had to be defended against a
racist state that equated identification with Africa to betrayal of Cuba and the interracial
struggle for independence from Spain and, later, the US.¹³⁸ Brujería had served as a
pretext throughout most of the period to prohibit religious celebrations, confiscate sacred
objects and jail practitioners who were convinced, and rightly so, that as citizens of the
nation they had a fundamental right to practice the religion of their choice. But the rights
of the popular classes were always subordinated to the broader interests of the state that
all too often included proving a capacity for self government and maintaining the wealth
and privileges of an elite minority.

The social practices of the Africans and, increasingly, Cubans of African descent
who refused to abandon their beliefs and assimilate to white society, as many did in the
turbulent decades of Cuba’s early republic, were not backward, ignorant or mentally

deficient as many white Cubans, and some Cubans of African descent, charged in
attempts to provide explanations as to why all Cubans did not attempt to at least mimic
dominant, white society. The formation of the Cuban Republic had to provide citizenship
to individuals from a variety of nationalities and ethnic groups in order to subordinate
them to national interests. Cubans of African descent understood that citizenship in
multiply subjective ways precisely because the republic proved incapable of honouring
its responsibilities to all Cubans. Africa continued to play a pivotal role in the identity of
some Cubans because it was one of the few political identities capable of challenging the
state. Where they could, practitioners appealed to the law to defend their right to practice
the religion of their choice and, in some cases, the state recognized that right. When they
could not stand up to the state, retreat or reinvention of either their casa templos or
practices enabled the continuation of religious practice. By the time Batista fled the
island in the last hours of 1958, practitioners of Ocha-Ifá were well-positioned to deal
with whatever the new government had in store for them.
Chapter Three: *Entre los santos y la revolución*

“...I made the saint and then the money for this house came to me...Then...the state gave me a bank loan...I have everything, as much because of them [the saints] as because of the state.”

-Mercedes Valdez upon describing her initiation to Regla de Ocha.

**Introduction**

There is no doubt that the revolutionary government that took power in 1959 did in the first twenty-five years more to eliminate the structural basis of racial discrimination than several governments were able to do in the first fifty-seven years of the republic. Free public and compulsory education, integrated schools and workplaces, and universal healthcare gave Cubans of African descent equal access to the basic services required for improving the quality of life for a historically marginalized sector of society. But where the new government was revolutionary in breaking down the physical barriers to equality, it was conventional in its treatment of the more subtle forms of racism. Prejudices and the uncritical acceptance of social and scientific doctrine, inherited from previous generations, continued to paint Cubans of African descent in a less than favourable light – they could become full citizens only if they abandoned the beliefs of their ancestors, joined white Cubans in the building of a new society and accepted the myth of racial democracy that had enabled Cubans to unite against the enemy, but divided them domestically. Many Cubans of African descent did not. Those practitioners of Ocha-Ifá,

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1 The original reads, “‘...me hice santo y entonces me vino el dinero para esta casa...Entonces...el estado me dio un crédito bancario...Todo tengo, tanto por ellos [los santos] como por el estado.’” Mercedes Valdez, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, November 2007.
like Mercedes Valdez, interpreted and manipulated both legislation and rhetoric to their advantage, identifying both the Revolution and Ocha-Ifá as instrumental in their lives.

In spite of the abundance of research conducted on diverse aspects of the Cuban Revolution, the subject of religion has attracted relatively little attention even as it often serves as a vehicle to condemn the revolution. The historiography of religion and revolution focuses primarily on the Catholic Church in Cuba during the 1960s, a period in which the Church became a thorn in the revolution’s side for advocating the overthrow of the new government. The Protestant Churches and their relationship with the revolution only recently have attracted study. Research tends to conclude that they were repressed as was the Catholic Church.

Most of the literature dealing with religions of African origin since 1959 argues that a racist state repressed both their practice and their adherents in an attempt to relegate the traditions to history. I believe it is necessary to examine notions of race more thoroughly and its contextualization. In recent years, researchers such as Alejandro de la Fuente, have argued that revolutionary bureaucrats were limited by political ideology as well as the inheritances of previous generations. Lázara Menéndez

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Vázquez’ 2002 book, *Rodar el coco, proceso de cambio en la santería*, is one of the few works to recognize the shortcomings of the revolution with respect to its conception and treatment of religious practitioners, while connecting the impact that the provision of free and mandatory education, artistic education, and a dedication to the conservation and promotion of popular traditional culture had on practitioners of Ocha-Ifá. Practitioners were able to use the socioeconomic gains of the revolution to contribute significantly to the survival of Ocha-Ifá. This chapter examines the ways in which practitioners of Ocha-Ifá used revolutionary policy and discourse to further both their participation in, and criticism of, the revolutionary process.

**Religion and Revolution**

The forces that emerged in Cuba following Fulgencio Batista’s 1952 coup sought to end corruption and violent repression in order to establish stability and peace throughout the country. Practitioners of religions of African origin did not mobilize as groups or organizations to fight the *Batistato*, but rather as individuals drawn to one movement or another for personal reasons or beliefs. It is impossible to know exactly how many practitioners of Ocha-Ifá joined the *Movimiento del 26 de Julio* (M-26-7) either in the cities or the countryside, but they, like many others by 1958, saw in the M-26-7 the best chance at overthrowing Batista and they participated in both conventional and unique ways.

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7 By “discourse” I am referring to “the interpretation of ‘hearing’ of and ‘already-said’ that is at the same time a ‘not-said’.” Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972) 25.
Natalia Bolívar has illustrated both the power Ocha-Ifá had over Batista and his police, as well as the military participation of several practitioners. Roberto Rodríguez Arietrea, Yeyo Aragón, and Luis Angel Cortés Hernández (Obangoche) were all *babalochas* who went to the Sierra Maestra and joined the *Ejercito Rebelde*, Rodríguez and Cortés becoming Captain, and Lieutenant, respectively. All three were of African descent and moved into the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias* (FAR) in some capacity after the triumph of the revolution. As their predecessors in the 1895-1898 war for independence, they joined a predominantly white leadership for the opportunity to liberate Cuba and themselves from oppression.

In addition to fighting in the Sierra, many Cubans also joined clandestine movements in the cities that produced revolutionary propaganda, collected money and supplied arms and food to the guerrilla forces. A good number of these participants were killed and/or tortured by the police in attempts to extract information on the insurgency. Being, or appearing to be, a practitioner of a religion of African origin did not guarantee survival, but it often had an impact on the police interrogators, many of whom were also practitioners and feared the divine consequences of mistreating fellow-believers.

Cuban ethnographer Natalia Bolívar had not yet been initiated when she became involved in the clandestine struggle and was detained by the police in 1958, but had acquired some symbolic capital from a *babalocha* who foresaw death, weapons and difficult times for her while performing a *registro* (consultation). Ta Juan, the

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9 Bolívar and Orozco, Cuba Santa, 352-354.

babalocha (male practitioner of Ocha), gave Bolívar Ogún’s (a warrior orisha) collar (beaded necklace whose colours represent a certain orisha) and a symbol belonging to Ochosí (the orisha of the hunt). He also taught her about resguardos (a type of charm) and the power of revealing another practitioner’s knowledge. Upon Bolívar’s arrest, Julio Laurent, a lieutenant with the Naval Intelligence Service (Servicio de Inteligencia Naval), attempted to interrogate her, but exposed her collar as he grabbed her by her shirt. At the same time Bolívar noticed that he wore a flecha (arrow) for Ochosí and immediately revealed her knowledge of his belief to him, telling him that he must also have resguardos in his pockets and a belt of the same colour as the flecha.

Coincidentally, the babalocha who had given Bolívar the collar was Laurent’s padrino, and he released Bolívar. Fear of angering his angel guardian (tutelary orisha) limited the degree of force Laurent could use with Bolívar.

It could be argued that Bolívar was released for other reasons, such as family connections or social position, but this type of symbolic capital also served to spare the lives of Cubans with more humble origins. Guadalupe Stable was an iyaloche (female practitioner of Ocha) from a family with a well-established history in Ocha and her casa-templo, the Sociedad Santa Bárbara, located in Cienfuegos, in the Escambrey Mountains, housed what was considered to be a miraculous image of Santa Bárbara, its patron saint. The oral history of the casa templo tells the story of a carpenter who went to see Guadalupe Stable, known for her ability to cure a variety of afflictions, because his wife could not have children. The carpenter promised that if she was able to help them he would make her a work of art, and the life-size wooden image of Santa Bárbara was the

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11 Bolívar and Orozco, Cuba Santa, 413.

12 Bolívar and Orozco, Cuba Santa, 410-412.
fulfillment of that promise. In the 1950s Guadalupe collaborated with the M-26-7 operating in the Escambrey and was ultimately arrested by Batista’s forces. As Bolívar had done, Guadalupe also took some evidence of her orisha, Changó (the Yoruba identity of Santa Bárbara), with her at the time of her detention and, according to legend, information regarding Guadalupe and her miraculous saint reached Batista, who was also initiated to Changó. Batista had Guadalupe released. From that day on Guadalupe promised to dress Santa Bárbara as a guerrillero.  

These two stories illustrate the use of Ocha’s symbolic capital, and its perceived utility in the fight against Batista, and suggest the degree to which it was part of the lives of military officers and the police in the mid-twentieth century. Batista’s government was, indeed, the first of the republican regimes to appoint enough Cubans of African descent to high positions within the government to both raise the expectations of Cubans of African descent and cause concern among white Cubans. While Batista’s government employed the lieutenant and the police who questioned Bolívar and Stable, of greater concern than extracting information on the insurgency was the fear of provoking the wrath of the orishas. The clandestine practitioners benefited from the sense of commitment, honour and duty to the orishas, if not to their ancestors and contemporaries, that Batista’s police and military officers had inherited by virtue of their initiation to Ocha-Ifá.  

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13 The information about this society was recorded in 1999 by Bárbara Balbuena Gutiérrez who also witnessed the ceremonies and processions related to the saint. Las celebraciones rituales festivas en la Regla de Ocha (Havana: Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Cultura Cubana Juan Marinello, 2003) 91-93.

14 de la Fuente, A Nation for All, 243-244.

15 Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice, 119.
Stable shared something else that trumped even Batista who, according to Guadalupe’s narrative, was unwilling to cross the line between the human and divine.

But Guadalupe Stable’s support for the insurgency was not only material – she also used more extensive ritual representations than collares and resguardos to characterize her political position with regard to the revolution. The image of Santa Barbara, as a guerrillero, is intriguing and revealing on multiple levels. She is white, as Santa Bárbara is usually portrayed. Dressed as a guerrillero, however, she is ambiguously gendered. Women fought alongside men in the insurgency and Santa Bárbara’s green cape covered in yellow flowers, covering a yellow dress with green flowers, certainly suggests femininity. On her head is a beret of the same style used by the insurgency. It is impossible to know exactly what Guadalupe intended to convey through this image because no self-respecting iyalocha would ever reveal such sacred information to an aleyo (someone not initiated to Ocha-Ifá), but several things can be inferred from the information available.

Guadalupe’s rendering of Santa Barbara as a guerrillero generates a nexus between Guadalupe and the rebel army – she serves as a bridge between the insurgency and Ocha-Ifá. The use of yellow and green in the colours of Santa Barbara’s attire are significant beyond their use in military fatigues – yellow and green are also the colours of Orula (the orisha who communicates with an oracle via a divining tray) and Ifá (the exclusively male high priesthood). Guadalupe’s use of yellow and green could, therefore, have symbolically transformed the image of Santa Bárbara into Changó and made her male. Changó is also believed to be the original dueño of the Ifá oracle. The

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16 Balbuena Gutiérrez, Las celebraciones rituales festivas en la Regla de Ocha, 93.
flowers, however, represent Ikú, or death, in Yoruba cosmology. Guadalupe’s Santa Bárbara was a “social [experience] in solution” marking her support for the insurgency, and warning against further interventions against Guadalupe.\(^{17}\)

The researcher who documented this *sociedad* was quick to point out the “level of syncretism” created by cross dressing the image, as well as the use of green and yellow, colours associated with Orula and Ifá.\(^{18}\) As Cuban researcher René Cárdenas Medina argues, practices, rituals, symbols, figures or deities form part of the social whole and change and are reproduced in connection with this much broader reality.\(^{19}\) This deliberate conflation of the sacred (the image of the virgin) with the secular (the clothing of the *guerrilleros* who overthrew Batista) and some divine transgendering (Changó-as-Santa Bárbara-as male warrior) illustrates the presence of what Raymond Williams called “the dialectics of power” in the public domain. Guadalupe revitalized her virgin-*guerrillero* in the service of the insurgency because she was able to identify with it.\(^{20}\)

While Luis Ángel Cortés Hernández’ assertion that Ocha-Ifá was the only religion to decidedly support the Revolution may not be entirely accurate, his belief that practitioners esteemed and defended the Revolution because they were “*negros, humildes, y pobres* [blacks, humble, and poor],” is perhaps more significant.\(^{21}\) In the last

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\(^{18}\) Balbuena Gutiérrez, *Las celebraciones rituales festivas en la Regla de Ocha*, 93.


\(^{21}\) As quoted in Bolívar and Orozco, *Cuba Santa*, 396.
census prior to the revolution, Cubans of African descent were well-represented in all sectors of the economy, including the professions. But, as de la Fuente has pointed out, higher education did not translate into earnings and professional Cubans of African descent remained in low income brackets with very few exceptions.\textsuperscript{22} None of these statistical reflections on the socio-economic situation of Cubans of African descent prior to 1959, however, can, in and of themselves, account for why black Cubans overwhelmingly supported the Revolution, much less indicate why practitioners of Ocha-Ifá, more than practitioners of any other religion of African origin, did so. After all, most republican governments had tried to attract votes by promising to address issues important to Cubans of African descent, such as labour legislation, and a number of Cubans of African descent supported conservative politicians throughout most of the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{23} Nor do these statistics account for the numbers of white practitioners of Ocha-Ifá who may or may not have sympathized with the situation of Cubans of African descent. These statistics do, however, demonstrate that Cubans of African descent were disproportionately poor. A revolution promising to uphold the principles of José Martí, provide free healthcare and education through to university, jobs and equality for all, regardless of race or social origin, was therefore the most appealing to the sector of society that stood to gain the most – Cubans of African descent.

\textsuperscript{22} Republica de Cuba, \textit{Censo del Año 1943} (Havana: P.Fernandez y CIA, S. En C) 855, 1203; Fuente, \textit{A Nation for All}, 150-152.

Race or Culture?

In spite of the economic gains that indirectly alleviated some of the harshest manifestations of racial discrimination by elevating the living standards of all Cubans, Cubans of African descent lacked a movement, based on race or ethnicity, capable of organizing to demand equal political and social respect in 1959. The 1912 massacre of thousands of Cubans of African descent in reaction to what was interpreted as separatist, racist political organization resulted in the creation of laws preventing the formation of political organizations based on race.24 All subsequent governments maintained this prohibition, including the revolutionary government that inherited a complex social and political legacy that simultaneously denied the existence of racism, while discriminating against Cubans of African descent in government positions, hiring practices and public spaces.25 To be sure, this discrimination assumed different forms in different times and under different circumstances, but Cubans were never able to eliminate it.

Several researchers have commented on the lack of initial concern the revolutionary government paid to the issue of race until prominent Cubans of African descent, like Juan René Betancourt, brought it to their attention.26 Evidence from newspapers and popular magazines, however, suggests that different social and political

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26 Among many are Moore, Castro the Blacks and Africa; Mark Q Sawyer, Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
actors began to broach the subject in January 1959 because they saw the Revolution as an opportunity to discuss the issue and “redress previous inequalities.”

Many ordinary Cubans began writing letters to popular periodicals and newspapers to express their opinions or share their experiences. One article appearing in the newspaper Revolución and titled “Blacks No…Citizens!” was the result of interviews with ten Cubans of African descent who were residents of a Havana solar (tenement building). The article expressed the needs and concerns of seniors living on low pensions, the unemployed and mothers’ concerns for their children’s safety, drawing attention to a previously neglected sector of society.

Perhaps the most significant element of the article for the purposes of this study was its title recognizing the subjectivity of citizenship.

Prior to the revolution Cubans of African descent living in solares, or worse places, were simply “blacks” but through the revolution they would become “citizens,” presumably through equal access to basic services like pensions, jobs, schools and adequate housing. Socioeconomic equality, more than democracy, would define Cuban citizenship. This belief that discrimination was based in structural and material inequalities dominated both government and popular thought in the first years after the triumph of the revolution, and several articles appeared in Bohemia outlining the connection more explicitly.

In February 1959 Juan René Betancourt, the Cuban lawyer of African descent who was the president of the national organization representing the associations of Cubans of African descent, published “Fidel Castro y la integración nacional” in

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27 de la Fuente, A Nation for All, 261.


29 Canning and Rose, Gender, Citizenships and Subjectivities, 6-7.
Bohemia to argue for the economic integration of black Cubans. In addition to commending Fidel Castro for his dedication to the elimination of racial discrimination since his university days, Betancourt called for the expulsion from black sociedades of mujalistas (cronies of Conservative labour leader Eusebio Mujal) and batistiano elements “...que continuan funcionando en contra de la clase como un cancer […that continue to work against the class like a cancer].”

Calling attention to the lack of official support, Betancourt called on the new government, but more specifically Fidel Castro, to study racial discrimination in depth, and combat this injustice. Betancourt’s article focused exclusively on economic factors that had left Cubans of African descent vulnerable to the machinations of manipulative politicians using them for their political support, without offering structural changes to the system that contributed to their discrimination. Even after Fidel Castro officially encouraged dialogue on the subject of racism, several months after Cubans themselves had already begun the process, official discussions did not move much beyond economic inequality.

At the August 1959 Conferencia Internacional Sobre Problemas Socioeconómicos, held in Havana, Ramón Cabrera Torres presented a paper arguing for the national integration of all Cubans as the solution to the inequality of black Cubans. He called for the naming of a permanent commission of sociologists, economists, intellectuals, and prominent national institutions, composed of all Cuban ethnic factors, to work together in the Cuban economy. He argued that it was the task of economists to both diagnose and create remedies for socio-economic ills, in order to provide “the daily

31 Betancourt, “Fidel Castro y la integración nacional,” 123.
bread to every home.” Cabrera Torres recognized that economic inequality was not the only reason for, or symptom of, racial discrimination. He also suggested that the black population in Cuba had steadily declined between 1899 and 1953 because some blacks were “jumping the black belt” and declaring themselves white in the censuses in order to avoid discrimination. However, Cabrera Torres recommended speaking only of Cubans, not blacks, to eliminate the social causes of racism. Speaking of blacks contributed to division and racism, issues that did not deal with the real reason for the exclusion of blacks in Cuban society – economic inequality. The suggestion to speak only of Cubans echoed the nineteenth century calls of José Martí for Cubans to identify themselves as a single race, a fusion of black and white.

Cabrera Torres’ proposal for dealing with racism was unanimously approved and adopted, thereby silencing discussion on racial discrimination, as simultaneously as it began. Fidel Castro did not declare the elimination of racial discrimination until 1962, nor did the government yet prohibit its discussion, but many of the venues available to the public for continued dialogue on the issue were no longer willing or interested in dealing with it. Bohemia, one of the most accessible sites of debate, stopped all publication of articles dealing with race in 1959, adopting two different approaches for combating racism without calling it by name. One was to publish articles on notable African or African descended historical figures, such as Haiti’s Henri Christophe, which at least served to illustrate the contributions of non-Europeans to crucial moments in

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32 “...el pan de cada día a cada hogar.” Cabrera Torres, “Hacia la rehabilitación económica del cubano negro,” 14-16.


34 Aline Helg, Our Rightful Share, the Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality 1886-1912 (Chapel Hill, London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 105-106.
history. The other tactic was the ideologically-laden, and equally discriminatory, discourse of culture, to both praise and criticizes Cuba’s population of African descent.

*Bohemia’s* attention to Cuban culture was not unusual as it was a periodical dedicated to culture, be it music, literature, art or other manifestations. What was striking, however, was how the editorial board assessed and defined culture as early as January 1959, well before the revolutionary government closed some presses and assumed control of others. This early cooperation with, and even anticipation of, the goals of the revolution demonstrates a certain level of commitment to changing Cuban society on the part of the artists and journalists who contributed their opinions to the pages of *Bohemia*. While the opinions expressed in *Bohemia* with regard to race and Cuban culture may not have reflected the views and opinions of all Cubans, they were representative of a particular sector of Cuban society that tended to privilege the European over the African, but also found value in the culture of Cubans of African origin. This sector had uncritically adopted Fernando Ortiz’ views of non-European culture as remnants of the past that should be recorded and preserved for historical purposes, but otherwise abandoned as all Cubans acquired the education necessary to see the incongruence of certain cultural practices with the modern world.35

In the first several years after the triumph of the revolution *Bohemia* covered most of the popular Cuban festivals, from the feast days for several saints to the traditional *comparsas* (a costumed musical group) that performed during *carnaval*. It also published an article on the detention of Batista’s brother, Hermelindo, in which his belief and practice in *Santería* dominate both the description of the man and the content of the

35 Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 178.
article. The authorities who arrested Hermelindo took him to Camilo Cienfuegos in Camp Columbia (Batista’s former military compound) where he attempted to perform a “santería ritual” on Cienfuegos using a miniature representation of San Lazaro’s (Babaluayé) crutches. Surprised and taken aback, but smiling, Cienfuegos allegedly ordered, “Remove this man from here, he’s going to make us all crazy!”36 As if to reinforce the significance of Cienfuego’s reaction to the ritual, the author of the article concluded by writing that Hermelindo was “a poor, marginal, backward individual with all the marks of a deficient education, a superstitious mind and the physical traces of a life of unlimited excess.”37 If the Bohemia article represented mainstream opinions on Santería, Cuban society had a long way to go in eliminating discrimination.

Hermelindo’s physiognomy was not necessary to mark his race. Although he probably was not considered black, even in 1959, his cultural practices and lack of education certainly distanced him considerably from white Cuban society. While it is possible that the publication of the article was intended to further vilify Batista via his family members, and emphasize a break with the past, both politically and socially, it continued an early twentieth century policy, initiated by Fernando Ortiz, of cloaking their denigration and discrimination in cultural, rather than racial, terms.38 Subsequent articles in Bohemia continued this ideological thread through features on several feast days,

36 “Camilo dio un salto, retrociendose rapidamente, mientras con una sonrisa ordenaba: ‘¡Saquen a este hombre de aqui, que nos va a volver locos a todos!’” Unknown author, “Rezando me pasaba el tiempo para que se acabara la sangre en Cuba,” Bohemia 51.2, 11 January 1959, 43.

37 “...un pobre postergado retrasado con todas las lacras de una educacion deficiente, una mente superstitiosa y las huellas fisicas de una vida de excesos sin limites.” “Rezando me pasaba el tiempo para que se acabara la sangre en Cuba,” 119.

38 See for example Bronfman, Measures of Equality.
recognizing both the Catholic and African festivities, but sneering at the more popular, African elements.

In spite of the implications that an emphasis on culture rather than race had for Cuban society, the term culture proved to be a versatile concept for many Cubans, both of European and African descent. In the wake of the Playa Girón invasion in 1961 and Fidel Castro’s subsequent declaration of the Marxist-Leninist character of the revolution, in addition to the Catholic Church’s counterrevolutionary activity, the revolutionary government viewed organized religion in Cuba with suspicion. Religions of African origin, however, were not organized religions whose practitioners met in large congregations and agreed upon or promoted specific doctrine. Certainly, there were similarities of belief and practice among and within different groups, but there was no hierarchical body that could influence or control behaviour. Perhaps, most importantly, if not derogatorily, the revolutionary government generally viewed religions of African origin as backward survivals of slavery or as superstition and folklore that could be preserved as part of Cuba’s rich cultural heritage. If the revolutionary government viewed religions of African origin as relics of history and their practitioners in need of education and moral uplift, practitioners viewed themselves as fulfilling revolutionary mandates to emphasize the particularly Cuban origin of their traditions that had been rejected as superstitions unworthy of attention under previous governments. As Alejandro de la Fuente has argued, the Cuban Revolution was

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39 For details on the situation of Catholic and Protestant Churches in Cuba after 1959 see Kirk, Between God and the Party. Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Cuba; Alonso Tejada, Iglesia y Política en Cuba Revolucionaria; Crahan, Religion, Culture and Society: The Case of Cuba; Corse, Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-US Bond.
conceived by its leaders and many Cubans as a process not only of political or economic transformation, but also of cultural change. As in the 1930s, the new Cuba required a new culture, one that would exalt autochthonous values and traditions and rescue forms of popular expression that had been forgotten, ignored or simply rejected under the republic.\footnote{Fuente, A Nation for All, 285.}

The Revolution’s emphasis on culture, rather than race and/or religion continued to provide practitioners of Ocha-Ifa with unique opportunities to practice their religion and participate in its promotion as part of Cuba’s African heritage and Cuban culture.

The revolutionary government promoted authentic Cuban culture to build national unity and identity as early as 1959. The government did not immediately create cultural institutions, but it did provide material support for the projects proposed by Cubans working in the fields of music, theatre, dance, and art. Several intellectuals from the People’s Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Popular, PSP) founded the Teatro Nacional in early 1959 to learn and perform the songs, dances, and legends belonging to the various cultural and ethnic groups in Cuba.\footnote{Katherine Hagedorn, Divine Utterances the Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001) 137-138.} The Department of Folklore, with the support of UNESCO, organized the Seminario de Estudios de Folklore (Seminar of Folklore Studies), a series of workshops designed to teach young researchers how to extract and gather information about cultures different from their own, so that it could be used in various artistic representations. Cubans of African descent were not the only targets of this project, but theatrical representations of their cultures and beliefs often became the main public focus. Performances of Abakuá (an all-male society originating with the Caribalí), Yoruba and comparsa groups took place in Cuba from Havana to the Sierra Maestra as early as 1960. The theatre group even staged performances of Yoruba music,

In Cuba, however, the first attempts to bring religions of African origin to the national stage, both figuratively and literally, also met with success. “Suite Yoruba” created by Ramiro Guerra in 1960 was the \textit{Teatro Nacional’s} first attempt to examine the roots of religions of African origin. It appeared regularly in Havana’s Sala Covarrubias to a full house for several months and explained the similarities that enslaved Yoruba found between their \textit{orishas} and the Catholic saints. Yemayá, Changó, Oggún and Babaluayé (the \textit{orishas} of the sea, lightening, war/iron, and pestilence, respectively) were the \textit{orishas} featured in the production, four of the most popular and broadly recognized \textit{orisha}-saints at the time. \textit{Bohemia} provided detailed coverage of the production and, with few exceptions, refrained from essentialist characterizations of the performers and Cubans of African descent. Notably, the author of one article on the production referred to it as possibly the most profoundly Cuban production in Cuba’s history.\footnote{Orlando Quiroga, “Yoruba,” \textit{Bohemia} 52.47, 20 November 1960, 48.}

In addition to performances, the \textit{Teatro Nacional} also created \textit{Actas del Folklore}, a monthly publication designed to inform researchers of the work and results of the seminars, in which selected works on African culture from different parts of the world, were published.\footnote{Sánchez León, \textit{Esa huella olvidada}, 151.} This early enthusiasm for learning about and preserving Africa in Cuba continued throughout the course of the revolution in different forms, creating new social space for practitioners themselves.
The appeal to recognize and produce autochthonous Cuban culture enabled the further creation of many cultural institutions, only one of which was the *Conjunto Folklorico Nacional* (CFN) that emerged in 1962 from the *Teatro Nacional* as a separate entity. Rogelio Martínez Furé, *matancero* (native of Matanzas) and former student of the *Teatro Nacional’s* workshops, founded the CFN with Mexican choreographer Rodolfo Reyes to contribute to the “liberation [of Cubans from] historical traumas and inferiority complexes” so that the people could arrive at the realization that they were “creators of culture with universal values.”45 With this objective in mind he recruited practitioners of religions of African origins to perform and teach the songs, dances and myths of the different religions to choreographers, so that they could be performed as theatre.46

Certainly, this was not the first time that practitioners of religions of African origin were able to perform their religion as artists in public – Benny Moré, Bola de Nieve and Arsenio Rodríguez, to mention only a few, had successful musical careers in the first part of the twentieth century that were based on their knowledge of the songs and rhythms of Regla de Ocha-Ifá. While the rhythm of the music that made them famous had its foundation in religions of African origin, the instruments used, such as horns and pianos, in addition to percussion instruments, made it more palatable for a broader audience than just practitioners. Although choreographers have acknowledged their manipulation of dances and songs for the purpose of “staging” productions, often having musicians shorten a song or dance, the CFN maintained the percussion instruments

45 “Intento contribuir a que nuestro pueblo se libere de traumas historicos y complejos de inferioridad, y tome conciencia profunda de que es <<creador de cultura>> con valores universales.” Rogelio Martínez Furé, *Briznas de la memoria* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 2004) 88.

46 Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 139-140.
normally used in religious ceremonies. Additionally, the dances practitioners performed corresponded to certain rhythms and instruments associated with specific *oríshas*.

There is surprisingly little written about the history of the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional* given its longevity and significance to both Cuba’s African history and the history of the revolution. Scholars who have examined the CFN are either sympathetic to its intentions or harshly critical. In the latter case, critics believe that the informants, or the practitioners who collaborated in this pursuit, were coerced or forced to comply with the demands of the revolution or face the consequences of refusing. They also believe that “folklorization” of religions of African origins contributes to their profanation. Others have argued that theatrical performances are lacking in authenticity because of their disconnection from the sacred. Katherine J. Hagedorn is to date the only researcher to have done any type of extensive study on the formation and evolution of the CFN and, while her analysis is not entirely sympathetic to the CFN, she does recognize that “religious” and “folkloric” performances represent different states and follow different “rules of engagement.”

Studies of religion in Cuba often ignore the broader social processes of which religion and religiosity or spirituality are a part, reducing changes exclusively to the political sphere, and ignoring conscious, deliberate blurring of the line between the sacred

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47 Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 140.


and profane.\textsuperscript{51} Juan Garcia, for example, a practitioner, performer and eventual director of the CFN, saw two very different processes occurring simultaneously. First, the \textit{orishas} and drums that had previously been confined to “sacred sites” in houses were taken to the stage. Second, the people who went to see the performances did not see the \textit{orishas}, they saw the men and women dancing based on the “displacement” that the choreographers had designed.\textsuperscript{52} In Juan García’s understanding, the sacred and the profane were inextricably linked in a given performance, and the level of experience of a particular performance was determined entirely by the subjectivity of the individual as performer, choreographer, or spectator.

The practitioners who acted as informant-performers were conscious of the implications that their participation in such a project could have. The members of the \textit{Cabildo San Antonio} in Trinidad, an organization of descendants (consanguine and ritual) of \textit{Congos Reales} (a Bantú group) that at some point adopted the ritual structure of Regla de Ocha, were committed to being part of the CFN and having their religious beliefs recognized as Cuban culture. Nonetheless, the members of “San Antonio” fervently discussed amongst themselves how much ritual knowledge they could reveal to the choreographers.\textsuperscript{53} Informant-practitioners were, therefore, active in the process of redefining Cuban culture, as much through their revelations and participation as in their omissions or intentional concealments. Ramiro Guerra, choreographer for the CFN, recognized that if performers were not actually practicing their religion during a folkloric

\textsuperscript{51} Cárdenas Medina, “Religión, Secularización, y Sociedad Cubana,” 276.

\textsuperscript{52} Juan García, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007.

\textsuperscript{53} Guerra, \textit{Teatralización del folklore}, 30-31.
performance, the performance was still for their “own satisfaction of communicating with
their religious belief.” Practitioners were able to not only contribute to the production
of Cuban culture; they were also able to reaffirm, publicly, their history, beliefs, and
practices, while challenging stereotypes and prejudices.

Guerra also understood the social utility of “theatralization,” arguing that it was
an “indispensable resource for putting cultural values, until recently relegated or
stigmatized by originating with socially marginalized classes, in popular contact with
mass audiences.” Rogelio Martínez Furé has expressed his debt to his informants who
contributed to what he calls “the rebirth of popular culture” in Cuba. For these lifelong
contributors to the development and maintenance of Cuban cultural institutions, folkloric
productions of religions of African origin were a necessary element in combating racism
and prejudice and in compelling the population to recognize and accept authentic Cuban
culture. Indeed, in her study of Cuba and national identity, Christine Ayorinde has
pointed out that folklore originated with the nineteenth century European formation of
nation-states and called for the inclusion of all sectors of the population in an attempt to
resolve class struggle. Criticism of “elite” culture was one of the main purposes of

54 “…propia complacencia de comunicacion con su creencias religiosa.” Guerra, Teatralizacion del folklore, 6.

55 Juan García also emphasized the necessity of using the performances to approach Cubans who had
previously despised and feared religions of African origin. Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December
2007.

56 “La teatralizacion es un recurso de primer orden para poner en onda comunicativa con audiencias
masivas, valores culturales hasta hace poco relegados o estigmatizados por provenir de clases marginados
socialmente.” Guerra, Teatralizacion del folklore, 20.

57 “…el renacimiento de la cultura popular in nuestro pais.” Martínez Furé, Briznas de la memoria, 180.
showcasing folklore.\textsuperscript{58} Understood in these terms, folklore could be used to combat the superstitions and break down the barriers that many Cubans held.

Alejandro de la Fuente has argued that making racial inclusiveness the essence of nationhood makes racially defined exclusion more difficult and provides opportunities for the appropriation and manipulation of dominant racial ideologies by those below, while limiting the political options of the elites.\textsuperscript{59} Whether through public performances of their religious practices or private maintenance of “family” beliefs, practitioners of Ocha-Ifá both contributed to the production of Cuban culture and challenged the dominant revolutionary discourse that sought to relegate their “cultural practices” to “folkloric representations.”

**Change and Continuity**

As Alejandra Bronfman points out for the newly independent nation of Cuba in 1902, Cubans inherited much of the previous legal system because overhauling it was a complex task.\textsuperscript{60} In 1959 a similar phenomenon occurred – the new government maintained any legislation not immediately contradictory to either the ideology or goals of the revolution. As chapter one demonstrates, all formal organizations had been regulated and controlled under the Spanish colonial *Ley de Asociaciones* (Law of Associations) that republican governments had maintained, not exclusively, for religions of African origin. As well as being required to retain membership lists and treasury records, organizations were required to formally request permission for any large


\textsuperscript{59} de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 8.

\textsuperscript{60} Bronfman, *Measures of Equality*, 23.
gatherings or celebrations and comply with the conditions imposed by the legal authority involved, which was usually to put an end to things by a specified time. The revolutionary government preserved this remnant of Cuba’s colonial past throughout the entire post 1959 period, although it appeared that by the end of the twentieth century restrictions on activity had eased significantly. Practitioners of Ocha-Ifá may have had differing opinions and expectations from the revolutionary government, but with regard to state-practitioner relations little changed – religions of African origin continued to fall under the scrutiny of government officials who had the power to grant or deny permission to meet, celebrate, or initiate new members.

Alejandro de la Fuente has demonstrated that in order to eliminate the corruption and extravagance that characterized many Afro-Cuban societies during Batista’s dictatorship, the revolutionary government began to systematically close the organizations of Cubans of African descent in the early 1960s, on the grounds that they contributed to racial segregation and disunity, although the official reason given was non-compliance with the Ley de Asociaciones. The only organizations spared were the religious societies, but the revolutionary government attempted to limit their expansion, restrict their practices, and associated them with criminality or counterrevolutionary behaviour. Nevertheless, practitioners continued initiating new members, honouring their ancestors and living out their beliefs within the context of the revolution.

Most sociedades of religions of African origin had never complied with all the laws requiring them to maintain correspondence with the state. Instead, they complied with the minimum, practical requirements for registering and drew up reglamentos (regulations), elected a directiva (governing board), and occasionally requested

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61 de la Fuente, A Nation for All, 292.
permission to celebrate the saints’ feast days, but did not usually send minutes or regular
election and financial information. The Sociedad Africana Nuestra Señora de la Caridad
in Finca la Julia, Colón, Matanzas was representative of the organizations that complied
very nominally with the law prior to the revolution. Founded in 1951 “la Caridad”
ocasionally sent election results and membership lists to the Registro de Asociaciones
during the 1950s. It apparently never sent a balance of its accounts because that was one
of the first things the revolutionary government requested in its initial communication
with the organization in 1960. “La Caridad” did not comply with that request, or several
others for missing election results, and was cancelled in November 1961. Cancellation
of a sociedad did not, however, mean that it ceased to function. The Sociedad “Africana
Nuestra Señora de la Caridad” once again came under the scrutiny of the government,
this time the Ministry of the Interior (Ministerio del Interior, MININT), the body in
charge of national security, in March 1965, for reasons other than failing to remit
paperwork to the Registro de Asociaciones.

Carlos Fidel Tellechea was the former president of the Sociedad Africana Nuestra
Señora de la Caridad prior to its official cancellation, and for all intents and purposes
remained the director of the sociedad after its cancellation. His home served as its
headquarters and in 1961 had thirty-five male and female members. In March 1965, the
MININT ordered the Registro de Asociaciones to cancel “la Caridad’s” registration
because of “the obscurantist activities,” code among some members of the revolutionary

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62 Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, Fondo Asociaciones, “La Sociedad Africana Nuestra Senora de la
Caridad” Finca la Julia, 29 August 1951-16 November 1961, leg. 1, exp. 42.
government for African-derived religious activities, “that go against this new society.”\textsuperscript{63} Tellechea had already served 90 days in prison for practicing “obscurantism” (\textit{medios oscurantistas}) when he was arrested in 1965 for his “\textit{trabajos oscurantistas y de explotacion a los campesinos} [obscurantist works and exploitation of peasants].”\textsuperscript{64} A practitioner of Ocha-Ifá, he had allegedly advised a peasant (\textit{campesina}) family to burn their house in order to cleanse it of an evil deed committed on the land on which it stood, thereby feeding the superstitious nature of \textit{campesinos} that the revolutionary bureaucrats believed should be eliminated through education. The Juzgado Correccional of Colón sent Tellechea to the Military Units to Aid Production (\textit{Unidades Militar para la Ayuda de Producción}, UMAP, discussed in more detail below), but the UMAP returned him to his home because of a physical disability. Not knowing how to deal with Tellechea, the MININT recommended closing the society, again, to avoid further “obscurantist” activities and ordered any goods belonging to the society turned over to the state. As Tellechea’s home served as the locale of the \textit{sociedad}, he was able to keep his belongings.\textsuperscript{65}

Tellechea’s case illustrates that being registered with the government was not necessary for the continued functioning of a \textit{sociedad}. Presumably “la Caridad” carried out activities without calling attention to its existence until Tellechea’s fateful consultation with the \textit{orishas} determined that a house had to be set on fire. But it is the

\textsuperscript{63} Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, “...las actividades oscurantistas...que va en perjuicio de esta nueva sociedad...” “La Sociedad Africana Nuestra Senora de la Caridad” Finca la Julia.

\textsuperscript{64} Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, “La Sociedad Africana Nuestra Senora de la Caridad” Finca la Julia.

\textsuperscript{65} In the event of dissolution of a \textit{sociedad} the state usually sold or distributed the furniture or other items to pay off the society’s debts or, after 1959, assist those in need. Societies operating out of private homes were not subject to this sale or distribution of goods. Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, “La Sociedad Africana Nuestra Senora de la Caridad” Finca la Julia.
discourse the revolutionary officials used in dealing with Tellechea that is so striking and reveals the distance that existed between Cubans of different classes and different races after the triumph of the Revolution. Pre-revolutionary notions that “cultural practices” were to blame for certain behaviour were simply a mask for implying an individual’s race without saying it. Performing “obscurantist work” and “exploitation of peasants” were coded phrases for referring to Cubans of African descent and denigrating their behaviour, phrases that Cubans popularly believed were not racist remarks.\(^\text{66}\) Attacking the behaviour, not the person, served to maintain the pretension that Cubans were a united people, in spite of racial differences. Moreover, Tellechea’s “cultural practices,” or religious beliefs, led him to violate the law. If his casa templo were closed and people ceased to meet there, or seek Tellechea’s advice for problems in their lives, perhaps the revolution could eliminate superstitious beliefs and behaviours from society.

As Luis Salas’ study on social control and deviance in Cuba during the Cuban Revolution illustrates, the new government did not substantially modify the opinion of previous governments concerning the propensity to violence that the Abakuá societies were believed to have.\(^\text{67}\) As in the first part of the twentieth century, all practitioners of religions of African origin attracted suspicion, mostly because authorities could not distinguish between the different beliefs. There is some evidence that revolutionary authorities maintained this unofficial policy. Tellechea’s case suggest that the MININT officials viewed all religions of African origin as equally prejudicial to society.

\(^{66}\) de la Fuente, A Nation for All, 295.

\(^{67}\) Luis Salas, Social Control and Deviance in Cuba (New York: Praeger Publishing, 1979) 88.
There were, however, some salient changes to social theories in Cuba after the revolution, which, in spite of their flaws, marked a significant departure with the past – the revolutionary government believed in the perfectibility of human beings.68 People were not necessarily inherently good or bad, but were corrupted by societal influences. Where practicing religions of African origin did not necessarily make someone a bad person, religions of African origin could be seen as the cause or source of delinquent behaviour, as Tellechea’s case suggests. Race, or culture, therefore, was not seen as a life sentence. Intellectuals, including those revolutionary authorities, had promoted the idea that the improvement of all human beings was possible under the right conditions.69 Confidence in this theory led to the development of the UMAPs, possibly, the most repressive measure taken by the revolution to “re-educate” those deemed to be delinquents (antisocial). Homosexuals, criminals, priests and others believed to be counterrevolutionaries through their beliefs or behaviour were subjected to hard labour and political indoctrination in work camps between 1965 and 1968. The UMAPS were closed because of overwhelming public and government outcry and criticism in 1968.70

The revolutionary government did not seek out practitioners of religions of African origin for re-education programs. As with other internees, simply being a priest or homosexual was not sufficient cause to sentence someone to the UMAPs – there had to be a real offence with which to charge people. In Carlos Fidel Tellechea’s case, he had been deemed delinquent (antisocial) for advocating an activity that conflicted with the

68 Salas, Social Control and Deviance in Cuba, 127.
69 de la Fuente, A Nation for All, 178-179.
Revolution’s goal to provide housing to all Cubans. In his attempt to help the *campesina* family that had gone to him for advice, Tellechea contributed to the destruction of housing that, if it could not serve the *campesina* family, could have served someone else. Tellechea was not necessarily a counterrevolutionary or delinquent, but discrimination led to his imprisonment because the revolutionaries who imprisoned him could not and did not want to understand Tellechea. To practitioners of Ocha-Ifá, Tellechea’s recommendation was perfectly logical and not to follow it would be incomprehensible. But in this case not only the individual came under attack. The MININT’s closure of the *sociedad* in Finca la Julia indicated a belief that Tellechea’s ‘delinquent and counterrevolutionary behaviour’ (recommending the burning of a perfectly good dwelling) extended to an entire group of ‘like-minded’ individuals (practitioners of religions of African origin) and had to be stopped. In denying their association, the MININT believed that it could stop further ‘contamination’ of its citizens.

The fate of Carlos Fidel Tellechea was perhaps the exception rather than the rule in the revolutionary government’s treatment of practitioners of Ocha-Ifá, although greater access to the UMAP records may one day reveal something different. Correspondence from the *Sociedad la Virgen de Regla*, in Santa Clara demonstrates that practitioners did indeed engage with the Revolution, complying with formerly lax laws in order to have some space to manoeuvre. Between 1939 and 1961 “la Virgen de Regla” held annual elections, celebrated the saints’ days, and provided the appropriate documentation for all of these activities to the *Registro de Asociaciones*. In 1963 the *Junta de Coordinación, Ejecución y Inspección* (JUCEI) took over responsibility for the *Registro* and requested the financial information for 1961-62 and the 1962-63 *directiva*, or it would cancel its
registration. Although the Ley de Asociaciones had always required the personal information of members, such as date of birth, home and work address, very few religions of African origin had ever provided this information in their regular, or irregular, correspondence with the Registro. When the JUCEI began requesting this information in 1964 “la Virgen de Regla” complied with the request.\(^{71}\) From this information it is possible to determine more clearly who the members of “la Virgen de Regla” were.

Most members were working class, although Rafael Verdecía Pérez who served as President of the society in 1964 was a laboratory technician at the Provincial Hospital. The majority of members were born in the 1930s and had been initiated between the ages of eighteen and forty. Only one, Tomás Díaz y del Pino, was initiated as a small child. Eleven of the twenty-three members listed in 1974 (the last year for which there is data) were initiated after the revolution in 1959 and of these eleven only two could have been children of members initiated much earlier. Seven members were initiated in the early 1970s when the revolutionary government restricted permits to discourage new initiations. Eighteen members were male, and five female. The directiva consisted of thirteen men and all five of the women comprising the membership. “La Virgen de Regla” had never been denied permission for any kind of fiesta (in spite of anonymous complaints of “escándalo” and noise) and in 1972 María del C. E, President of the local Comité para la Defensa de la Revolución (Committee for the Defence of the Revolution, CDR) and Cirilio Ponce Sánchez, President of “La Virgen de Regla” signed a request for permission to celebrate a velorio bailable (wake) on 8 and 9 September for the Virgen de

\(^{71}\) Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Registro de Asociaciones, “La Virgen de Regla, Santa Clara, Las Villas,” exp. 25928, leg. 1244.
Regla. There is no evidence to suggest that permission was denied. In 1973 the MININT changed its reference from sociedad de recreo y instruccion y Socorro (society of recreation and instruction and mutual aid) to santera and requested that members use the correct file numbers on their correspondence. It was 1978 before the Registro de Asociaciones cancelled the sociedad for non-compliance with Ley 1320 (Law 1320) of 29 November 1976, a law that actually repealed the 1888-1975 legislation requiring associations of religions of African origin to register with the state.

If the revolutionary government had been trying to discourage, or outright prevent, the practice of Ocha-Ifá, as critics suggest, it did not succeed. While it is a difficult phenomenon to measure due to changes in government regulations and lack of documentation (or access to it) of the religious activity of practitioners, and individuals’ perceived need for secrecy, there are some indications that initiations into Ocha-Ifá actually increased in the years immediately following the 1959 Revolution. In 1985 the Departamento de Estudios Socioreligiosos (Department of Socio-religious Studies, DESR) of the Centro de Investigaciones Psicologicas y Sociologicas (Centre for Psychological and Sociological Research, CIPS), in Havana, compiled data on initiations to Ocha in the city of Matanzas twelve years prior to the 1959 revolution and twelve years after the revolution. Prior to the revolution, 1956 was the year in which most of the initiations took place (and were documented by the state) when thirty-six individuals were initiated, the most to Changó (eight of the thirty-six).

72 Archivo Nacional de Cuba, “La Virgen de Regla, Santa Clara Las Villas.”


74 Aníbal Argüelles, Manifestaciones Religiosas Municipio Matanzas, Doce Años Antes de la Revolucion, 1985, Private Collection, Havana.
after the revolution, 1969 was the year in which the most initiations took place at 150, more than four times the initiations of 1956. At this time Yemayá was the most popular orisha to whom people were initiated, not Changó. What remained consistent was the dominance of women being initiated to Ocha in Matanzas with 218 of the 309 initiates prior to 1959, and 643 of the 876 initiates after 1959. An explanation for the preference of certain orishas during these times remains elusive, although it is possible to speculate based on knowledge of the two orishas.

Changó is a violent, fiery orisha of lightening who was often associated with the dictators Machado and Batista prior to the Revolution. It is possible that practitioners felt a need to have a violent orisha on their side during a violent and unpredictable period of Cuban history. Yemayá, in contrast, is generally perceived to be a calm, gentle, nurturing orisha. Pregnant women invoke her for protection of their unborn children and she is also believed to be the only orisha capable of calming Changó. It is possible that practitioners perceived a genuinely different sociopolitical climate after 1959 and the choice of their ángel guardián reflected that change. More focused research on this aspect of ritual practice, however, is necessary to draw any conclusions.

It is certainly possible that better vigilance or reporting requirements simply recorded more initiations and the rate of initiations may have actually declined or not changed appreciably in the years studied. Given the degree of vigilance, historically, in Matanzas, however, it seems likely that the police did not greatly alter their recording of

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75 Aníbal Argüelles, Manifestaciones Religiosas, Municipio Matanzas, Doce Años Despues de la Revolucion, 1985, Private Collection, Havana.

76 Argüelles, Manifestaciones Religiosas, Municipio Matanzas, Doce Años Antes de la Revolucion; Manifestaciones Religiosas, Municipio Matanzas, Doce Años Despues de la Revolucion.
initiations in the first twelve years after the revolution. This high number of initiations in
the late 1960s, therefore, is particularly surprising considering legislation passed in the
mid 1960s, and later revoked in 1971, prohibited initiations to Ocha. This discrepancy
between practice and policy suggests that local governments applied the law unevenly
and inconsistently, possibly based on intimate knowledge (or lack thereof) of the region
and its population.

A comparable study of other regions could show different tendencies with regard
to application of the law, the orishas individuals were initiated to, as well as the
distribution of men and women. However, I strongly suspect that, as in Matanzas, there
was an overall increase in initiations in other regions as well. Certainly the degree of
vigilance varied by region but the Sociedad La Virgen de Regla illustrates a similar
pattern of initiation in Santa Clara, initiating one individual in 1967 and two in 1968
during the same period of alleged prohibition on initiations. Given the amount of time
and preparation required for an initiation, the number of initiations in one society is
relatively high. Once again, either “la Virgen de Regla” concealed the initiations or the
authorities simply ignored their activities. Both the statistics for Matanzas and the
evidence from La Virgen de Regla in Santa Clara defy conventional arguments insisting
on the applied repressive or coercive forces of the revolutionary government.

A further consideration to be taken into account when analysing spikes in
initiations to Ocha-Ifá is cost. Initiations had always been associated with great financial
sacrifices during the twentieth century. Scholars argue that expense alone may account

77 de la Fuente, A Nation for All, 293.

78 Archivo Nacional de Cuba, “La Virgen de Regla, Santa Clara, Las Villas.”
for the early twentieth century initiation process known as *cabeza y pie* (head and foot) in which initiates received only their *angel guardian* and Elegguá (the *orisha* of the crossroads, destiny), rather than the multiple *orishas* common by the late twentieth century. 79 Others argue that the *cabeza y pie* initiation is more authentically African and certain regions, like Matanzas, maintained the practice throughout the twentieth century. 80 In either case, initiates were required to provide animals to be offered to their *orisha* (size and cost depended on the *orisha*); they had to pay the *babalao* (a priest of Ifá) and *olorishas* (men and/or women initiated to Ocha) involved in initiating them; and they had to provide food for the guests invited to their initiation ceremony. In the end, personal finances always dictated the scope of the initiation and the new government’s commitment to radical social change after 1959 had significant impact.

In the late 1960s the revolutionary government implemented what Carmelo Mesa-Lago terms an “idealist economy” or “Guevarism,” in which the government controlled prices and rationing, emphasized moral incentives over material to increase productivity, and provided free social services, among other policies, aimed at creating equality. 81 The impact of this economic policy resulted in food and consumer goods that were affordable to all, Cubans had equal incomes and individual needs were met by the state. Economists have noted that these revolutionary policies caused inflation, trade deficits and a decrease


in economic growth, but they also created an increase in liquidity, which was exactly what Cubans required to be able to become initiated to Ocha-Ifá.\footnote{Mesa-Lago, “Economic and Ideological Cycles in Cuba 1959-2002,” 27.} Certainly, individuals with serious problems who were told to become initiated as soon as possible always found the means to do so, but, as will become apparent in subsequent chapters, during times of increased liquidity, there were significant spikes in initiations to Ocha-Ifá – 1969 was the first of these spikes occurring during the revolution.

**Gendering Ocha-Ifá**

In the late 1960s and 1970s revolutionary discourse diverged slightly from its notions of cultural inferiority when speaking of or writing about religions of African origins and their practitioners. The religions continued to be viewed as “cultural atavisms incongruent with the construction of a modern, technically oriented socialist society,” but officials also attempted to account for the continuing attraction they held for many Cubans.\footnote{de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 336.} Increasingly, religions of African origin came to be seen not only as signs of “cultural backwardness,” but as the cause of mental illness and homosexuality by different levels of government. Criminal behaviour was sometimes, but not always, part of the equation.

In 1967 the Department of Transcultural Psychiatry at the *Departamento de Psiquiatría Transcultural de la Academia de Ciencias y el Departamento de Salud Mental* (Academy of Sciences and the Department of Mental Health) conducted a study linking so-called cultural factors to the most common psychiatric illnesses. Study subjects consisted of 200 practitioners of either Santería or Espiritismo, the majority of
whom were mixed race women (mestizas) between the ages of thirty and forty years from Havana and Matanzas. The results of the study are perhaps obvious, but what is more important is the way in which the researchers devised and carried out their investigation. Researchers set out to find mental illness among a population practicing religions of African origin, and whether or not they found a high incidence of mental illness, limiting their study to only practitioner subjects guaranteed a correlation. The focus on mestizas turned the alleged link between religion and mental illness into gendered, racist dogma that ignored both white women and non-practitioners, male or female, who also suffered from mental illness. Havana and Matanzas were also the regions in which Ocha-Ifá originated and had the most adherents. There also exists a distinct possibility that some or all of the mestizas did not actually suffer from mental illness but had been discursively labelled ‘mentally ill’ because of their religious beliefs. As late as the 1980s the Ministry of Health continued to view the participation in religions of African origins as pathological behaviour.

In the late 1960s practitioners who had been part of the insurgency also began to experience limitations in their advancement at work and in mass organizations because of their beliefs. Luis Ángel Cortés Hernández had been elevated to lieutenant in the Sierra Maestra but was dismissed from his position in the transportation union and blocked from moving from the Unión de Jovenes Comunistas (Union of Young Communists, UJC) in 1968 because he admitted to being a creyente. Cortés Hernández believed that he had to be honest about his beliefs to be a good communist and a good santero, but the officials

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84 Ayorinde, Afro Cuban Religiosity, Revolution and National Identity, 116.
85 McGarrity, “Race, Culture and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba,” 199.
in charge of his admission to the PCC said that “being a believer was to be ideologically unsound.”

Discrimination against Cortés Hernández did not stop with the PCC, however. Government authorities also confiscated six revolutionary medals he received for: combatant in the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army), combatant in the clandestine struggle, founder of militias, teacher (alfabetizador) and participant in the cleansing of the Escambrey, and blood donor. Convinced that he had done nothing wrong and was every bit a revolutionary as any member of the PCC, Cortés Hernández lodged a complaint in his village and got his medals returned a year and a half after they had been seized.

If mestiza practitioners of Ocha and Espiritismo suffered from mental illness because of their religious practices, male practitioners of Ocha-Ifá, in addition to being seen as unfit for the PCC, came to be associated with homosexuality and sometimes delinquency, which was often directly linked to Cuban views on homosexuality. The negative attitude toward homosexuality was not an invention of the revolution. It, like attitudes toward the cultural practices of Cubans of African descent and the value of folklore in the past tense, was inherited from previous generations and later imbued with ideology from the Soviet Union. Homosexuality itself was not criminalized in Cuba,

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86 “…ser creyente era tener un desvío ideologico.” Bolívar and Orozco, Cuba Santa, 353.

87 Bolívar and Orozco, Cuba Santa, 353.

88 Bolívar and Orozco, Cuba Santa, 354.

89 On the link between religions of African origin and perceived criminality see de la Fuente, A Nation for All, 292.

but certain behaviours, such as public displays of homosexuality or the corruption of minors, were considered crimes and were punishable under the law.\textsuperscript{91}

Luis Salas argues that homosexuality was a status, not an offence, with willing participants, the deviation arising “in the stigmatization of the person by others and his reaction to the societal proscription.”\textsuperscript{92} I would like to extend this definition of status to religions of African origin, specifically Ocha-Ifá, in which practitioners were stigmatized by others and reacted to societal proscription. Like homosexuality, practicing Ocha-Ifá was never a crime in and of itself after the triumph of the revolution, but the discourse of some revolutionary authorities connected religions of African origin to both homosexuality and pathological behaviour. Ocha-Ifá could, for example, be blamed for purchasing scarce items on the black market or as being ‘socially dangerous,’ by initiating minors. As Salas argues with homosexuality, it must be understood in conjunction with the reactions of the society that potentially stigmatizes it.\textsuperscript{93} The same can be argued about religions of African origin. The media played a role in perpetuating these stereotypes concerning the propensity for criminality and homosexuality among practitioners of Ocha-Ifá in its reproduction of fact and fiction. It thereby assisted in retrenching discriminatory attitudes toward Cubans of African descent, religions of African origin and the less-than-masculine antithesis of the \textit{guerrillero heroico}, the male homosexual. The case of Luis Pérez Paine and Luciano Martínez is particularly illustrative of the gendering and stigmatization of Ocha-Ifá in the first decades of the revolution.

\textsuperscript{91} Salas, \textit{Social Control and Deviance in Cuba}, 151-152.

\textsuperscript{92} Salas, \textit{Social Control and Deviance in Cuba}, 150.

\textsuperscript{93} Salas, \textit{Social Control and Deviance in Cuba}, 150.
The April 1971 First National Congress on Education and Culture had laid out the
official policy on the treatment of homosexuals in the context of the revolution, only
months before Luis Pérez Paine’s and Luciano Martínez’ counterrevolutionary activity
came to public light. The Congress determined that homosexuals could not teach or
come into contact with children and called for further study of the behaviour. It referred
to homosexuality in medical and psychological terms, rather than criminal, but continued
to blame counterrevolutionary activity on the weakness of homosexuals.94 Luis Pérez
Paine and Luciano Martínez were two young Cubans with a long history of trouble with
the revolutionary authorities when they were arrested in 1971 for the murder of three
MININT officials. Their difficulties with the law may have begun before 1959, although
the documentary evidence available does not suggest it. The age of both men at the time
of their arrest also indicates that they came of age some time in the early to mid 1960s,
the same time they began to experience problems with the justice system. According to
Bohemia, the periodical reporting the crime, the pair killed the MININT officials who
had been guarding the Prisión de la Habana (Havana Prision) while attempting to escape.
Upon their successful, if unfortunately violent, flight, Luis Pérez Paine and Luciano
Martínez sought refuge with Martínez’ padrino (godfather), Everardo Marrero
Fernández, who provided Pérez Paine with a change of clothes and then hid Martínez.
Pérez Paine then hid in the home of Luis Villafuerte Fundora, described as a vagrant
(vago), Jehovah’s Witness, and passive homosexual (homosexual pasivo) involved in
counterrevolutionary activity. A second santero allegedly prepared a resguardo against
the police, although Bohemia did not specify for whom. In addition to the crime of

94 Arguelles and Rich, “Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes toward and Understanding of
the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience, Part I.” Signs 9.4 (Summer 1984), 693.
killing the MININT personnel in the prison, Pérez Paine’s and Martínez’ previous crimes included robbery, theft and homosexuality.95

Not only the perpetrators of the main crime were branded sexual and social deviants – Bohemia also described Marrero Fernández, Martínez’ padrino as a homosexual, common vagrant (vago habitual) and marijuana addict, who illegally sold animals for the purpose of Santería.96 His apparent close association with, and aiding of, one of the perpetrators was enough for Bohemia to link his religious beliefs to sexuality and to the crime of assisting a known criminal. Of the five people charged and sentenced in the murder of the MININT personnel, all were characterized as homosexuals, practitioners of marginalized religious sects, and delinquents. The exception to this consideration was Emilio Rodríguez who merely had a reputation for creating public scandals in his neighbourhood, a pre-revolutionary synonym for practicing religions of African origin. The two “homosexual santeros” (Pérez Paine and Martínez) were sentenced to death and those implicated in assisting them were sentenced to terms of between five and twenty years in prison.97

The obvious goal of the Bohemia article on the arrest of the two murderers was to report a crime against the revolution. The discourse employed in the narration of Pérez Paine’s and Martínez exploits suggests other motivations as well. The revolutionary government associated homosexuality with counterrevolutionary activity and capitalism.98 In its attempts to unite Cubans in defence of the Revolution and create the

96 “Justicia Revolucionaria,” 51.
97 “Justicia Revolucionaria,” 50-51.
98 Salas, Social Control and Deviance in Cuba, 165.
New Man, it did not tolerate political or physical weakness, and the opinion shared by many in the government was that homosexuals were weak and effeminate. Ian Lumsden has noted that the word often used in Cuba to refer to homosexuals, maricón, meant coward and deviation from acceptable, dominant forms of masculinity. In the 1960s and 1970s maricón and homosexuality continued to be seen as deviations from acceptable masculinity, but more because they lacked respect for the revolution – they were in conflict with the concept of the New Man who was courageous and strong, physically able to defend the revolution. Revolutionary officials did not believe homosexuals could be trusted. Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich have argued that U.S. hostilities beginning with CIA-sponsored subversion and peaking with the invasion of Playa Girón had the dual impact of “pushing” homosexuals into counterrevolutionary activity, and consequently being identified as counterrevolutionaries that could not be trusted. But exclusion is often a self-fulfilling prophesy. Where revolutionaries questioned the loyalty of homosexuals to the revolution because of the revolution’s opposition to homosexuals, and the activities of a few, they left little room in which homosexuals could be revolutionaries. The two “santeros” who escaped from prison were indeed guilty of the murder of the guards; however, it is not clear that they were homosexuals. Their murder of the MININT officials, however, made them counterrevolutionaries, along with homosexuals who were a symbol of decadent

99 Lumsden, Machos, Maricones and Gays, 53.

100 Lumsden, Machos, Maricones and Gays, 64.


102 Salas, Social Control and Deviance in Cuba, 165.
capitalism. Revolutionary discourse equating counterrevolutionary activity with capitalism and homosexuality, as the ultimate indicator of decadent capitalism, discursively labelled Pérez Paine and Martínez homosexual, whether or not they actually had same-sex relations. The inclusion of Santería as another explanation or source for their criminal activity discursively linked it to both counterrevolutionary activity and homosexuality.  

The 1976 Constitution and the *Tesis y Resolución* on Religion

The revolutionary government did not entirely abandon the legal system it inherited from the two republics or the Spanish colonial authorities. After 1959 the government eliminated some laws that prevented it from taking extreme measures to defend the revolution, and introduced new laws to guide the revolutionary process. It was not until 1975, however, that the revolutionary government codified its position on religion in the I Party Congress. Perhaps not surprisingly, the place of religion and practitioners in the revolutionary project was a matter of much discussion.

Party Congresses work toward consensus building by dividing party members into groups dedicated to thematic areas that present and debate ideas until arriving at consensus and making resolutions on a particular theme or subject. It is, perhaps, a result of this compartmentalizing of tasks that contradictions and space for manoeuvring emerge when all of the parts reconvene. In keeping with the Marxist-Leninist nature of the Revolution the fourteenth resolution declared,

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103 de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 292.

104 Partido Comunista de Cuba, “Sobre la política en relacion con la religion, la iglesia y los creyentes,” *1980*. 
We must realize a prolonged, patient, serene and careful work, with the goal of accomplishing the self-improvement of religious ideology in all of its manifestations. This work should rest on the Marxist-Leninist principle that the struggle for a scientific consciousness, free of superstitions and prejudices is subordinated to the battle for the construction and development of socialist society, in which all citizens of the country should participate and indispensably take part, believers as much as non-believers.\textsuperscript{105}

It is clear that the revolutionary government expected to eventually eliminate religion altogether through the development of a socialist society. Paradoxically it envisioned the participation of believers as well as non-believers in this task.

The \textit{Tesis} also cautioned members of mass organizations and the Party against hurting the feelings of religious believers and charged their colleagues with understanding that their mission was not a campaign, but a patient and careful task of years to come. The struggle against “survivals” (\textit{supervivencias}) had to be linked to the practical and concrete movement of class and education, not anti-religious campaigns or coercive counselling.\textsuperscript{106} Although this section did not specifically mention religions of African origin the words “superstitions” and “survivals” exposed the intended targets of patient educational campaigns, revealing the way in which discrimination based on culture as race, rather than race alone, was perpetuated at the highest levels of government.

\textsuperscript{105} “Debemos realizar un trabajo prolongado, paciente, sereno y cuidadoso, a fin de lograr la superstición de la ideología religiosa en todas sus manifestaciones. Este trabajo debe descansar en el principio leninista que la lucha por una conciencia científica, libre de supersticiones y prejuicios esta subordinada a la batalla por la construcción y desarrollo de la sociedad socialista, en la que participan e indispensablemente deben tomar parte todos los ciudadanos del país, tanto los creyentes como los no creyentes.” Tesis sobre la lucha ideológica, \textit{Tesis y Resoluciones, Primer Congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba}, (Havana: Partido Comunista de Cuba, 1976) 255.

\textsuperscript{106} “Tesis sobre la política en relación con la religión, la iglesia y los creyentes.” \textit{Tesis y Resoluciones, Primer Congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba}, 303.
Religions of African origin did, however, receive specific attention. Designated “syncretic cults” (*cultos sincréticos*), they were charged with carrying out the same duties that applied to all other “cults” with respect to laws, public order, the health of citizens and norms of the socialist morale.\(^{107}\) In the case of practitioners of religions of African origins, laws and public order referred to noise and large gatherings of people that non-practitioners had complained of for decades. Concerns with the health of citizens were not new either – republican governments had often used public health concerns as pretexts for seizing religious artefacts and the revolutionary government declared its potential use of the health clause for prohibiting the activities of *casa templos*, should the need arise. Furthermore, the folkloric cultural values that the ethnicities represented in religions of African origin carried were singled out for “assimilation, purging them of mystical elements, in a way that the utilization of their essentials does not serve the maintenance of customs and criteria devoid of scientific truth.”\(^{108}\) How exactly this would be accomplished is not explained although it is tempting to turn to earlier calls to preserve truly Cuban culture. The need for informant-performers to explain and interpret customs requires the carriers of folklore to be active in the creation and maintenance of that folklore and seems to defeat the goal of purging the mystical elements.

But the revolutionary government was not interested in punishing people into abandoning their religious beliefs by 1975. Besides pointing out the error of religious belief, the government also wanted all citizens involved in the Revolution in whatever

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107 “Tesis sobre la política en relación con la religión, la iglesia y los creyentes.” *Tesis y Resoluciones, Primer Congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba*, 316.

108 “…deben asimilarse, depurándolos de elementos místicos, de manera que la utilización de sus esencias no sirva al mantenimiento de costumbres y criterios ajenos a la verdad científica.” *Tesis sobre la política en relación con la religión, la iglesia y los creyentes.* *Tesis y Resoluciones, Primer Congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba*, 317.
way possible. To that end, mass organizations like the CTC and its unions, Asociacion Nacional de Argricultores Pequeños (ANAP), CDR, Federación de Estudiantes de la Enseñanza Media (FEEM), Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC), Pioneers, Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios (FEU), and the Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos (UNEAC) would accept the religious and the non-religious as members. Only the Communist Party and the Unión de Jóvenes Cubanos (UJC) demanded that those entering their ranks “have a politico-ideological formation fully in accordance with the theoretical foundations, dialectical materialist, in which their program and doctrine are established.”

Membership in the Party was to entail sacrifice, discipline and abnegation, but the other mass organizations were what really kept the revolution going and sometimes even reined in excesses.

The I Party Congress served as the drawing board for the first constitution of the revolution in 1976, which defined the rights and responsibilities of citizens in the new society. The Preamble to the 1976 Constitution deserves some attention because it attributes citizenship and revolutionary status to very specific groups of people, most of them all but ignored by previous governments. Cuban citizens were the heirs and the ones who would carry on the creative work and traditions of combat, strength, heroism, and sacrifice forged by their ancestors consisting of: the aboriginal people who preferred

109 “…tengan una formación político-ideológica plenamente concordante con los fundamentos teóricos, dialéctico-materialistas, en que se asientan su programa y su doctrina.” “Tesis sobre la política en relación con la religión, la iglesia y los creyentes.” Tesis y Resoluciones, Primer Congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba, 305.

110 Perhaps one of the most well-known interventions was the UNEAC in the 1960s when its members mounted a public critique of the UMAPs after several artists were removed from their jobs and sent off for “re-education.” They were successful and Fidel Castro denounced them as concentration camps but they were not eliminated until 1968. José Yglesias, In the Fist of the Revolution: Life in a Cuban Country Town, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968).
extinction to submission; the slaves who rebelled against their masters; the patriots of 1868 and 1895 who fought the Spanish only to be dominated by the U.S.; the workers, peasants, students and intellectuals who struggled against imperialist domination, political corruption, lack of rights and freedoms, unemployment and exploitation for fifty years; those who promoted and developed the first peasant and worker organizations disseminating socialist ideas and founding the first Marxist-Leninist organizations; those who joined the vanguard under the guiding principles of Martí and made the January Revolution; and those who sacrificed their lives in defence of that Revolution. Not only did this constitution break with formal, legal notions of citizenship, it included Cubans from all sectors of society. Revolutionary citizenship was tied to Cuba’s history and culture, as well as formal legal concepts. All that was required was for Cubans to be committed to honouring and upholding the principles for which the revolution stood.

Article 54 of the Constitution is the only section dealing explicitly with religion and although it guarantees the right of all Cubans to profess and practice any religion, subsections 2 and 3 put the state in charge of regulating the activities of religious institutions and made it illegal and punishable to use faith or religious belief against the revolution, education or work responsibilities. Cubans could not, therefore, be absent from school or work for religious celebrations and the state had the right to monitor religious activities. The type of monitoring varied depending on the practitioners, the authorities and the decade, although oral history interviews conducted in Matanzas reveal


112 Republica de Cuba, Constitucion Politica de 1976.
that the government was concerned with religion being used to hide or foment counterrevolutionary activity.

Although Mercedes Valdez had not yet been initiated in the 1970s, she was not a stranger to Ocha. She and her husband, Pedro García, remember authorities trying to disguise themselves as practitioners so that they could attend religious events and effectively spy on the members and guests of the different *casa templos*. Their attempts at disguise were apparently so poor that practitioners spotted the interlopers immediately, significantly decreasing the chances that the authorities would find evidence of counterrevolutionary activities, were there any at all. Pedro García believes that the party militants lacked a great deal of education about Ocha-Ifá and its practitioners in those days. Given that at least some members of the revolutionary government were practitioners of Ocha-Ifá, it is significant that regional authorities employed spies, or were perceived as employing spies, rather than using initiated party members.

Other ways of monitoring the activities of practitioners of religions of African origin were less intrusive and often allowed for more freedom through centuries old requirements to request permission to celebrate a feast day or initiations. Practitioners had to provide guest lists and start and finish times for the activity, as well as describe to some extent what the activity would consist of (drums, sacrifice, or procession), but the authorities did not always monitor the actual activity very closely and the curious or uninvited often arrived and stayed for the spectacle. As long as the activity did not change or create problems for the neighbours, the police left the practitioners alone.

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113 Mercedes Valdez and Pedro Garcia, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, November 2007.
Mercedes Valdez suggests that this latter type of control was more the norm by the late 1970s and early 1980s.\footnote{Mercedes Valdez, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, November 2007.}

**The Revolution and Practitioners Twenty Years Later**

Several factors converged in the early 1980s that led to the first significant economic and political changes since the late 1960s. The revolutionary government permitted free farmers’ markets that had previously only operated in the countryside since the mid 1970s, to operate in the cities and the government also allowed some self-employment for the first time since the 1960s. Tourism, especially on the part of émigrés who had left Cuba in the 1960s and early 1970s, brought Cubans into contact with the capitalist world for the first time in decades. Many researchers link this increased tourism to the Mariel Exodus in which 125,000 Cubans left via boats for the US. These researchers believe that the slow pace of change and consumerist desires were sources of discontent.\footnote{See for example Susan Eckstein, *Back from the Future Cuba Under Castro*, 2$^{nd}$ edition (New York: Routledge, 2003) 57-58; Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution, Origins, Course and Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 150.} But even as the II Party Congress met in 1980 and declared that the 1975 policy in relation to religion, the church and believers (*creyentes*) was still valid and did not require further discussion, significant developments in the early 1980s, for the purposes of this study, were those taking place on a less official level.\footnote{Partido Comunista de Cuba, “Sobre la politica en relacion con la religion, la iglesia y los creyentes,” *II Congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba, Informe Central, Lineamientos economicos y sociales para el quinquenio 1981-1985, Resoluciones 1980* (Havana: Editora Politica, 1983) 359.}

As the II Party Congress recognized, Christians (mostly Catholics) had changed their attitude toward the revolution, mostly as result of its leadership that realized that
some sort of accommodation was necessary to its survival. The Congress commended the contribution Christians had made to building and expanding links among the revolution, movements for national liberation, and with progressive social forces in the international arena, and recommended perfecting the socialist system that guaranteed the free exercise of freedom of conscience. Some form of official tolerance, as well as the toleration of public celebration of meetings, assemblies, and other activities, including the celebration in Cuba of international religious events, served to demonstrate on an international level that the revolutionary government did indeed obey its own legislation.\textsuperscript{117}

The Presbyterian Reformed Church was one of the more autonomous denominations in which influential pastors argued for identifying with the goals of the Revolution and incorporating itself and its parishes into the revolutionary process.\textsuperscript{118} In 1977 it issued its Confession of Faith, in which it declared that the Church lived happily in the Revolution, and argued that the “atheist communists serve as an inspiration to us because of their readiness and willingness to live sacrificial solidarity and effective love.”\textsuperscript{119} Margaret Crahan has argued that the churches in Cuba had become by the 1980s concerned by what they saw as “increasing moral decay and debasement of traditional values related to family and community.” Perhaps more importantly, however, church leaders wanted to play a more prominent role in society and, therefore, began to criticize


\textsuperscript{118} Corse, \textit{Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-US Bond}, 131.

\textsuperscript{119} In Kirk, \textit{Between God and the Party}, 140.
social shortcomings, while stressing their support of the revolution. Culminating in the 1986 Encuentro Nacional Ecumenico Cubano (ENEC) the process of reflection in parishes and church groups criticized the churches’ failure to support social justice prior to 1959. It sought to make the scripture relevant to Cuban society as a way of expressing concern over corruption, theft, fraud, alcohol abuse, abortion, and irresponsible workers, and its goal was to stimulate dialogue and consensus capable of improving societal wellbeing. Both personnel and resources from abroad were important to this task, and as Crahan has pointed out, a government disposition to giving the churches more space facilitated the endeavour.

Although religions of African origin lacked hierarchical bodies capable of organizing large numbers of practitioners, individuals and smaller organizations began to pay attention to the Christians. Kimbo, an oriaté (master of ceremonies) from Matanzas, saw the 1986 ENEC as an experience from which practitioners of Ocha-Ifá could learn. If the Christians could put aside their differences and unite in order to expand their role and participation in the revolutionary process, practitioners of Ocha-Ifá could do the same. It took a bit longer for large Ocha-Ifá organizations to emerge but Kimbo’s analysis demonstrates that practitioners were in touch with developments that were not necessarily part of their lived experiences.

In addition to the reconciliation taking place between the revolutionary government and Cuban churches, Cuban internationalism also had an impact on those

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120 Crahan, “Religion and associationalism,” 76.

121 Crahan, “Religion and associationalism,” 76.

becoming initiated to Ocha-Ifá (or any other religion of African origin). Heriberto Feraudy Espino, former Cuban ambassador to Nigeria, makes two important points in his position. First, he claims that Cuba’s *internacionalismo* was a significant factor in introducing or reacquainting Cubans with Africa and/or their African heritage. Second, almost unintentionally, *internacionalismo* put Cubans serving on missions in harm’s way, leaving their families at home feeling powerless over their safety and protection, willing to try almost anything to ensure the safe return of their loved ones. He argues that some Cubans without family histories in Ocha-Ifá began to turn to religions of African origins, not in a quest to rediscover their African roots, but to protect their loved ones participating in missions abroad as soldiers, doctors, teachers, and technicians.\(^\text{123}\)

Whether or not Cubans practiced Ocha-Ifá, they often believed in its power and were receptive to African-based rituals.

In 1979 34,000 to 36,000 Cubans were serving in some military capacity abroad, the vast majority in Angola and Ethiopia.\(^\text{124}\) The fact that so many of the internationalists were in Africa in the 1980s, Feraudy Espino argues, may have swayed Cuban exposure to and interest in religions of African origin.\(^\text{125}\) This argument would suggest that, on a popular level, Cubans never altogether abandoned certain popular religious traditions, in spite of state efforts or their entering higher education, positions in the government and even the PCC. Just as popular religiosity in Cuba did not oblige Cubans to practice only one religious tradition or to strictly observe that tradition, it seems that popular politics


\(^{125}\) Feraudy Espino, *De la Africanía en Cuba el ifáismo*, 17-18.
did not prevent members of state entities from consulting *babalao*. It was common for someone to be baptized in the Catholic Church, *rayado* in Palo Monte, with the *mano* of Orula and consider him or herself to be a sincere and faithful believer of all – why then could a revolutionary not also be a believer. Whichever traditions were best suited to the task at hand met the criteria of the individual.

The early 1980s did not only witness increased interest in Ocha-Ifá. As Feraudy Espino noted there was also an increase in the number of people becoming initiated and, where the former ambassador sees the increase as a result of fear of the unknown and attempts at protection, economic factors also played a role. In spite of the economic liberalization, what Mesa-Lago terms the period of “Timid Economic Reform,” Cubans once again experienced a period of high liquidity, in part as a result of self employment.

In spite of the fact that a good number of Cubans had money available, Mercedes Valdez, whose quote introduces this chapter, had not financially benefited from the economic liberalization of the early 1980s, nor did she want to “make the saint.” In 1983, the city of Matanzas had allocated her a piece of land on which to build a house for her family, but Mercedes believed that Ocha would interfere in her plans for family and

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126 Feraudy Espino claims that a *compañera* he knew who considered herself to belong to the ultra left allowed her in-laws to have her son’s military uniform “blessed” by a *babalao* to protect him on his mission to Angola, *De la Africanía en Cuba el ifáismo*, 18.

127 My informant from Matanzas, Kimbo, says that all *olorishas* must have been baptized. He himself was baptized, *rayado*, initiated to the Abakua society, made a *babalocha*, and joined the Masons proclaiming his sincere dedication to all.

personal freedom by demanding too much of her time and energy.\textsuperscript{129} By 1984, however, her health was declining and her padrino told her that she had to become initiated as soon as possible. Within months of becoming initiated to \textit{la Caridad}, as Mercedes calls her \textit{ángel guardián}, her health improved and the state approved her for a bank loan to build her new house.\textsuperscript{130} Mercedes and her family moved into a new house, with running water, large rooms, a garden and a patio – plenty of room for the \textit{orishas} and the ancestors who could not inhabit the same space – the same year. Her children had a safe, clean place to play and Mercedes was relieved to provide a healthier environment for her family.\textsuperscript{131}

In the period 1981-1985 the Five Year Plan determined to build 200,000 housing units for those without housing or living in inadequate housing.\textsuperscript{132} Living in the \textit{barrio Pueblo Nuevo} of Matanzas in crowded, unsanitary conditions, Mercedes Valdez qualified for a new house. Lázara Menéndez has noted in Havana that many people who moved out of slums and into new homes and well-equipped neighbourhoods hid their beliefs even more from their new neighbours who did not understand their customs.\textsuperscript{133} This was not the case with Mercedes who celebrated her first year of initiation in her new

\textsuperscript{129} Local governments acquired a degree of autonomy through the 1976 Constitution and some provincial towns began to support the efforts of residents to build their own dwellings, sometimes providing building sites and materials. Kosta Mathéy, “Self-Help Housing Strategies in Cuba: An Alternative to Conventional Wisdom?” in Robert B. Potter and Dennis Conway, \textit{Self-Help Housing, the Poor, and the State in the Caribbean} (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997) 168.

\textsuperscript{130} In 1984 the official government policy began to support local initiatives and began offering credit, technical assistance, and official outlets for building materials. Mathéy, “Self-Help Housing Strategies in Cuba,” 168-169.

\textsuperscript{131} Mercedes Valdez, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007.


\textsuperscript{133} Lázara Menéndez Vázquez, \textit{Rodar el coco, proceso de cambio en la santería} (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 2002) 75.
house in plain view of all of her neighbours. Far from believing that the state assisted her in order to remove her from an environment that contributed to the continued practice of Ocha-Ifá, Mercedes declared that she had a pending appointment with destiny and had to comply with the wishes of the orisha that had claimed her head, Ochún, before the state would help her resolve her material issues. Unlike some of the more dominant ideological views among members of the revolutionary government, Mercedes did not view her initiation in 1984 as counterrevolutionary, but as necessary in order to both benefit from, and contribute to, the Revolution. In this sense, the state did not give her money; Ocha helped her obtain it from the state. By framing her politico-religious experience in this manner, Mercedes avoids becoming only a subject of the state and also becomes a protagonist in the revolutionary process, not always following the party line, but challenging the revolution within the bounds that it established and based on the contradictions it inherited from previous generations.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has emphasized the difficulties that Cubans, including the revolutionary government, had in breaking free of the past and how practitioners of Ocha-Ifá manipulated contradictory policies to their benefit. Although a revolution had occurred that radically changed Cuban society and significantly contributed to social equality, the people who made that revolution carried with them ideologies, cultural values and morals that were incompatible with the goals of the Revolution. Their legacy of racism and an inability for self-criticism or self-reflection, enabled stereotypes and prejudices to persist on a popular level under the guise of “culture,” while the

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contradictory policies and legislation that arose from this impediment left spaces in which
individuals and groups could manoeuvre.

Practitioners of Ocha-Ifá were variously credited with contributing to Cuban
culture and folklore, gendered “sexually deviant,” labelled mentally ill and criminal,
applauded as artistic performers, and discriminated against as Cubans of African descent
who needed to leave the past behind. Evidence from casa templos and individual
practitioners of Ocha-Ifá suggest that Cubans accepted or understood the Cuban
Revolution in a variety of often unintended ways, but also contributed to the redefinition
of national culture and identity. Remarkably, many practitioners seized upon the more
positive discourse associated with their religious heritage and became performers in the
CFN, while others continued to practice their religion in private, both options fulfilling
the revolutionary call to celebrate Cuba’s autochthonous culture and its African heritage.
Chapter Four: La ceremonia de la letra del año: rival visions of Ocha-Ifá

“The greatest fortune is to have, to be able and to know.”
- Ifá proverb appearing in a 1994 letra del año.¹

Introduction

On 31 December 1986 two groups of babalaoas gathered in Central Havana homes to conduct ceremonias de la letra del año, that is, divination ceremonies to auger the New Year, ceremonies not conducted since December 1958 on the eve of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution.² Earlier that month the same groups had met to determine what kinds of offerings the orishas wanted in order to gain their favour on the eve of the New Year. Participants located and sacrificed the animals and other offerings, and then placed them in the locations the orishas had specified. Only after the orishas had eaten were the babalaoas ready to ask their prognostications and recommendations for 1987.³ The reigning odú or sign (in the form of a proverb or myth) that would characterize the year, as determined by one group, was Babá Ejiogbé, double fortune, good and bad, a sign


³ On the process involved in conducting a ceremonia de la letra del año see Argüelles Mederos and Rubiera Verdecia, “La ceremonia de apertura del año en la Regla de Ocha.”
ruled by Elegguá, the orisha responsible for opening and closing roads.\(^4\) Coincidentally, Babá Ejiogbé was the same odú that characterized 1959.\(^5\)

Knowing and being able to control one’s destiny were two of the fundamental and constant aspects of Ocha-Ifá throughout the twentieth century, and the ceremonia de la letra del año was one manner of prophesying the destiny of large populations, or even governments, on an annual basis. But after the triumph of the revolution babalao and orishas scaled back their activities to focus on their own casa templos, auguring letras de casa, predictions only for the benefit of their religious family. These letras did not appear in print, although practitioners did pass predictions on by word of mouth.\(^6\) The orientation of the letra changed significantly in the late 1980s, however, when two groups of babalao claimed to auger events or occurrences of national and international interest, frequently predicting coups d’état, wars, power struggles, betrayal, droughts and crop failures, floods and damaging storms, and failure to comply with agreements.\(^7\) But if we examine the letra del año as a metaphoric discourse on religion, politics, and race,


\(^5\) Argüelles Mederos and Rubiera Verdecia, “La ceremonia de apertura del año en la Regla de Ocha,” 6, note.

\(^6\) This is the way Victor Betancourt explained the revival of the ceremonia de la letra del año, although other practitioners argue that one group of babalao never stopped conducting the broader ceremony, they just did not make it public. Interview, Havana, November 2007; the Junta Directiva of the Asociación Cultural Yoruba claims that babalao Joaquín Salazar continued the tradition after 1959 and passed on direction of the ceremony to another babalao upon his death in the mid 1970s. “Historia de la ceremonia de la letra del año,” available from www.cubayoruba.cult.cu/Textos/opinion.htm, internet; accessed 5 January 2006.

\(^7\) Not all of these predictions appear in a given year but these are the most common ones that reappear numerous times between 1987 and 2009 in the letras from the Asociación Cultural Yoruba and the Comisión Organizadora de la Letra del Año. 1988-2004 available in Argüelles Mederos and Rubiera Verdecia, “La ceremonia de apertura del año en la Regla Ocha” and 2001-present available online at www.folkcuba.com and www.cubayoruba.cult.cu.
competing visions of Ocha-Ifá, domestic politics and the salience of Africa in late twentieth century Cuban identity emerge.

During the late 1980s and 1990s Cubans witnessed the erosion of many of the revolution’s gains. Some sectors of society, such as Cubans of African descent, experienced this hardship disproportionately as racial discrimination re-emerged, salaries shrunk, and opportunities to escape the crisis were available disproportionately to white Cubans. These shifting fields of privilege and power in late twentieth century Cuba contributed to the emergence of two distinct Havana-based groups of babalao— one focused on Cuban rituals and practices, the other on purity and authenticity via Africa. Both sought to unify practitioners in order to standardize ritual practice. The Comisión Organizadora de la Letra del Año Miguel Febles Padrón (herein Comisión), formed in 1986 for the specific purpose of conducting the annual ceremonia de la letra del año. What later became the Asociación Cultural Yoruba (herein ACY) was founded in 1976 under the name the Asociación Ifá Ayer, Ifá Hoy, Ifá Mañana by babalao Filiberto O’Farrill to conduct religious activities in general – the ceremonia de la letra del año was only one among many endeavors.8 The differences characterizing the two organizations must therefore be understood as organizational as well as theological or ideological.

In spite of their differing religious orientations, the Comisión and the ACY share a common ritual heritage. Both organizations recognize Bernardo Rojas as a pivotal figure in their traditions, but the Comisión places greater emphasis on his unifying role than does the ACY. The ACY, for its part, argues that while the creole babalao were important for continuing the tradition, the African founders of the ceremony are the true

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8 Antonio Castañeda Márquez, Asociación Cultural Yoruba, “Información,” pamphlet, no date.
progenitors of late twentieth century practice. Kenneth Routon argues that the ACY’s African orientation is a response to twentieth century Yoruba claims that Cuban practitioners were missing some elements of ritual practice. Framing Africa as the true source of historical knowledge and contemporary legitimacy, the ACY traces its ritual ancestry back through Rojas to Adeshina or Remigio Herrera, a babalao born in Africa and, according to some accounts, the first to initiate other babalao s in Cuba. Remigio Herrera was also the African-born babalao who conducted the first ceremonia de la letra del año in Cuba some time around the end of the nineteenth century. Practitioners remembered Adeshina as the founder of numerous Ocha-Ifá organizations and as responsible for the development and consolidation of Ifá in Cuba. Adeshina’s ritual heritage, therefore, is not only well entrenched in Cuba, it also connotes a certain amount of ritual authority and prestige for those who can trace their lineage to him. For the ACY, it is significant that Bernardo Rojas inherited Adeshina’s orishas (deities) and took over the direction of the letra del año because it provides a bridge to the current association and its ritual history. When Bernardo Rojas died in 1959 he passed the leadership of the letra del año to a babalao, named Joaquín Salazar, who belonged to the ACY’s early incarnation, the Asociacion Ifá Ayer, Ifá Hoy, Ifá Mañana. The ACY uses this complex ritual history to advocate for its pre-eminence in Cuba.

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10 Junta Directiva, Asociación Cultural Yoruba, “Historia de la ceremonia de la letra del año.”

11 Junta Directiva, Asociación Cultural Yoruba, “Historia de la ceremonia de la letra del año.”

The Comisión was founded in 1986 with the primary goal of uniting *babalaos* in order to conduct annual *ceremonias de la letra del año* – agreeing that the content and aesthetics of that particular ritual was the basic criteria for uniting practitioners; other discrepancies or disagreements could be overlooked.\(^{13}\) The Comisión traced its ritual heritage regarding the *ceremonia de la letra del año* only as far back as Bernardo Rojas, although the more relevant figure for it is Miguel Febles Padrón, who passed away just months before the December 1986 event. Because the revival of the *letra del año* was Febles Padrón’s idea, the *babalaos* named the Comisión in his honour. Unlike the ACY, the Comisión believes that it rescued and revived a Cuban tradition with antecedents in Africa. Moreover, Lázaro Cuesta, member of the Comisión, argues that Cubans preserved rituals and traditions that no longer existed in Africa by the end of the twentieth century.\(^{14}\) Africa served as a point of reference for this group of *babalaos*, but the deferral to Rojas suggests that Ocha-Ifá as it had developed in Cuba was more significant to the Comisión’s concept of ritual practice in the late twentieth century.

Because the legitimacy with which the Comisión conducted the annual ceremony could be questioned on the basis of authority, as no one involved in the Comisión’s ceremony had inherited its leadership, the Comisión affirmed other foundations to legitimate its activities. It, therefore, claimed that Rojas himself approved of the revival of his tradition when the *odú* Iré-Tedí appeared during the first ceremony, coincidentally the same *odú* Rojas received as his name in Ifá upon initiation. If the appearance of Rojas’ name were not enough to reinforce this claim, the Comisión also

\(^{13}\) Cuesta, “Un Mensaje Necesario,” 2.

\(^{14}\) Cuesta, “Un mensaje necesario.”
insists that Rojas’ spiritual presence attended the ceremony to determine his own odú, thereby confirming the Comisión’s authority.¹⁵

In analysing two distinct groups of babalao conducting an annual divination ceremony, this chapter bridges two distinct periods in Cuban history: by beginning with the re-emergence of the ceremonia de la letra del año in 1986 it opens in a period of relative comfort and prosperity, compared to the main focus of the chapter that unfolds during the Special Period of the 1990s. Much of the literature for this period focuses on the Cuban economy and the material hardship Cubans experienced in this period. Yet, the economic crisis and deprivation often overshadow other salient developments that surfaced at the same time.¹⁶

Alejandro de la Fuente’s research on the Special Period has characterized the re-emergence of racial discrimination in Cuba, arguing that decreased government control over important sectors of the economy and society contributed to an increase in racist ideologies and prejudices, as some sectors of society became prosperous and the wealth was not redistributed. Many of these ideologies and prejudices existed prior to the Special Period, however, and, therefore, indicate a failure to fulfill one of its more celebrated goals.¹⁷ In a similar vein, Mark Sawyer focuses on ‘infrapolitics,’ arguing that Afro-Cubans used the black market, or other illegal activity, as an outlet for the expression of their views on race and discrimination in Cuba. He also concludes that the

¹⁵ Trimegistros, “Concepto ‘Letra del Año.’”


economic order inaugurated in 1990 contributed to an increase in racial inequality in Cuba.\textsuperscript{18} Both researchers present nuanced analyses that address structural and social factors contributing to racial discrimination that I will apply to this examination of practitioners of Ifá. However, before embarking on that endeavor it is useful to provide an overview of the origins and history of the \textit{ceremonia de la letra del año} in Cuba.

\textbf{La ceremonia de la letra del año}

Although chapter one dealt with Bernardo Rojas and his connection to the \textit{letra del año} and Fulgencio Batista, the ceremony antedates Rojas. In the late nineteenth century a small group of \textit{babalao}s who had arrived in Cuba as slaves united for an annual divination ceremony.\textsuperscript{19} Little is known as to the purpose of the ceremony; whether it was for a limited number of religious families or practitioners of Ocha-Ifá more broadly, or if it remained the exclusive domain of the \textit{babalao}s, is not clear. Once these African \textit{babalao}s passed away in the early years after the founding of the republic, the group ceremony ceased. The creole \textit{babalao}s either were not interested in, or were not capable of uniting for, common religious purposes.\textsuperscript{20} Given the degree of repression and control of Ocha-Ifá during that period, external forces probably affected their ability to mobilize for such a ceremony. There is evidence that \textit{babalao}s and \textit{olorishas} (male and female practitioners of Ocha) conducted the \textit{ceremonia de la letra del año} on a small scale for their own \textit{casa templos} and that the predictions and recommendations reflected the


\textsuperscript{20} Routon, “The ‘Letter of the Year’ and the Prophetics of Revolution,” 127.
situation or needs of a particular religious family.\textsuperscript{21} For example, a \textit{casa templo} whose membership depended on criminal activity in some part for survival might warn of pending trouble with the law and suggest leaving an offering at a jail to prevent the fulfilment of this fate. These small scale \textit{letras del año} were not intended to comment on the socio-political situation of Cuba, much less the rest of the world. But in the 1950s, the \textit{letra del año} began to assume a political discourse aimed at the Cuban state under the direction of Bernardo Rojas, a \textit{babalao} who some say conducted the ceremony for the exclusive benefit of Fulgencio Batista.\textsuperscript{22}

There is some scholarly speculation that the \textit{letra del año} had its roots in the New Yam Festival of West Africa, a ceremony celebrating the harvest and the fertility of the land. Although a good many practitioners argue that the \textit{ceremonia de la letra del año} was an African tradition taken from Africa to Cuba during the nineteenth century and perpetuated by the descendents of the enslaved Africans, there is no firm evidence to support this argument.\textsuperscript{23} The New Yam festival of the Oyó Yoruba, however, was a celebration of the harvest that may have served as the root for the Cuban \textit{letra del año}. Linked to Yemayá, the \textit{orisha} responsible for ensuring female conception, the harvest also celebrated human fertility.\textsuperscript{24} Several scholars have argued that, in Cuba, fertility \textit{orishas}, or the fertility function of \textit{orishas}, serving humans or the land, fell to the

\textsuperscript{21} Victor Betancourt Estrada, Interviewed by the author, Havana, November 2007.

\textsuperscript{22} Victor Betancourt argues that Rojas’ \textit{letra} was never a real \textit{letra del año} because of Rojas’ complicity with Batista. Interviewed by the author, Havana, November 2007.

\textsuperscript{23} The ACY promotes this view without exception and the Comisión often refers to the ceremony’s African roots but insists that at the ceremony was more Cuban than African by the end of the twentieth century. No researcher has thus far been able to document a similar ceremony in nineteenth century West Africa, other than the New Yam Festival.

\textsuperscript{24} J. Lorand Matory, \textit{Sex and the Empire that is No More} (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004) 141, 256.
wayside and were eventually forgotten or disconnected from their function of fertility, as a result of the harsh conditions of slavery and slaves’ desire to control their own (re)production. In Cuba, fertility of both people and the land meant longer working days, poorer living conditions, and increased misery. Therefore, instead of predicting rain or rich soil, the ceremony assumed a socio-political character that warned enslaved Yoruba in Cuba of betrayal, violence, illness, or inclement weather, such as hurricanes. It was this type of prediction that contributed to the continuing relevance of Yoruba divination in Cuba, not fertility.

The ceremonia de la letra del año in Cuba typically begins in early December, although some take place in June, when babalaosein consult the Ifá oracle, consisting of a round wooden tray and an orisha who communicates through kola nuts or cowrie shells, to determine the offerings and sacrifices the orishas will require in order to reveal the future. The babalaosein question the orisha of the oracle, named Odú, Odúa or Oduduwa (all one and the same), as they throw kola nuts onto a mat or tablero (tray) and the pattern in which the nuts fall (face up or down) tells the babalao whether to mark a one or a zero in dust. Every orisha is consulted in this way, via the orisha Odú, and the results interpreted from the marks in the dust. The marks, or combinations, of kola nuts correspond to a particular odú (referring to a myth and not the same as the orisha above) of Ifá, which indicates the camino (avatar) or circumstances in which a particular orisha


may be at the time. The babalaos offer specific foods and other items in order to make that orisha more amenable to consultation, or to maintain the orisha in a state of good communication. The situation is easier to manage when the orishas’ favourite and taboo foods are considered, thereby enabling the babalaos to arrive at a suitable and feasible menu.

Once the babalaos have determined the sacrifices and offerings, they collect the necessary animals or items. Small, easy to find and to afford animals, such as chickens or other birds, are common sacrificial animals; however, for a large ceremony like the letra del año all types of animals are required in order to satisfy the desires of all of the orishas. The babalaos trade or purchase the necessary animals, fruits, vegetables, herbs and other goods, sacrifice the animals in the appropriate manner at the appropriate time, and then transfer them to the apeterbi (a woman initiated to either Ochún or Yemayá, depending on the lineage, who has special permission to work in the Ifá room to assist the babalao; she is usually the babalao’s partner) or other iyalochas to be seasoned and/or cooked. The babalaos take the food and other offerings to locations specific to the orisha, or places indicated by the orisha in consultation. For example, offerings to Eleggua, the orisha of the crossroad, are typically placed on the ground at a crossroad;

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29 Both researchers and practitioners emphasize the role women have in preparing the food, whether destined for the orishas or the members and guests of the casa templo. Mary Ann Clark provides the most detailed explanation of this role. Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule: Santería Ritual Practices and their Gender Implications (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005) 115.
and offerings to Changó, who lives in a palma real (royal palm), are typically left at the base of a palm tree.\(^{31}\)

The actual ceremony itself takes place 31 December, after the orishas receive their offerings and sacrifices, and is directed by one babalao with the participation of all other babalao. Some organizations (the ACY) allow the most senior babalao to determine the letra del año because his wisdom and experience are considered necessary to interpret the odú, while other organizations (the Comisión) allow the least senior babalao to determine the letra because he is the least experienced and thought less likely to manipulate the odú.\(^{32}\) Regardless of which babalao the group selects to conduct the ceremony, babalao determine three main types of information from the oracle.

The answers to the first questions presented to the oracle reveal the reigning and accompanying orisha, as well as the sign or myth that defines the year. These three elements are fundamental for determining what is in store for the coming year. For example, in a year in which Changó is the reigning orisha war, coups d’état, objects falling from above and other violence can be expected. Responses to a second set of questions reveal the relation and interrelation in the environment in which we live. These responses provide a more accurate account of what is possible in a given location or organization, such as the likelihood of a coup d’état versus a relatively small scuffle over political or other offices. The third set of questions are perhaps the most important as their responses indicate the measures required to ameliorate or avoid potentially negative

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\(^{31}\) Arguelles Mederos and Rubiera Verdecia, “La ceremonia de apertura del año en la Regla de Ocha,” 7.

\(^{32}\) Arguelles Mederos and Rubiera Verdecia, “La ceremonia de apertura del año en la Regla de Ocha,” 8; Victor Betancourt explained that the Comisión prefers the most junior babalao to determine the reigning odú so that the results are less calculated and more “pure.” Interviewed by the author, Havana, November 2007.
Amelioration can involve further sacrifice, initiation to Ocha-Ifá, receiving a new orisha, cleaning one’s house with certain herbs, avoiding moonlight, or any number of recommendations. The significance of this portion of the ceremony is that not only can human beings control their destiny if they follow the advice of the orisha, but that states and governments can control their destiny, as well as that of their citizens, by acknowledging the predictions of the ceremonia de la letra del año. The responses, corresponding to any of the 256 odú of Ifá, to all of these questions are provided in a series of tosses of the kola nuts and recorded in dust in the form of ones and zeros. A babalao from each group writes out the interpretation of these signs, or odú, in a mix of Spanish and Cuban Yoruba that is then circulated among the members of the group or organization and the public.

Although anyone initiated to Ocha-Ifá can participate in the preparations for the letra del año in some way – whether helping to acquire animals, cooking, or contributing with resources – only babalao participate in the actual ceremony. To become a babalao the orisha Orula (also Orúnmila), the interpreter of the oracle of Ifá, must choose a boy or man to be initiated to him. As in Ocha, an individual cannot choose his or her orisha, the orisha chooses the individual. It is difficult to determine exactly when babalao began refusing to initiate homosexual men, but certainly by the 1980s, only heterosexual men (and boys) could become babalao. If the babalao could publicly convince Cubans that they were all heterosexual, perhaps they could avoid the negative

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34 Hermes Trimegistros, “Concepto ‘Letra del Año,’” pamphlet, no date, no publication, 2.
35 Brown, Santería Enthroned, 88.
36 Brown suggests that homophobia entered Ifá in the 1940s, Santería Enthroned, 88.
stereotyping that collapsed practitioners of religions of African origin into homosexuals, crime and disloyalty to the revolution. In Cuba, women have been prohibited from the priesthood of Ifá until very recently.

The Ifá Organizations and the letra del año

Many scholars and observers of the ceremonia de la letra del año believe that opposing views of the Cuban Revolution and the revolutionary government form the basis for the differences and antagonism between the Comisión and the ACY. While I do not entirely discount this rather superficial claim, I argue that their perceived political loyalties also reflect intense religious rivalries rooted in the legacy of European colonization, the Atlantic slave trade, and Cuban struggles for political independence, as well as the socio-political and economic challenges faced by Cubans in the 1990s.

Contained within the letras del año are positions on such fundamental issues to Cuban identity as race, cultural heritage, and political loyalty, as well as larger politico-socio-economic issues that are as related to Ocha-Ifá as they are to the Cuban Revolution.

In addition to reviving the annual ceremony, the Comisión also aimed to standardize ritual and practice in order to reduce confusion and conflict among practitioners. Victor Betancourt Estrada, one of the founding members of the Comisión, explained it as follows:

They wanted to achieve exactly that, modify. Because what happened was there was a lot of confusion...because if I was going down the street and the neighbour or the friend of the owner...‘hey Ogbé Yono appeared and Changó is coming.’ But I would walk two more blocks and ‘Otura Ógbé appeared and Yemayá is coming’ and ...so as there were always difficulties informing the Cuban

37 Among scholars see Brown, Santería Enthroned, 291 and Routon, “The “Letter of the Year” and the Prophetics of Revolution,” 130; among observers see The Miami Herald in any given year.
population, the religious, here, it was so uninformed because religious diffusion was prohibited.\textsuperscript{38}

Rather than being a problem generated by practitioners themselves, Betancourt interprets the lack of unification and standardization as a result of state intervention prohibiting the circulation of religious information. Enforced isolation created the confusion, not the practitioners themselves through their competing positions. And while Betancourt in this instance was referring more specifically to the revolutionary period, the prohibitions or restrictions on religious activities involving religions of African origin were imposed to varying degrees throughout Cuban history. What the Comisión proposed to do through its group \textit{ceremonia de la letra del año} was, therefore, to challenge centuries of control and domination over the descendents of African peoples.

Similarly, the ACY sought to defend the history of Ocha-Ifá through standardization of the religion, not only a particular ritual. As the current president, Antonio Castañeda Márquez explained, "Yo vivo frente un San Pedro y digo: ese no sirve, no sabe nada...Y así van peleándose entre todo el mundo sin darse cuenta que esto es una fraternidad, una hermandad, que cada uno tiene su gente [I live in front of a San Pedro [a person initiated to San Pedro or Ogún] and I say: this guy is no good, he doesn’t know anything...And they go along like this fighting among themselves without realizing that this is a fraternity, a brotherhood, that everyone has his own people]."\textsuperscript{39} The view that other practitioners did not know enough about Ocha-Ifá to practice it properly or that

\textsuperscript{38} “Querían lograr eso mismo, modificar. Porque pasa que había mucha confusión...porque si yo iba por la calle y la vecina o la amiga del dueño, oye salió Ogbé Yono y que viene Chango. Pero caminaba dos cuadras más y salió Otura Ogbé y viene Yemayá y salía...entonces como aquí siempre hubo dificultad para informar la población cubana, la religiosa, estaba tan desinformada porque estaba prohibida la difusión religiosa.” Betancourt Estrada, Interviewed by the author, Havana, November 2007.

\textsuperscript{39} Castañeda Márquez, Interviewed by the author, Havana, June 2005.
they were needlessly sowing the seeds of dissent within the religion, formed the basis of
the ACY’s development in the late 1980s and 1990s, in an attempt to place itself at the
top of a ritual hierarchy.

In spite of their different views of Ocha-Ifá’s past and future in Cuba, the ACY
and the Comisión did, however, share common ground in two significant areas. Both
organizations went public during a time in which they could not easily predict the
reaction of either the state or society. The state no longer required religious organizations
to register with the Ministerio de Justicia, but they still had to request permission for
religious activities, especially when those activities involved large groups of people.
Both organizations also responded to latent feelings of dismissal, neglect and outright
desipsal of African cultural manifestations in Cuban society, in spite of benefiting from
revolutionary programs to provide universal healthcare and education to all, and the
attention given to them during the revolutionary period through the arts. The leaders and
members of the ACY and the Comisión, therefore, shared a desire to practice their
religion openly, honour their ancestors, and have their cultural heritage recognized and
valued by society.40 The terms on which they sought to achieve these goals further
challenged the myth of racial democracy on which a united Cuban people was founded.

40 Many babalaos, babalorishas and iyalochas expressed feelings of pain and sadness when they discussed
the way practitioners were treated by the Cuban State throughout much of the twentieth century. While
they recognized and even applauded the efforts of the revolutionary government to research and present
African traditions as part of Cuban culture, they also felt they had to confront tendencies to present their
beliefs as part of the past as they are very much in the present. For example Kimbo, Interviewed by the
author, March 2006; Juan Ramón Velázquez, Interviewed by the author, June 2006; Juan García,
Interviewed by the author, December 2007; and Victor Betancourt, Interviewed by the author, November
2007.
From the Casa Templo to the Streets: The 1980s

Discussions of the mid to late 1980s are often overshadowed by the initiation of Cuba’s Special Period in 1990 following the economic crisis caused by the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. According to scholars, the dire circumstances in which Cuba found itself, when unable to secure credit or favourable trade terms with the former Eastern Bloc, contributed to the revolutionary government allowing greater personal freedom in order to maintain unity. Yet, there were indications by the mid-1980s that the Cuban government was already re-evaluating the previous twenty-five years. In 1985, as a result of interviews conducted earlier that year, Frei Betto, the Brazilian Dominican priest, published *Fidel y la Religión* in Cuba. The book focused mostly on Catholicism, Fidel Castro’s childhood and religious education, as well as his thoughts on religion twenty-six years into the revolution. To the surprise of most Cubans, Fidel Castro admitted that religion and revolution were not necessarily incompatible, as experiences in Chile and Nicaragua had demonstrated. He spoke positively about religion in general and for the first time referred to religions of African origin as religions, rather than cults or superstitions, igniting many discussions in Cuba. Cubans lined up for hours to get a copy, and its first printing sold 200,000 copies.

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41 For example Eckstein, *Back from the Future*, 234.


Additionally, after a considerable amount of reorganizing in the 1970s, the Catholic and Protestant Churches secured a place in the debate on the role of religion in a Marxist-Leninist state through the 1986 Ecumenical Council Meeting. Practitioners of Ocha-Ifá saw *Fidel y la Religión* and the new role for the Catholic and Protestant Churches as positive gestures for religion, especially Ocha-Ifá. Moreover, at the end of the 1986 *III Congreso del Partido*, Fidel Castro admitted that racial discrimination still existed in Cuba and that Cubans had work to do in order to fully eliminate it. With other sectors identifying and demanding an expanded role in society, practitioners of Ocha-Ifá also felt empowered.

Despite Fidel Castro’s comments in 1986 and efforts to improve the representation of Cubans of African descent in all levels of government, race remained a topic of public non-discussion in Cuba, and Cubans wanting to call attention to the issue sought to frame their efforts in different terms. Culture continued to serve as a veil, but the limits expanded, making Africa important, not only for claims to authority, but as a source of identity as well. In 1987 the *Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos* (ICAP) invited the Ooni of Ile Ifé, the spiritual leader of the Yoruba in Nigeria, Orunade Sijuwade Olubuse II, to Havana for a cultural visit. The Ooni’s visit was one among a list of Nigerian dignitaries who visited Cuba in the 1980s to establish cultural and

44 Margaret Crahan, “Religion and associationalism,” 76.

45 Kimbo, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, March 2006.


47 de la Fuente notes that the *III Congreso del Partido* elected a black and mestizo membership representing 28% of the total, double the number of blacks and mestizos elected only six years earlier. *A Nation for All*, 313.

educational ties between the two countries. During his visit he was impressed with the extent to which Cubans practiced the Yoruba religion, and called on practitioners of Ocha-Ifá to build a temple in Havana where all could worship. He also suggested that Cubans host a world conference on the Yoruba religion. The ACY accepted this challenge and, with the Ooni’s international stamp of approval, tried to register the association with the Ministerio de Justicia under its old name, the Asociacion Ifá Ayer, Ifá Hoy, Ifá Mañana. Then-president, Manolo Ibañez, was unsuccessful in legalizing the association because the state was not interested in registering religious organizations at that time, having recently eliminated the colonial legislation requiring registration. But Ibañez insisted that making the organization more accessible to a broader group of people, not only those initiated to Ocha-Ifá, was important for the future of the religion. Intellectuals and researchers, as well as average people interested in the religion, could join the ACY.

In spite of his recommendations, the Ooni’s visit did little to unite practitioners, as leaders of both the ACY and the Comisión desired. The visit actually triggered the conflict and rivalry between the ACY and the Comisión, linking Cubans to longstanding ethnic and political struggles in Nigeria whose origins can be found in nineteenth century British colonization of the region. When the British began their colonial rule over what is now Nigeria, they divided the Yoruba southwest administratively between the Ooni of Ife and the Alaafin (king or emperor) of Oyó, allowing two traditional figures to serve as

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49 Ayorinde, Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution and National Identity, 100.
50 Castañeda Márquez, “Información.”
51 Castañeda Márquez, “Información.”
liaisons between the British and the Yoruba. The British put the Ooni in charge of religious affairs and the Alaafin in charge of political affairs, believing the Oyó Empire had had complete political control over all the Yoruba until its collapse early in the nineteenth century. This arrangement in the Yoruba region lasted until Nigeria won its independence in 1960, at which time Yoruba political movements constructed competing interpretations of the Yoruba past in the sense of different ethnic political projects. The Ooni, as religious authority, became a unifying figure in the interests of a pan Yoruba separatist identity, arguing that ethnicity was unimportant because all Yoruba were descended from Odudua (an orisha whose sons founded the sixteen Yoruba kingdoms according to Ife mythology).

Not all Nigerian Yoruba saw the Ooni as a religious authority, however, because they continued to identify along ethnic lines that did not necessarily recognize Odudúa as the patriarch of the Yoruba, or the Ooni as their spiritual leader. While these ethnic tensions had eased considerably in Cuba over the twentieth century, ritual practice and belief retained some of the ethnic identifiers of the Yoruba kingdoms. These differences, along with rivalries, contributed to the continuing religious disunity in Ocha-Ifá.

Granma published a short article on the Ooni’s visit on the front page of the paper under the title “Declarado huesped ilustre de la capital el rey de los yoruba [King of the

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Yoruba Declared Distinguished Guest of the Capital],” unwittingly fuelling the conflict in its implication that there was only one Yoruba people.\textsuperscript{55}

Although the ACY was not interest in participating in a separatist movement, either in Nigeria or Cuba, pan Yorubism was appealing in other ways. In order to create a pan Yoruba movement in Cuba, the ACY had to define its concept of identity, culture and community.\textsuperscript{56} To this end, the leadership of the ACY structured its \textit{letras del año} to ritually position its members as the heirs of timeless traditions, seeking to correct what it saw as the errors of other practitioners not properly educated in the religion. Predicting a year of uncertainty and worry, the ACY foresaw conflict in attempts to maintain hegemony for 1988 and recommended listening “to the advice of the more experienced so we do not lose our heads.”\textsuperscript{57} In Ocha-Ifá the head of the body or the person is very important – it houses the tutelary \textit{orisha} that guides one’s destiny. Losing one’s head, as the ACY suggested could happen, if the advice of elder practitioners went unheeded, would be the equivalent of losing the guidance of the \textit{orisha}, control over destiny, and would spell certain death in one form or another. Tracing their heritage to nineteenth century West Africa, the ACY believed its \textit{babaláos} to be the more experienced. Other organizations and practitioners should respect their social and religious elders, heed their advice, and, more specifically, respect the \textit{babaláos} and the plans of Ifá.\textsuperscript{58} Not only did these recommendations seek to position the members of the ACY as experienced

\textsuperscript{55} “Declarado huesped ilustre de la capital el rey de los yorubas,” 1.


\textsuperscript{57} Asociación Cultural Yoruba, “Letra del año 1988,” in Argüelles Mederos and Rubiera Verdecia, 53.

\textsuperscript{58} Asociación Cultural Yoruba, “Letra del año 1988,” in Argüelles Mederos and Rubiera Verdecia, 53-54.
religious elders, they also placed Ifá on a higher level in the ritual hierarchy than other religions of African origin, including Ocha.

The ACY was not only interested in fulfilling the Ooni’s call to unite practitioners under a pan Yoruba identity. It was also interested in being of service to populations and governments inside, as well as outside, the island. And in spite of the popular misperception that the ACY supported the revolutionary government and therefore muted its predictions, the ACY’s 1989 letra del año corresponded more closely to national and international events than any other year and was not particularly favourable to the revolutionary government.\(^{59}\) According to the Ifá oracle, as the ACY interpreted it, 1989 would be a year of tragedies in the world caused by negative thinking or decisions. More specifically, important people would be arrested, great repressions causing deaths would occur, and speculation would arise.\(^{60}\) On the international field it is easy to cite the student protests in Tiananmen Square (June 1989), the collapse of the Berlin Wall (November 1989), and international speculation as to when the Soviet Union would collapse and, as a result, the socialist regime in Cuba. But speculation also referred to domestic politics unfolding as a result of the Proceso de Rectificación (Process of Rectification).

In 1989 the Cuban government was in its third year of rectifying the errors of the past, one of which was the bureaucratic structure that had enabled the corruption of officials. For the first time in the history of the Revolution, the Ministerio del Interior

\(^{59}\) A number of newspapers reporting on the annual ceremony, such as the Miami Herald, promote this view as do several researchers, including Brown, Santería Enthroned, 291; and Routon, “The “Letter of the Year” and the Prophetic of Revolution,” 133.

\(^{60}\) Asociación Cultural Yoruba, “Letra del año 1988,” in Argüelles Mederos and Rubiera Verdecia, 55.
(MININT) and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias* (FAR) purged their institutions of several high ranking officials linked to various types of corruption. Some of the most well known were Arnaldo Ochoa, a decorated General and veteran of the war in Angola, who was arrested and tried for trafficking narcotics; twin brothers Antonio and Patricio la Guardia, who were implicated with Ochoa; and José Abrantes, director of the MININT, under whom all three worked. Few could have known in January 1989 that the MININT and the FAR were investigating Ochoa and the la Guardias, but according to testimony in June of that year the trio shut down their operation in April 1989 under the suspicion that an investigation of them was under way. Ochoa and the la Guardias were all found guilty of compromising the revolution; Ochoa and Antonio la Guardia received the death penalty while Patricio la Guardia received a lengthy prison term. The trial and punishment of these, and other high ranking, officials was a momentous event in Cuba and the revolutionary government could have interpreted the materialization of some esoteric predictions as a challenge to its authority.

The Comisión, popularly believed to be more critical of the Cuban government in contrast, did not make any significant predictions of an international or national nature in its first years conducting the ceremony. Environmental phenomena, and the illnesses associated with them, formed the bulk of the Comisión’s early predictions. On an island like Cuba, located in the Atlantic Ocean and in the path of developing tropical storms and hurricanes it is not difficult to predict heavy rain or hurricanes in any given year. And although the Comisión did not specify that its predictions of hurricanes were for Cuba, it was very easy for followers of the *letra del año* to make the connection.

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What were unusual in the Comisión’s predictions were the anticipated results of hurricanes. In 1988 the Comisión warned of losses in the merchant marine, loss of children and poisoning, all possible impacts of hurricanes and flooding, but not the usually cited devastation that include flooding, loss of crops, or general loss of life. The Comisión’s 1990 letra predicted fewer large scale catastrophes, although damaging nonetheless, in the form of colds, fevers and intestinal problems. Far from demonstrating its criticism of the Cuban government the Comisión refrained from making any predictions of a political nature in the first few years it conducted the ceremony. Nor did the Comisión respond to the ACY’s accusations that its membership was too young and inexperienced to conduct such an important ceremony. The Comisión was content with following the tactic that many practitioners took in the 1960s and 1970s – it revived a cultural practice in danger of being lost, thereby contributing to the enrichment of national culture in the service of Cubans.

**The Special Period and the IV Congreso del Partido**

Lázara Menéndez Vázquez argues that between 1959 and 1989 Cubans experienced a process of de-stratification in which the new society was characterized by a high degree of integration and equality, enabling broad sectors of society to meet their basic needs. An absolutist state with little ability to recognize and incorporate diversity into its social transformation agenda controlled and directed the process through

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centralization and the under-exploitation of potential participants.\textsuperscript{65} By 1990, however, the absolutist state was weakened and unable to provide or create the conditions for maintaining the integration and equality on which it had once prided itself.\textsuperscript{66} In these conditions of inequality and extreme hardship, the revolutionary government could not suppress diversity in the way it once had. The Special Period in Peacetime, as the revolutionary government called the period initiated in 1990, changed the terrain on which rivalry for authority in Ifá unfolded.

In spite of the planned \textit{IV Congreso del Partido} (Party Congress), the 1991 \textit{letras del año} appropriately predicted a very difficult year for Cubans; practitioners and non-practitioners of Ocha-Ifá alike. The Comisión determined that Changó would rein in 1991 and prophesied objects of all kinds falling from above, including unoccupied housing structures.\textsuperscript{67} One of the areas in which the revolutionary government continued to experience difficulty was in providing adequate housing to all Cubans. Alejandro de la Fuente notes that this failure to address the housing issue “allowed for the survival and reproduction of traditional residential patterns that combined race with poverty and marginality.”\textsuperscript{68} While Cubans of African descent were not segregated into specific neighbourhoods, their inability to move out of them, either into a newly constructed home or through a \textit{permuta} (in which homeowners trade residences for housing more


\textsuperscript{66} The number of buses in Havana was cut by 30\%, taxis by 50\% and put to tourist use. Tourism grossed $500 million in 1992 up from $200 million in 1989. Eckstein, \textit{Back from the Future}, 97, 103.


\textsuperscript{68} de la Fuente, \textit{A Nation for All}, 316.
suited to their needs), contributed to overcrowding and unsanitary conditions that threatened some of the revolution’s more successful programs.⁶⁹

Housing shortages were part of Cuba’s history and, although the revolutionary government built or assisted in the building of more housing than any other government, supply never matched demand.⁷⁰ Older buildings suffered from various states of disrepair; however, those desperate for a roof over their head continued living in them long after they became dangerous. Additionally, people moving from the provinces to Havana in search of work took whatever shelter they could find, often in abandoned buildings destined for destruction or rehabilitation.⁷¹ In specifying the danger of unoccupied buildings the Comisión warned Cubans to be careful, but more importantly, underscored a major failure of the revolution that disproportionately affected Cubans of African descent.

The Comisión also predicted the development of stress-related illnesses and crises, such as nervous and stomach problems, problems with children and marital separation.⁷² As government assistance to families in the form of childcare and eldercare decreased and the price of pre-cooked meals increased, women found themselves overburdened in the home. Those without state childcare had to pay someone privately to care for their children out of increasingly devalued peso salaries. Many simply stayed

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⁷¹ de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 328.

home to manage shrinking resources.\textsuperscript{73} Men, more affected by unemployment than women as factories and other heavy industries closed, also felt pressure to provide for their families, but usually sought such opportunities outside of the home.\textsuperscript{74} The stress of daily survival took its toll. By 1993 Cuba’s divorce rate was 6/1000 per year, one of the highest in the world.\textsuperscript{75} Malnutrition causing serious health concerns, including neuropathies, also appeared. While the Comisión did not foresee major political events for 1991, it did provide average Cuban citizens with practical warnings and advice to help them through the coming year, and perhaps more importantly, the Comisión recognized the difficulties with which Cubans were dealing.

Demonstrating that they had more in common with the Comisión than they cared to admit, the ACY’s 1991 \textit{letra} was also pessimistic for Cuba and Cubans, predicting intestinal problems as a result of ingesting certain foods and marital problems due to stress. The ACY also acknowledged the personal difficulties facing Cubans. But 1991 was also the first year in which the ACY predicted the downfall of Ocha. Some practitioners of Ifá believe that Ocha developed out of Ifá and that Ifá is more authentically African and therefore superior to Ocha.\textsuperscript{76} Auguring a positive year for \textit{babalaos}, or those “who have Ifá,” the ACY’s \textit{letra} predicted that “many iyálochas will confront problems of death. They will not be well this year and will be victims of


\textsuperscript{75} Maxine Molyneaux, \textit{State, Gender and Institutional Change in Cuba’s Special Period: the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas} (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, University of London, 1996) 37-38.

\textsuperscript{76} Routon, “The Letter of the Year,” 127.
betrayal.” It continued to say that, “the babalochas in possession of los guerreros and manos de Orúnmila will have problems of violence in their lives and they could die due to accidents.” Receiving the guerreros and mano de Orúnmila or Orula make a babalocha an ahijado and member of a babalao’s house but it does not make him a babalao. The babalocha is under the complete supervision of and subject to the babalao’s knowledge and opinion in all ritual matters. As women, iyalochas could not become babalaos. If all ritual practice were reoriented under Ifá, as the pure African tradition the ACY believed it to be, Ocha, as a hybrid practice, would cease to exist, leaving the babalaos in control of the Yoruba religious tradition in Cuba. David H. Brown argues that babalaos will use all ritual means at their disposal to acquire new ahijados, especially through delivery of the guerreros and mano de Orula that will lead to an eventual initiation and contributions of money, resources and ritual prestige. This competition for ahijados tipped in favour of Ifá by the 1990s.

Babalaos could also acquire ritual hegemony through the expansion of their services to the uninitiated that could include the revolutionary government. Although a contradiction from an ideological perspective, even party members were not above dabbling with the divine from time to time. Having already predicted occurrences of national interest in the previous decade, such as the arrest of the la Guardias and Ochoa, and a failure to honour treaties, the ACY directed its only riddle with significant political content for 1991 at the revolutionary government concerning the state of the country: “It

78 Brown, Santería Enthroned, 152.
79 Brown, Santería Enthroned, 155.
80 Kenneth Routon’s informants told him that they believed government officials visited babalaos for consultations on a regular basis. “The Letter of the Year,” 130.
is one thing from outside, another from inside. We must examine the situation in depth before adopting a decision or carrying out any activity. The general situation is not favourable. The elephant is powerful; if he falls it will be difficult for him to get up.”  

While the elephant could have been the Soviet Union, then on the brink of dissolution, or even Fidel Castro, I argue that the ACY was referring to the Cuban Revolution itself, the survival of which was threatened after thirty-two years as a result of bad economic planning and the crisis in the USSR. Without international political and economic support, two fundamental bases of support for the Cuban Revolution since the early 1960s, international speculation, concerning the survival of the revolution, began to mount. The ACY was aware, as were all Cubans, of the upcoming Party Congress later that year and knew the crisis would be a priority. It, therefore, urged caution and intelligence in finding a solution to the political and economic isolation confronting the country.

The political and economic situation Cuba found itself in by 1991 notwithstanding, the Cuban government continued its support of culture, giving special, renewed attention to Ocha-Ifá. In spite of the reduction of its publications in frequency and length due to a shortage of newsprint, Bohemia, Cuba’s cultural and literary review, published a series of articles either on Ocha-Ifá or related to it. Articles in April, August and December 1991 featured individual practitioners of religions of African origin as their subjects. The first was an interview with Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui, one

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82 There was a call prior to the 1991 Party Congress for citizens to voice their complaints with regard to the state of the economic crisis. Eckstein, Back from the Future, 115.

83 Eckstein, Back from the Future, 97.
time protégé and assistant to Lydia Cabrera who later worked with Fernando Ortiz and was initiated to Mayombé, one of the religions of Bantú origin. Her book *Los orishas en Cuba* became a bestseller when it went on sale early in 1991, indicating a widespread interest among Cubans to learn about Ocha-Ifá. Much of the article described Bolívar’s house with the altars to various orishas, objects representing different deities, and her recently published book. *Bohemia* also published five photographs of Bolívar, most of them with objects and altars to the orishas in the background. The article itself was not particularly interesting – it served to educate the uninformed of a religious tradition and the research conducted on it. Bolívar, however, asked the journalist writing the story the most significant question of the interview: “¿Tú sabes lo que es la identidad nacional? [Do you know what [Cuba’s] national identity is?]” Her response to her own question was, “Es un poco de cada orisha [It is a bit of every orisha].”

As previous chapters argued, Cubans of African descent who continued to practice religions of African origin never entirely separated themselves from the African identity of their ancestors even as they accepted and challenged Cuban identity throughout the twentieth century. Bolívar’s public proclamation in 1991 that national identity was a bit of each [African] orisha did not exactly confront the myth of racial democracy, but it did suggest that Cubans were more African than many cared to admit.

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86 Bolívar Aróstegui, quoted in Juan Sánchez, “El libro y la autora, Los orishas “y otras hierbas” de Natalia,” 8.

87 Mark Sawyer has noted that Cubans tend to be less accepting of African-derived cultural practices that are popularly viewed as African rather than Cuban. Santería is still viewed popularly as African. *Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba*, 127.
It was obvious prior to the *IV Congreso del Partido* that the revolutionary government was at least making gestures toward recognizing practitioners of religions of African origin as a legitimate sector of society. Legislation enacted following the 1976 Constitution abolished the law requiring religious organizations to register with the *Ministerio de Justicia*, although practitioners still needed permission to hold gatherings and celebrate *fiestas*. The lack of government interference in the *cermonias de la letra del año* also indicated greater tolerance. The resolutions resulting from the *Congreso*, were, therefore, formalizations of a process of inclusion begun earlier. But the *IV Congreso del Partido* is worthy of some examination before continuing with the *letra del año* because the discussions that took place gave considerable time, space and respect to religion generally, and religions of African origin specifically. Moreover, one of the most significant resolutions to emerge from the *Congreso* was a lifting of the prohibition against admitting people with religious beliefs to the Communist Party, a resolution that made the Party more inclusive and representative of the people. The *IV Congreso* also declared the Cuban state secular, ending more than thirty years with Marxism-Leninism as the official state ideology, establishing a new tolerance, if not acceptance, of religion in general.  

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the revolutionary government’s early opinions of religion, one of the major discussions during the *Congreso* focused on the suitability of religious practitioners, of any faith, to joining the PCC to serve the revolution in a political capacity. The arguments members of the Party presented in support of admitting religious practitioners or believers to the Party for the first time discussed religions of

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African origin as religions and as having counted among their membership Cubans considered to have been great labour leaders and Communists. For example, President of the Instituto de Historia, Jorge Enrique Mendoza, emphasized that, “Aracelio Iglesias was a santero and [that] he was killed by imperialism for defending principles. He was a militant of the first Communist Party of Cuba, and a man who, until the last moment, was faithful to the proletarian, yet he had that belief in Santería.”89 This statement is significant on several levels: it was perhaps the first time that the Communist Party connected Aracelio Iglesias to Santería, Communism and labour (the Party leaders generally mentioned only his membership in the Communist Party and his union activity); and it asserted that Iglesias’ beliefs did not contradict his commitment to workers, Communism or Cuba. Moreover, Mendoza concluded, “We must, compañeros, accomplish in this Congress the production of a Party that represents still more the Cuban nation, a Party that is still more Cuban, a Party that is more and more revolutionary and Communist, so that we can say as one day Martí demanded: ‘With all and for the good of all.’”90

A December 1991 Bohemia interview with Emilio O’Farril, Tata (father) Deabola in Palo Monte and babalocha in Ocha paralleled the evolving revolutionary discourse on the responsibility that Cubans had to maintain unity on similar martiano terms as

89 “Aracelio Iglesias era santero y lo mato el imperialismo por defender los principios, era militante del primer Partido Comunista de Cuba, y un hombre que hasta el ultimo instante fue fiel al proletariado y tenia esa creencia de santería.” Jorge Enrique Mendoza, “Amplio análisis del Tema de los Creyentes,” in IV Congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba (Havana: Editora Política, 1992) 91.

90 “Nosotros, compañeros, debemos lograr que este Congreso salga un Partido que represente aun mas a la nación cubana, un Partido que sea aun mas cubano, un Partido que sea cada vez mas revolucionario y comunista, para que podamos decir como un día reclamo Martí: ‘Con todos y para el bien de todos.’” Jorge Enrique Mendoza, “Amplio análisis del Tema de los Creyentes,” in IV Congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba (Havana: Editora Política, 1992) 91.
Mendoza’s. Speaking of the family, and assuming that the journalist conducting the interview would interpret the word as exclusively consanguine family, O’Farril explained his views on Cuba’s situation as follows:

I think we should unite more, and begin with the house, with the family. Because having a family is not, like many think, having a house with a wife and children, and once in a while buying the kids a pair of shoes. No, it is not like that. It is to take that family, united, along a good path, teach it how it has to live with morality and criteria. For that you have to be a good father, good husband, good worker, so the children see in the father a path to follow. This is, in my opinion, the way in which la patria maintains unity, in which the revolution does not lose itself and in which the cause of the humble is not disrupted. La patria is the greatest, and to help it you have to have the conditions, criteria and morale. How? Being dignified, decent, fighting men. You have to teach those who don’t know, give them criteria concerning what freedom is, so that they see how our Party and our revolution have given absolute freedom to our religion and freedom to all. Now we don’t have to be hidden like before, when you couldn’t make a plante [an Abakuá ceremony], and the santero knew to have it hidden.91

In adopting revolutionary discourse, O’Farril centred his argument around the family and the responsibility of the family, or the father more specifically, for raising and guiding the children. To practitioners of religions of African origin, family can also be ritual family, in which case the head of that ritual family serves to guide and orient his or her ahijados, both religiously and morally. In using the polivalent concept of the family, O’Farril affirmed the morality of religious families and drew parallels to the role of the consanguine family. But he did not stop there. As Cubans, all citizens belonged to the

91 “Yo creo que debemos unirnos más, y empezar por casa, por la familia. Porque hacer una familia no es, como muchos piensan, tener una casa con mujer y con hijos, y de vez en cuando comparles un par de zapatos a los muchachos. No, eso no es así. Es llevar esa familia, unida por un buen sendero, enseñarle como tiene que vivir con moralidad y criterio. Para eso hay que ser buen padre, buen marido, buen trabajador, que los hijos vean en el padre un camino a seguir. Esa es, según mi pensamiento, la manera de que la patria se mantenga unida, de que la revolución no se pierda y que la causa de los humildes no se desbarate. La patria es la mas grande, y para ayudarla hay que tener condiciones, criterio y moral. ¿Cómo? Siendo hombres dignos, decentes y luchadores. Hay que enseñar al que no sabe, darle criterio de lo que es la libertad. Que se vea cómo nuestro Partido y nuestra Revolución han dado libertad absoluta a nuestras religiones y libertad a todos. Ahora no tenemos que estar ocultos como antes, cuando no se podía hacer un plante, y el santero sabía que tenerlo escondido.” Emilio O’Farril, quoted in Osvaldo Navarro, “Religiones cubanas de origen africano, Cada cosa tiene su cosa,” Bohemia 83.52, 27 December 1991.
bigger family of *la patria*, headed by the government whose responsibility it was to teach morality and carry Cubans along a good path, ensuring the continuation of the Revolution and its commitment to the humble. Cubans, he warned, would model their behaviour during the crisis on the government’s ability to maintain its commitment to the beneficiaries of the Revolution.

In spite of evidence of significant earlier developments, many Cuban and non-Cuban scholars cite the IV Party Congress as the turning point in religious-state relations that enabled Cubans from all backgrounds to join some form of religious organization. 92 More Cubans certainly began to exhibit more visible manifestations of their faith after the 1991 party congress. But state permission to practice a religion and be a member of the PCC, or at least not face discrimination in the selection process, does not sufficiently explain the so-called “boom” of religious fervour that emerged in the 1990s. It is, of course, entirely possible that Cubans aspiring to positions in government actively avoided religious activity out of fear of impeding their ambitions; however, the vast majority of Cubans would not likely have qualified for admission to the party on other grounds, or would not have aspired to a career in politics. These people would have had nothing to lose by admitting, at the very least, to their religious beliefs. Clearly, this is one element of the ‘boom’ of initiations to Ocha-Ifá that requires further study.

The other half of the scholarly argument concerning the boom of the 1990s is related to the economic crisis that resulted when the Soviet Union disintegrated, withdrawing favourable loan terms and subsidies. Trade shrunk enormously at this time, making basic goods, such as foodstuff, extremely scarce. In 1992 the Soviet Union

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92 See for examples Lázara Menéndez Vázquez, *Rodar el coco, proceso de cambio en la santería*, 104; Ayorinde, *Afrocuban Religiosity, Revolution and National Identity*, 203.
dissolved and Russia refused to extend new credits to Cuba. It also converted Cuba’s ruble debt into dollars. The loss of oil imports meant that the state could not even distribute food produced in Cuba because there was no way to transport it from agricultural regions to cities and towns. Not only did Cubans literally begin to starve, but liquidity was so high that Cubans had drawers full of money and nothing to buy.

Some scholars argue that desperation to alleviate extreme suffering led large numbers of people to turn to religion for spiritual strength and material assistance, as organized religions generally received some form of aid from abroad. This argument can certainly account for the people who turned to Christian religions at this time, particularly the Protestant denominations, and more than one observer has questioned the sincerity with which a good number embraced the faith. Yet, unlike the Christian denominations, religions of African origin are not organized, do not, in spite of all attempts to create one, have a hierarchical directing body, and do not have ties, beyond the spiritual, to similar religions in other countries. They, therefore, did not benefit from aid routed through sister churches in the US or Europe, which means that there was no material incentive for people to join Ocha-Ifá, the religion of African origin to which Cubans largely joined in the early 1990s. In fact, initiation to Ocha-Ifá added to material hardship due to the difficulty in locating the necessary food and clothing required for an initiation ceremony.

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93 Eckstein, Back from the Future, 91.


95 On the type and amount of aid see Theron Corse, Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-US Bond (Gainseville: University Press of Florida, 2007).
In the early 1990s Cubans were certainly facing many problems and the possibility of resolving them through the intervention of the orishas would have appealed to a lot of desperate people. But in order for such large scale interest and initiation to Ocha-Ifá to take place, Cubans had to know something of the religion, its basic principles, and its functioning. This knowledge could have been acquired through the efforts of the revolutionary government to dispel fear of the religion and people of African descent; it could have been acquired through the numerous studies undertaken since 1959 of the music, folklore, or art associated with the religion; or it could have been acquired through close personal contact over an extended period of time as an aleyo, an uninitiated person. Whether baptized, initiated, or belonging in other ways to a particular religion, Cubans have a long history of appealing to the deity best suited to relieving their suffering, resolving their romantic difficulties, or solving their economic problems.  

Whether or not they consider themselves practitioners of Ocha-Ifá, a good percentage of the population has a history of seeking the advice or help of a babalao, babalocha or iyaloche in time of need. By the 1990s, therefore, a number of factors had contributed to providing some personal knowledge of Ocha-Ifá to a significant proportion of the population that saw it as an option in their personal lives. While I can only make suggestions based on the research I have thus far conducted, this notion of knowledge and exposure is clearly another area deserving of further research. Becoming initiated to Ocha-Ifá was also an informal recognition of power that was no longer centred on the revolutionary government.

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Another significant consideration to account for when analysing the boom of the 1990s is the cost involved in becoming initiated to Ocha-Ifá. It was not uncommon in the late 1980s or early 1990s to have to pay close to 10,000 pesos for an initiation ceremony. Even with rationed foodstuff and a fair pricing system, saving money to pay for an initiation was a sacrifice for the vast majority of Cubans. With the high liquidity brought on by the economic crisis, however, Cubans suddenly had money to spend on one of the few things still available to purchase. Studies from researchers conducting extensive interviews with practitioners in the 1990s, such as Lázara Menéndez, confirm that, as in the 1960s and 1970s, peak initiations corresponded directly to peak liquidity. Those with enough money could buy almost anything, even if it was acquired from the black market.

Menéndez conducted, or had others conduct for her, 100 interviews with practitioners of different ages from all over Cuba between 1992 and 1996, the majority from Havana. Among the questions researchers asked were the age, date of initiation, number of years initiated, and orisha cabecera (tutelary orisha) of the practitioner. At least one or two practitioners claimed each year between 1959 and 1995 as the year in which they were initiated; however, 1987-1993 showed a sudden increase to four practitioners initiated in each year, with a spike of eight for the year 1992. Obatalá, Ochún and Changó (the orishas of wisdom, romantic love and sensuality, and lightening,

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97 10,000 pesos give or take 2,000, depending on the tutelary orisha, is a price Kimbo, Mercedes Valdez, and Juan Ramón Velázquez quoted me for those years. All practitioners emphasized the concept of “sacrifice,” be it an animal, money, or an individual’s time and devotion to the religion.

98 Kimbo believed that the increased liquidity had a significant impact on the ability and desire for people to become initiated to Ocha-Ifá because they had a lot of money and nothing to spend it on. Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007.

99 Menéndez Vázquez, Rodar el coco, 338-343.
respectively) were the most common *orisha cabecera*.\(^{100}\) Although more detailed studies of the political economy of Ocha-Ifá are necessary in order to correlate more accurately the impact of liquidity on initiations, the existing data on initiations points to liquidity as a factor for high volumes of initiations.

As all initiations require a certain amount of money to pay for food and ritual expertise, it is more than likely that some of those who became initiated to Ocha-Ifá in the early 1990s had been told some time earlier that they would have to *hacerse santo* or make the saint (be initiated to an *orisha cabecera*), but could not afford to do so at the time. Juan Ramón Velázquez, a *babalao* from Centro Habana, was one of these individuals who received the *guerreros* in the mid 1980s, was initiated to Ocha in 1989 and Ifá in 1990. Velázquez experienced some personal problems in a romantic relationship while he was studying for his degree. His mother took him for a consultation with an *iyalocha* to try to help him solve his problems and Velázquez reported that receiving the *guerreros* at that time of crisis eased the immediate symptoms of the problem. But he had to *hacerse santo* in the near future to completely overcome the obstacle in his life.\(^{101}\) He also had to wait until he could afford the initiation ceremony.

Unlike Velázquez, a large, as yet undetermined, number of white Cubans without any family history of Ocha-Ifá also made the saint during the early years of the 1990s. Although white Cubans provide the same reasons as Cubans of African descent for being initiated (illness, problems in life), Cubans of African descent generally believe that

\(^{100}\) Menéndez Vázquez, *Rodar el coco*, 338-343.

\(^{101}\) Sometimes people can postpone their initiation by receiving only certain *orishas* like the *guerreros* or by participating in rituals or ceremonies on a regular basis, but practitioners always say that eventually a person with problems in his or her life will have to *hacerse santo* because fighting one’s destiny can only result in more problems and hardship. Juan Ramón Velázquez, Interviewed by the author, Havana, May 2006.
white Cubans were initiated to appropriate yet another element of African-derived culture. Cubans of African descent initiate white Cubans, however, in spite of this belief, because they must obey the wishes of the orishas.¹⁰²

Rather than directly spurring individuals to suddenly become initiated to Ocha-Ifá, I suggest that the onset of the Special Period and the IV Congreso del Partido provided a discursive framework in which some practitioners could move beyond public declarations of belief to characterize the national culture as a little of every orisha, or insist that the Cuban government, as the father of the Cuban family, had a responsibility to teach its children to follow the good path by setting the example. These claims on citizenship and belonging did not fall on deaf ears – in December 1991, after several years of trying, the Ministerio de Justicia legally recognized the Asociación Ifá Ayer, Ifá Hoy, Ifá Mañana under its new name, the Asociación Cultural Yoruba. Shortly after its recognition the ACY’s president, Manolo Ibañez, died and the current president, Antonio Castañeda Márquez, was elected.¹⁰³ Legal recognition for one organization, after a long moratorium on registering religious organizations of any kind, substantially altered the ritual hierarchy among practitioners of Ifá.

Africa or Cuba, Race or Ethnicity?

Most researchers argue that the official recognition of the ACY upset the ritual balance on the island and also privileged one group over another, in an attempt to gain

¹⁰² Kimbo was the most forthcoming regarding the initiation of white Cubans but when I asked him if he initiated white Cubans (or foreigners) he responded by saying that he had to if it was what consultation with the orishas indicated to solve an individual’s problems. Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, May 2006.

control of Ocha-Ifá.\textsuperscript{104} There are, however, other factors to consider. Legislation abolishing the requirement that religious organizations register with the \textit{Ministerio de Justicia} also effectively prohibited legal recognition for new religious organizations. Using the word \textit{‘cultural,’} instead of \textit{‘religiosa,’} in its title helped the ACY to navigate around that obstacle. The desire of the ACY’s leadership to include non-practitioners in its membership, as well as people initiated to Ocha-Ifá, also helped it appear more inclusive than organizations like the Comisión that only allowed the initiated to join. Moreover, the fact that it took the ACY several years to gain legal recognition does not indicate that the revolutionary government had much, if any, interest in co-opting it, although some elements of the government continued to view Ocha-Ifá as a threat to society.

Whether it was the change in leadership or the new political circumstances in which it operated, the ACY better articulated its concept of African identity in the 1992 \textit{letra del año} when it emphasized the Yoruba identity of Ocha-Ifá. The ACY urged practitioners to carry out ritual activities in “the most correct and organized manner,” in order to maintain the respect of all Yoruba. Appropriating the discourse of the revolution, it also exhorted members of the ACY to educate their religious brothers and sisters (\textit{hermanos}) to be honest, simple workers and to see themselves as true blood siblings (\textit{hermanos}). Furthermore, the Yoruba people of the world would help each other to find equality, prosperity, brotherhood (\textit{hermandad}), discipline and honesty as the only way to achieve higher goals.\textsuperscript{105} These appeals to a transnational ritual identification with

\textsuperscript{104} See for examples Ayorinde, \textit{Afrocuban Religiosity, Revolution and National Identity}, 166; Routon, “The Letter of the Year,” 135.

the Nigerian Yoruba appear to contradict government efforts to promote a single unitary national Cuban identity, thereby nullifying the argument that the ACY was an instrument of the revolution. Yet, critics argue that the appeals to Yoruba identity conform to government desires to promote the beliefs as survivals of an African past.\textsuperscript{106} History in Cuban terms ended in 1959 with the revolution, although, as far as religions of African origin were concerned, they were not historicized prior to the revolution either.\textsuperscript{107} Everything that came afterward was sociological, psychological, anthropological or political, so in many ways Cubans (and they are not the only ones) do not historicize religions as living, constantly changing belief systems, intimately woven into the social fabric of a particular historical period. The absence of a historical lens creates a tendency to view religions of African origin as timeless, which will inevitably lead to notions of survivals. The ACY took a more deliberate, calculating role in appealing to transnational identity. In identifying as Yoruba and calling on others to embrace the same identity the ACY changed the terms of using race or culture to mark difference. In shifting the ethnic identifier ‘Yoruba’ to religion and those practicing it, the ACY included more people, including whites, in that particular identity based on shared religious experiences, not only racial or ethnic identity.\textsuperscript{108} North Americans, Europeans, Africans, and Cubans could identify as one people united by religion. The ACY muted race, rather than called attention to it, in its calls for pan Yoruba identity.

\textsuperscript{106} Routon, “The Letter of the Year,” 139.


This concept of a transnational Yoruba identity emerged with more clarity in June 1992, during the first *Taller Internacional Sobre los Problemas de la Cultura Yoruba en Cuba* (International Conference on the Problems of Yoruba Culture in Cuba), organized and hosted by the ACY.\(^{109}\) Indeed, one of the significant problems with Yoruba culture in Cuba identified at the *Taller* was the negative impact that slavery and Catholicism had on the religion. In order to overcome this past, practitioners had to “re-appropriate the corpus of Ifá,” eliminate syncretism, and submit to the dictates of the Ooni of Ife.\(^{110}\) While the ACY and other participants in the *Taller* sought to reclaim Ocha-Ifá on their own terms and reject the impact that slavery and colonization had on their beliefs, not all practitioners accepted these demands; moreover, they formed the basis for intense hostility toward the ACY.

Most practitioners did not recognize the ACY or the Ooni of Ife as their religious authority, preferring to maintain the decentralized tradition of ritual practice, as was common throughout most of the twentieth century. Some inherited a tradition that was not Ife-centric, but Oyó-centric in which the oracle of Ifá was female, not male and ritual practice contradicted Ife.\(^{111}\) Others recognized that, even though they did not agree with the ACY or the Ooni, there may have been some benefits in allying with them.\(^{112}\) Most

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\(^{110}\) Lázara Menéndez Vázquez, “¡¿Un cake para Obatalá?! ” *Temas* 4 (October-December, 1995) 38.

\(^{111}\) It is difficult to point to the origins of each Ifá organization but ethnic identity can be inferred from several details. The ACY in submitting to the Ooni, identified with Ife and the legend of Odudua being the male progenitor of the Yoruba people. The Comisión identified with Oyó because it saw Odudua as being female and responsible for the creation of the *orishas* in the Yoruba pantheon. Comisión, “Letra del año 1995,” in Argüelles Mederos and Rubiera Verdecia, 24; Betancourt Estrada, Interviewed by the author, November 2007.

\(^{112}\) Although Kimbo did not adhere to most of the ACY’s fundamental claims he found that membership brought certain advantages to practitioners not part of large families and living in more peripheral regions of the country. Membership could give them a place to voice concerns, give them access to scarce
members of the Comisión saw Ocha-Ifá as a Cuban religion and Cuban practitioners as the bearers of both authority and knowledge. They were interested in twentieth century Nigeria to fill gaps in Cuban knowledge, not to control its practice, and, like it or not, Catholicism and Spanish colonial rule did have an impact on the religion. Not everyone was ready to deny or rewrite Cuban history, in favour of the babalaos. Furthermore, babalaos may have been interested in re-appropriating the corpus of Ifá, but many olorishas were not interested in submitting Ocha entirely to the babalaos.

Practitioner and researcher Lázara Menéndez Vázquez is very critical of the essentialization of the African-ness of Ocha-Ifá that emerged in Cuba through the ACY, arguing that in Cuban popular imagery Africa was not a point of reference or identity; there never existed a collective consciousness around the idea of returning to Africa; and the reinterpretation of its principles and theology is a norm in Santería. For Menéndez Vázquez characterizing Santería as a preservation of its African antecedents without a systemic or systematic historical valorization of this past is a naïve pretension that denies the existence of Cuban culture. Menéndez is one of the few Cuban researchers recognizing the significant developments in different periods; however, while Cubans may not have entertained notions of returning to Africa in the same line as Marcus Garvey did in the 1920s, Africa served as a point of reference for practitioners of Ocha-Ifá for most of the twentieth century. Chapter one noted that religious

resources, and enable them to dialogue with practitioners in other cities. Interviewed by the author, May 2006.

113 Betancourt Estrada, Interviewed by the author, Havana, November 2007.

114 Menéndez Vázquez, “¡¿Un cake para Obatalá?!,” 39.

115 Menéndez Vázquez, “¡¿Un cake para Obatalá?!,” 42.
organizations founded prior to the 1959 revolution emphasized the African nature of their activities and cited honouring their African ancestors as fundamental objectives. A physical return to Africa was not necessary in the spiritual world of the orishas.

Tomás Fernández Robaina agrees with Menéndez that denying the conditions in which Santería emerged, evolved and created communities ignores and rejects much of Cuba’s history as a slave colony. He does, however, see the interest among some to reclaim a degree of purity and orthodoxy, with regard to carrying out rituals, as logical, given the expansion of African religions and the contact babalos and orishas have had with their counterparts in Africa. Arguing that dismissing fundamentalist tendencies to purge the religion of Spanish-Catholic elements overlooks explanations for their manifestation, Fernández Robaina believes that babalos’ attempts at recovering old practices and rituals that babalos stopped performing, and whose practice the “santeros” (babalochas) assumed, is merely a quest for power to control religious activities. This quest for power has an economic base, he argues, that is inextricably linked to power and control in Santería.

But there is something that neither Menéndez nor Fernández account for when analysing the move to re-Africanize Ocha-Ifá. The revolutionary government devoted considerable effort and resources into cultivating political, cultural and economic relations with developing nations during the first three decades of the revolution. This policy brought Cubans into contact with people and cultures that they otherwise would

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117 Fernández Robaina uses the word “fundamentalism” to explain moves to Africanize or Yorubize Ocha-Ifa. “¿La santería: africana, cubana, afrocubana?: Elementos para el debate,” 10-11.
not have known. The ACY’s emphasis on its own African heritage and its intention to establish further dialogue with Nigeria, based on a shared cultural heritage, can, therefore, also be interpreted as a parallel, or appropriation, of the Cuban government’s policies of building relationships with developing countries based on mutual need for resources and allies. In this sense the ACY’s alliance with the Ooni of Ife and other Nigerian practitioners could be viewed as a complement to state policy.

The Taller sparked discussion among a number of practitioners on both sides of the debate and after years of publicly ignoring the ACY, the Comisión responded to the ACY’s religious challenges for the first time in its 1993 letra when it adopted a number of tactics to prove the ritual knowledge of its babalao and educate the public. In all letras there is a reigning odú or proverb that characterizes the year in question. The odú is always written in Yoruba and is therefore unintelligible to anyone without knowledge of the language. But in 1993, and all subsequent years, the Comisión translated the odú into Spanish for wider consumption. It also explained the origins of the reigning and accompanying orishas in Africa, without making any mention of the saints with whom they were syncretized.118 Rather than attempting to purge a legacy of slavery and Catholic domination several hundred years old, the Comisión was content to educate practitioners and non-practitioners in the correct orientation of the religion. The Comisión was not, however, content to end the confrontation with the ACY altogether, and closed its 1993 letra with a riddle: “El que piensa en Ifá sin estudiarlo está mal, pero el que estudia Ifá sin pensarlo, está mucho peor [He who thinks about Ifá without

studying it is bad, but he who studies Ifá without thinking about it, is much worse]."\textsuperscript{119}
Not only did the Comisión claim to study Ifá, it accused the ACY of not thinking about Ifá’s past or future in Cuba.

As well as competing with each other for ritual authority and prestige within Ocha-Ifá, the Comisión and the ACY both attempted to create dialogue with the revolutionary government using the \textit{letra} to recommend policy changes to ease the crisis in the country. Law 140 of 1993 officially decriminalized the possession of US dollars for Cubans allowing them to purchase food or other items in “diplo” stores, or hard currency stores that previously only served foreigners.\textsuperscript{120} Cubans with access to hard currency through remittances from relatives abroad, or the tourist industry, could purchase items the state could not provide, in US dollars, thereby putting more hard currency into the state treasury that could be used to buy medication, food and medical or other equipment on the international market. The Comisión supported this policy in its 1994 \textit{letra} by recommending that Cubans inside and outside of the island be allowed to contribute directly to resolving the crisis. It also recommended guaranteeing storage for agricultural products, a problem resulting in constant food shortages.\textsuperscript{121}

The ACY was perhaps more harshly critical of the government. In the late 1970s the state began sponsoring Ochaturs, in which tourists or foreign dignitaries could visit certain \textit{casa templos}, witness ceremonies and even be initiated to Ocha. The number and frequency of the tours increased through the 1980s and by the early 1990s were very

\textsuperscript{119} Comisión, “\textit{Letra del año 1993},” in Argüelles Mederos and Rubiera Verdecia, 21.
\textsuperscript{120} Consejo de Estado, “\textit{Decreto-ley No. 140},” Havana, 1993.
\textsuperscript{121} Comisión, “\textit{Letra del año 1994},” in Argüelles Mederos and Rubiera Verdecia, 23.
popular with tourists. Critics argue that this practice contributed to the exoticization and commoditization of the religion.\textsuperscript{122} The ACY’s parting message in the 1994 \textit{letra del año}, stated, “We have taken as one of main tasks that of avoiding all blending, video filming of secret ceremonies, falsification, mercantilism and commercialization of our faith, these being violations already committed by individuals, or by institutions.”\textsuperscript{123} Although the same critics accusing the state of contributing to the exoticization of Ocha-Ifá also accuse the ACY of muting its predictions in support of the government, the ACY walked a fine line in 1994 with its statement on the commoditization of Ocha-Ifá. Directed for the most part at practitioners involved in this practice, the ACY also implicated the state through its involvement in Ochaturrs.

Maintaining unity during the Special Period was a constant concern for the Cuban government. Its inability to maintain equality and provide many basic services to the population was a source of tension that led Cubans to identify each other as more, or less, privileged. But unity was an intermittent concern for practitioners throughout the twentieth century, and had been a persistent source of tension since the late 1980s. Predicting a year of betrayal and usurpation of rights at high levels of government, increased violence in the form of robbery, assault and rape, and the further deterioration of housing conditions, the Comisión’s 1995 \textit{letra} recommended the unification of different religious institutions and governments to confront the bad omens of Ifá.\textsuperscript{124} This call for uniting religion and government was not without precedent.


\textsuperscript{123} Junta Directiva, Asociación Cultural Yoruba, “Letra del año 1994.”

Sociologist Adrian Hearn found that in Havana there was a history of cooperation between religions of African origin and the revolutionary government dating as early as 1988 through the Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital (GDIC). The GDIC’s goal was to work with residents to incorporate local perspectives into development plans, through the establishment of talleres that enabled residents of a particular barrio to improve the conditions of their community. In exchange for government support the talleres encouraged the people of their communities to perform volunteer work in construction projects, to help to maintain local schools or to distribute information on drug abuse.\(^{125}\) The talleres had mixed results promoting the interests of the state, but did enable some religious organizations to provide material assistance to their communities through income generated in catering part of their activities to the tourist sector.\(^{126}\) By the 1990s these initiatives were more essential to both the government and citizens as need increased and the government’s ability to respond decreased. As Hearn’s work emphasized, most of these NGO/community projects took place in decaying Havana neighbourhoods inhabited overwhelmingly by Cubans of African descent.

It was the ACY, however, that benefited from the Comisión’s suggestion to work with the government when the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana gave it an old, rundown building to use as its headquarters.\(^{127}\) Operating under similar conditions as the GDIC, but with more autonomy concerning finances, the Office of the Historian also

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encouraged local solutions to local problems. One of the most visible and persistent problems in Old Havana was, and continues to be, the collapse of colonial buildings that were expensive to repair and dangerous to ignore. The building the Office of the Historian awarded to the ACY on Prado between Montes and Dragones, not too far from the major tourist attractions, was an ideal location for anyone hoping to benefit from the tourist sector, but it was in serious disrepair. In exchange for using the building for Yoruba ‘cultural’ purposes, the ACY had to repair it. As in all of its projects, the Office of the Historian provided some of the funds for materials and labour in the form of a loan that had to be repaid, but international NGOs also provided funds. Indeed, it was the NGOs that enabled the ACY’s further development of projects. By the first years of the twenty-first century, the ACY’s locale in Old Havana housed a restaurant and cafeteria serving Cuban, and some African, food, a library, a museum with life size representations of the orishas, and a gift shop, all generating income in hard currency and Cuban pesos. Even if it was not entirely self-supporting, the ACY had finally fulfilled the Ooni of Ife’s 1987 request to build a Yoruba temple in Havana.

The seeming prosperity of some Cubans during the Special Period created more rivalry among the babalao and envy among the population in general. Although the ACY’s arrangement with the Office of the Historian contributed to existing conflicts, the main source of tensions for the ACY and the Comisión was individual babalao, or individuals posing as babalao, to earn money. Once the revolutionary government legalized dollars, everyone scrambled to acquire them. Because most émigré Cubans


were of European descent, the remittances entering Cuba were destined predominantly to Cubans of European descent, Havana receiving the highest percentage. In 1994 alone between US$250 and US$400 million from remittances circulated in the domestic economy. By 2001 this estimate jumped to between US$790 million and US$1.05 billion. In comparison, tourism had only generated US$20 to US$60 million and US$80 to US$145 million in the same years, and the state retained the majority of this hard currency. While Cubans of African descent formed part of the émigré population, they were a smaller, more recent, and less established population in their new countries. Few Cubans of African descent received money in the form of remittances from relatives outside of the island.

But, unlike Cubans of European ancestry, Cubans of African descent had a religious heritage that foreigners were willing to pay to witness or join, and those who did not, sometimes faked it. Criticism concerning fraudulent practitioners was later extended to legitimate babalao and olorisha performing services for foreigners when they began to charge their fees in US dollars (later convertible pesos). A basic

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133 All of the practitioners I interviewed and a good number of non-practitioners expressed their concern with people misrepresenting themselves and Ocha-Ifá for profit. In some cases individuals under scrutiny were practitioners and in other cases they knew enough to be able to trick the unsuspecting into a “fake” consultation. Babalao such as Antonio Cañafeda Márquez and Victor Betancourt were the most vocal in their criticism. Interviewed by the author Havana, June 2005 and Havana, November 2007, respectively.
consultation that would cost a Cuban citizen twenty pesos, cost a foreigner twenty
dollars, twenty times more than the consulting fee for Cubans (if we use an exchange rate
of twenty pesos per dollar).\footnote{The $20 peso/dollar fee appears to be the standard fee I could determine by making general inquiries at various times in the last ten years in Havana.} When a fee for a much more complex service, such as an
initiation, is calculated this way, it becomes apparent that those catering to foreigners
could earn much more than those catering only to Cubans.

Once again, the best place for some practitioners to air their grievances
concerning unscrupulous colleagues or usurpers was in the letra del año, and both the
Comisión and the ACY revealed positions on consumption and accumulation very much
in line with the goals and principles of the revolution that eroded during the Special
Period. The ACY criticized the filming of secret ceremonies, falsification, mercantilism
and commercialization of their faith carried out by individuals or groups.\footnote{ACY, “Letra del año 1994, 1995,” in Argüelles Mederos, and Rubiera Verdecía, 65, 67.} The
Comisión went much further in its criticism against fraudulent or market-oriented
practitioners in the form of riddles at the end of its 1996 letra:

\begin{quote}
\textit{El río que crece rápido lo hace de agua sucia} [The river that rises quickly is full of dirty water].
\textit{No todo el mundo sabe jugar el juego del guacalote} [Not everyone knows how to play the guacalote’s [a seed used in diloggun divination] game].
\textit{Gran vicio del hombre es traicionar a quien en él confia} [The great vice of man is to betray the one who trusts him].\footnote{“El río que crece rápido lo hace con agua sucia.” Comisión, “Letra 1996,” in Argüelles Mederos, and Isabel Rubiera Verdecía, 29.}
\end{quote}

These three riddles speak of dishonesty, lack of knowledge, fraud and betrayal of fellow human beings. To be a real babalao one must therefore be honest, know one’s office,
and be trustworthy, regardless of the situation. The Comisión followed these riddles in
1997 with a statement that their greatest *divisa* (hard currency) was being able to rescue and maintain a tradition of their ancestors that was threatened with extinction.\(^{137}\)

For the ACY and the Comisión, legitimacy and authority in Ocha-Ifá did not require personal wealth or material goods, but a certain type of morality and strength of character, traits the Cuban government had tried to instil in its population since 1959.

Unification, the ideal with which both the Comisión and the ACY began their public *ceremonias de la letra del año* in 1987, remained elusive. The ACY closed its 1996 and 1998 *letra del año* with a note of clarification for anyone unfamiliar with its claims:

The Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba continues supporting and working united with the branches (*ramas*) that historically carried out the opening of the year since the end of the [1940s] and beginning of the [1950s] always with a national and worldwide character, that are none other than that of Adechina, Ifabi, Bernabé Menocal, Bernardo Rojas, José Antonio Ariosa. The Association is grateful for the collaboration and support that the traditional branches in general, and particularly the brother *babalao* Fernando Molina and Angel Padron, have offered us.\(^{138}\)

Under terms like ‘tradition’ and ‘history’ the ACY excluded, rather than included, practitioners in its projected unification of Yoruba peoples.

**Conclusion**

The revolutionary government had once seen Ocha-Ifá and other religions of African origin as rivals to its Marxist-Leninist ideology and competition with its


\(^{138}\) “La Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba continua respaldando y trabajando unida a las ramas que históricamente efectuaban la apertura del año desde la década de los finales del cuarenta y principio del cincuenta siempre con carácter nacional y mundial que no son otras que la de Adechina, Ifabi, Bernabé Menocal, Bernardo Rojas, José Antonio Ariosa. La Asociación tiene a bien agradecer la colaboración y apoyo que nos han brindado las ramas tradicionales en general y particularmente a los hermanos babalawos Fernando Molina y Angel Padrón.” ACY, “Letra del año 1996, 1998” in Arguelles Mederos and Rubiera Verdecia, “La ceremonia de apertura del año en la Regla Ocha,” 69, 73.
economic policy. Rather than losing ground under legislation that restricted their behaviour, practitioners assimilated revolutionary policy and discourse to their own purposes. The Comisión adamantly maintained a *martiana* view of its history and religion, insisting that Cuban Ocha-Ifá was more authentic because of everything that it had endured in the Spanish colony and the republics, in secret and behind closed doors. Ocha-Ifá was not African, but Cuban in the same way that citizens were not black or white, but Cuban, as Martí had declared one hundred years before. Contrary to earlier assumptions, *babalao* did have a role to play in the new society, and it complemented, rather than challenged, the role of the state.

The ACY also appropriated state policy in its own interests to build a pan Yoruba movement from Cuba linked to a similar movement in Nigeria. It attempted to assert ritual hegemony through historical ties to Africa, publicly purging the religion of Spanish-Catholic elements. Much more absolutist and intolerant of diversity, the ACY mirrored the early revolutionary government’s attempts to achieve unity and control over its population. But that absolutist, centralized government had already given way to one more tolerant of diversity by the 1990s, whereas the ACY showed no signs of relaxing.
Chapter Five: *Brujas*, Female Priests and Other Heresies

“Should we break with our ethnicity, with our ancestral family? That would be a lack of respect to the memory of our ancestors…we are *negros* or *mestizos* and the whites who yesterday held power taught us to live alienated and distanced from our families and not to recognize our origin. This has been very well entrenched in the mind of contemporary slaves.”

-Babalao Victor Betancourt’s basis and justification for initiating women to Ifá.  

Introduction

In 1985 a North American woman was initiated to Ifá, provoking the indignation of most babalaoes in Cuba and the US who unanimously agreed that initiating a woman to Ifá could not be done. But Cuban babalao Victor Betancourt, rather than saying it could not be done began to think about how it could be done. When, in the year 2000, he initiated two women to Iyáonifá (the term he applied to women in Ifá), critics accused Betancourt of heresy for allowing women to enter the previously male domain of the Ifá priesthood. The, often vitriolic, confrontations that followed the initiation of women, however, ignored Betancourt’s earlier modifications of ritual practice, obscuring the more subtle and less often articulated sociopolitical goals of such activity.

Although the initiation of women to a previously male priesthood had gender implications, both in the ritual and practice of Ocha-Ifá and Cuban society, when

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1 “¿Deberíamos romper con nuestra etnia, con nuestra familia ancestral? Eso sería una falta de respeto a la memoria de nuestros antepasados...somos negros o mestizos y los blancos que ayer detentaban el poder nos enseñaron a vivir aislados y apartado de nuestras familias y a desconocer nuestro origen. Ello ha quedado muy bien arraigado ne la mente de los esclavos contemporáneos.” Victor Betancourt Estrada, “Respuestas a Felipe Ifaláde,” Consenso 2 (2006), available from www.consenso.org/02/articulos/13_02.shtml, internet; accessed 21 February 2006, 2.

examined in conjunction with Betancourt’s revival of an obscure initiation style, the
creation of a society of brujas and the celebration of Olokún, the orisha of the deep sea, a
cohesive sociopolitical project emerges. In reviving or reinventing religious traditions or
rituals, Betancourt challenged long-standing practices silencing discussions on race and
inequality to call attention to the very social problems the revolution allegedly eliminated
– discrimination based on race, gender, and class.

Alejandro de la Fuente argues that the interpretations of Martí’s foundational
myth of a republic “with all and for all” oppose “public debates about racism in Cuban
society as a betrayal of Martí’s legacy, and as attempts to divide an allegedly integrated,
racially harmonious nation.”³ But Tomás Fernández Robaina maintains that Martí also
conceived of a racismo justo, a just or righteous racism, through which black Cubans
have the right “to promote and prove that [their] colour does not deprive [them] of the
abilities and rights of the human species.”⁴ As I have argued throughout this dissertation,
Cubans of African descent used the concept of “culture” in the context of a given period
to both maintain and promote their religious beliefs. Culture as racismo justo was and
continued to be a political project throughout the twentieth century, as overt political
organization based on race was prohibited. Betancourt’s casa templo and the revival and
reinvention of ritual practice in Ocha-Ifá would continue to serve the decades old
political project of Cubans of African descent that refused to assimilate to elite visions of
acceptable identity and behaviour.

XXXIV.6 (May/June 2001), 30.

⁴ José Martí, quoted in Tomás Fernández Robaina, Cuba – Personalidades en el debate racial
This chapter focuses on four modifications that Victor Betancourt introduced to Ocha-Ifá over a fifteen-year period from roughly 1990 to 2005 to illustrate the way in which some practitioners of Ocha-Ifá launched race-based projects designed to criticize growing racism, social and gender inequality, and to make claims for inclusion in the national project.

**Victor Betancourt Estrada**

It is useful to begin an analysis of ritual practices with an examination of the man who introduced them. Victor Betancourt’s life in Ocha-Ifá followed typical initiation patterns and assumptions, through which some ruptures and changes in the last twenty years can be detected. Born in December 1953 to a family practicing one or more religions of African origin, Betancourt began participating in religious ceremonies at two years of age because he had asthma, although his parents did not have him initiated at that time. Illness is one of the reasons practitioners cite for initiating people to Ocha-Ifá, on the belief that either the illness is caused by not obeying the *orishas*, or that the *orishas* can help to alleviate the condition. Practitioners of Ocha-Ifá believe, in the case of illness, that participating in religious activities can help to improve the illness until the individual in question can be initiated. Finances often dictated the possibility or time of initiation, but sometimes individuals did not want to be initiated right away for a variety of reasons. In Betancourt’s case he was very young and his *padrino* was able to control

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5 Betancourt Estrada, Interviewed by the author, Havana, November 2007.
the asthma by involving him in ceremonies and, more than likely, prescribing natural
remedies.⁶

At the age of nine or ten years, in 1963, Betancourt began a long initiation process
to Ocha-Ifá when he received the guerreros (Elegguá, Ogún, Osaín and Osún).
Individuals usually received the guerreros prior to initiation and they were believed to
help that person develop as a practitioner, as well as to take care of the various aspects of
an individual’s life.⁷ Receiving the guerreros can also serve as another means of staving
off illness, or other problems, until the person can be initiated. By the early 1960s the
revolutionary government had already begun to discourage the practice of and initiation
to Ocha-Ifá, especially among minors, so it is significant that Betancourt began his
formal life in Ocha-Ifá during this period.

Betancourt was in no rush to fulfill his destiny with the orishas, however. In
1971 he was initiated to Palo Monte (a religion of Bantú origin) and dedicated himself to
that religion, even after making a “medio asiento” (a partial initiation) in Ocha two years
later. In Betancourt’s case a medio asiento meant that he received the collares or
necklaces of the orishas, as determined by his padrinos (godparents), in addition to the
guerreros he had received as a child. This ceremony made him a member of the religious
house, enabling him to participate in some activities, but did not yet make him an initiate
of an orisha cabecera. Like receiving the guerreros, a medio asiento could also pacify
the orisha cabecera for a period of time, but eventually the individual would have to
hacerse santo (make the saint). Betancourt explains that in his case, the medio asiento

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was a style or process of initiation conducted at that time; however, it is also likely that there was a material incentive for dividing the initiation process over several years. Cuba’s economic situation always had an impact on ceremonies and food shortages would certainly have limited the orishas to which practitioners could sacrifice at various times, especially throughout the revolutionary period when food was rationed.

Betancourt did not complete his initiation in Ocha until he was in his late twenties, when he was initiated to Yemayá in 1981. There is a hierarchy among the religions of African origin, therefore, Betancourt’s earlier interest in Palo Monte postponed his initiation to Ocha because the head cannot be rayada (literally cut), a requirement for initiation to Palo Monte, after receiving the orisha cabecera, only before. Betancourt’s initiation to Ocha was followed in 1985, by his initiation to Ifá, just one year before the revival of the ceremonia de la letra del año.

Although Betancourt was initiated to Ocha prior to Ifá, not all babalao believe it is necessary. Traditions that do not require initiations to Ocha first, present a future babalao with a santo lavado (washed saint), in which case the head of the babalao-to-be is washed and then he receives a calabash with washed stones representing a particular orisha, rather than the direct form of placing the stones over the head and calling on the orisha to descend. Other Ifá lineages and traditions insist that babalao be initiated to Ocha first because that would enable them to enter the Ocha religious room and give

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8 Betancourt Estrada in Hurtado, “El poder de Olokún.”
9 This is a generally accepted rule although not all practitioners observe it.
them more influence and control over Ocha and its link to Ifá.\textsuperscript{12} Many practitioners, particularly outside of Havana, do not recognize the \textit{santo lavado} form of pseudo-initiation to Ocha and will not allow \textit{babalao}s initiated this way to enter the Ocha religious room.\textsuperscript{13} It is through prohibitions like this that \textit{babalocha}s and \textit{iyalocha}s are able to maintain more autonomy over their religious practices, than those who accept \textit{babalao}s with a \textit{santo lavado}. Significantly, the \textit{santo lavado} became the most common way of initiating \textit{babalao}s in Havana in the 1990s during the explosion of initiations to Ocha-Ifá.\textsuperscript{14}

As the previous chapter explained, Victor Betancourt Estrada was involved in the revival of the \textit{ceremonia de la letra del año} in the 1980s and 1990s. He has continued that involvement to the present, but also founded his own Ifá temple in 1990 for the specific purpose of “recovering lost traditions” and conducting research on and educating practitioners about Ocha-Ifá in Cuba.\textsuperscript{15} Starting one’s own casa templo as a babalao requires a great deal of confidence within Ifá. A babalao must ask his padrino for some of the lineage olofín to establish a new organization. Olofín can be explained in material

\textsuperscript{12} Michel González, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007.

\textsuperscript{13} Michel González, a babalocha from Matanzas does not recognize \textit{santo lavado} in babalao\textit{s} and will not allow a babalao with \textit{santo lavado} to enter an Ocha religious room. Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007.

\textsuperscript{14} It is impossible to determine numbers but most practitioners I spoke with in Havana and Matanzas from 1998 to 2007 cited the \textit{santo lavado} as the means to initiating babalao\textit{s} quickly and enabling them to work with Ocha houses. Many babalocha\textit{s} and iyalocha\textit{s} indicated it was a way for babalao\textit{s} and Ifá to dominate ritual practice and earn more money. For examples Kimbo, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, March 2006; Pedro García, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007; Juan Ramón Velázquez, Interviewed by the author, Havana, May 2006; Tomás Fernández Robaina, Interviewed by the author, June 2006.

terms as the sacred stones representing the orishas belonging to a babalao that he inherited from his padrino. In ritual terms olófin is more of a “symbolic capital” enabling a babalao to initiate new babalao, establish his own organization, and act with a degree of authority. The act of requesting the olófin could be a humbling experience, but if the babalao’s padrino refused to give him the olófin that experience could result in humiliation. The fact that Betancourt’s padrino gave him the olófin with which to start his own organization indicated that there was a certain amount of respect and trust between the two men.

Since his initiation to Ifá in 1985, but especially since founding his own casa templo, Victor Betancourt has dedicated his time to reading, researching and incorporating what he sees as lost or forgotten practices back into Ocha-Ifá. Some of these reinventions or reinterpretations have not gained renown outside of Betancourt’s religious family, while others have provoked the criticism and consternation of practitioners around the world. While appearing to flout tradition or commit heretical acts attracted criticism from other practitioners in general, the most vitriolic attacks against Betancourt came as a result of his challenge to the gendered hierarchy of Ifá. The following sections will examine some of Betancourt’s reinventions, the conditions in Cuban society that either enabled or sparked their appearance, and a range of reaction to the innovation and the babalao.

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Pata y Cabeza: Initiation According to Means

While the previous chapter did not go into detail regarding the initiation of practitioners in the late 1980s and the 1990s, many of the procedures and patterns that became common from the 1960s through the early 1980s – in which people entered Ocha-Ifá gradually and sometimes reluctantly, and could be gleaned from testimonies such as those of Mercedes Valdez, Juan Ramón Velázquez and Victor Betancourt – became increasingly rarer. Cubans initiated in the late 1980s and early 1990s during periods of high liquidity had large sums of money that they directed toward elaborate initiation ceremonies in which they received the guerreros, the collares and their tutelary orisha in one initiation period. Foreigners arriving in Cuba, with the specific goal of being initiated to Ocha-Ifá, further complicated and expedited the initiation ceremony and procedures because they had the money to pay for a complete ceremony, but often did not have the possibility of spending extended periods of time in Cuba fulfilling other requirements.  

18 Babalaos, babalochas and iyaločas did not usually turn foreigners away because they brought much needed hard currency into the casa templo, expanded the ritual lineage to far away places, and increased ritual prestige. Foreigners were also likely to send friends or acquaintances interested in being initiated to Ocha-Ifá in Cuba to their padrinos, which perpetuated the cycle of wealth and prestige.  


19 Kimbo describes this cycle as a chain through which family and friends of an initiated foreigner will seek out the Cuban padrinos for advice or initiation, creating a personal and economic relationship with Cuba and Cubans. In Dolores Pereira, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007.
The Special Period in Cuba upset the equilibrium the revolutionary government had established over thirty years through rationed goods and price controls, reasonable rents and assistance for Cubans in buying or building their own homes, and salaries that acknowledged different skills and training, but did not create income gaps so great as to breed animosity within society.\(^{20}\) As food imports disappeared overnight and Cuban production, as well as transportation of foodstuffs, could not match the needs of the population, starvation became a reality for all. Cuban consumption of fats and proteins dropped significantly during the first part of the 1990s. In the period 1986-1988 Cubans reached peak consumption of protein at 77.4 grams per day and 82.6 grams per day of fat. In 1992 these amounts dropped to 61.7 grams per day of protein and 65.4 grams per day of fat.\(^{21}\) By 1993, however, these levels had dropped to 46 grams per day of protein and 26 grams per day of fat.\(^{22}\) Riots in some of the poorer neighbourhoods of Havana in 1993 and 1994 led the government to implement measures to alleviate the distress of the population that also contributed to creating social inequalities.

By 1994, soon after the revolutionary government legalized the possession of US dollars, Cuban society was quickly divided in two – those with dollars and those without. Cubans with dollars could buy food no longer on the libreta (ration card) in diplo tiendas, or stores originally established for the exclusive benefit of foreigners, and, increasingly,

\(^{20}\) Archibald R.M. Ritter and Nicholas Rowe, “From “Dollarization” to “Euroization” or “Peso Reconsolidatation”?,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 44.2 (Summer 2002), 109.

\(^{21}\) *Statistical Abstract of Latin America* Vol. 34, 172.

TRDs (Tiendas de Recuperación de Divisas) run by the FAR. As the government removed items from the *libreta* or limited their distribution later in the decade, Cubans had no choice but to shop in the TRDs for basic items such as cooking oil, meat or chicken, and most seasonings. Those Cubans without access to US dollars either had to convert their pesos into dollars (at a rate that by the late 1990s fluctuated between 20-25 pesos for one dollar), or try to survive on rations and food available in the *agro mercados* (legal government markets selling produce and some meat at competitive prices). Without US dollars basic survival was difficult, but dollars also facilitated more than mere survival. Given the complaints from many practitioners, Cubans did not use their hard currency only for survival. They also used it to pay for expensive initiation ceremonies in Ocha-Ifá – converting the dollars they acquired through remittances or some form of work in the tourist sector to pesos it took much less time to save for a 7,000-10,000 peso ceremony than it would have had Cubans had to save from their meager state salaries.

The line between wealth and prestige, greed and fraud was a delicate one as chapter three demonstrated. *Babalaos* and other practitioners were critical of those catering to foreigners, in large part because of the amount of money they earned. Some were also critical because they believed that practitioners were overlooking the character of those they welcomed into their religious homes for the financial return of initiating

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24 Ritter and Rowe, “From “Dollarization” to “Euroization”…” 103.

25 Leogrande and Thomas, “Cuba’s Quest for Economic Independence,” 354.

26 Data on cost of initiation to Ocha-Ifá does not, to my knowledge exist, however, if asked practitioners quote a variety of prices close to 10 000 pesos (or US dollars if the initiate is not Cuban). These prices remained constant during my period of inquiry of 1998 to 2007.
foreigners, or even Cubans, with high liquidity. And yet, Ocha-Ifá was used increasingly
to address material needs, as well as personal gain.27 Warnings urging caution in
welcoming people into casa templos without knowing their character were popular
admonitions in the letras del año of the late 1990s.28

Victor Betancourt had a different approach to dealing with the circumstances of
the Special Period. Instead of exclusively adopting the elaborate initiation ceremonies
that had become popular during the Special Period, he revived an initiation ceremony
believed to have all but disappeared by the 1940s. The pata y cabeza (also pie y cabeza,
foot and head) initiation ceremony involved the iyawo (new initiate) receiving Elegguá
(the feet) and having the tutelary orisha (the head) placed on his or her head.29 As there
were only two orishas to feed in the ceremony this type of initiation was relatively
inexpensive and the iyawo could receive the guerreros or other orishas as finances
permitted in future years. Most importantly, especially if initiation was a response to an
illness, the iyawo’s tutelary orisha would protect and guide its son or daughter through
his or her problems, sooner rather than later.30

According to David H. Brown the pata y cabeza initiation style was popular in
Matanzas at least until the middle of the last century and a few casa templos, in areas
remote from Havana, have preserved the knowledge into the current century. Many

28 See for example ACY, “Letra del Año 2001.”
29 Brown, Santería Enthroned, 134.
30 Tomás Fernández Robaina found that most practitioners only used the pata y cabeza initiation style in
cases of emergency when an individual needed to be initiated quickly and/or if economic circumstances did
not permit the more elaborate initiation process. “¿La santería: africana, cubana o afrocubana?: Elementos
para el debate.” La Jiribilla 116.07 (2003). Available from
Havana-based practitioners, however, do not recognize either the ceremony or the possibility that some practitioners continue to utilize the ceremony as circumstance dictates.\textsuperscript{31} The Consejo de Sacerdotes Mayores Obases de Cuba, a group of oriatés belonging to the ACY, does not recognize the \textit{pata y cabeza} initiation believing that there are no longer living practitioners initiated in this form. For the Obases the only acceptable initiation to Ocha is to first present the iyawo with the \textit{santos reglamentarios} (standard saints), Ochún, Changó, Obatalá, Yemayá and sometimes Oyá. After this presentation the iyawo should receive his or her tutelary orisha or other orishas as determined by the padrinos.\textsuperscript{32} Practitioners never recognize variations in belief or practice as religious pluralism, but rather as heresy or incorrect practice.\textsuperscript{33} Tomás Fernández Robaina found among his informants in Havana, practitioners who insisted that the \textit{pata y cabeza} ceremony was reserved for very specific circumstances or was specific to Matanzas, not Havana.\textsuperscript{34}

There is, however, another explanation for the popularity of the Havana-style initiation and the lack of popularity of the \textit{pata y cabeza}. As Miguel Ramos’ research presented in the introduction explained, there was a ritual conflict between two women in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Havana based in part on initiation style. As a result of the conflict and a parting of ways, Havana maintained the royal, Oyó-centric initiation ceremony, in which initiates received the \textit{santos reglamentarios} first and the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[31] Brown, \textit{Santería Enthroned}, 138.
\item[34] Fernández Robaina, “¿La Santería: Africana, Cubana o Afrocubana?” 13.
\end{footnotes}
orisha cabecera last, while Matanzas maintained the non-royal, non-Oyó practice of initiating individuals to Eleggua and the orisha cabecera. While these initiation practices may mark past and present for many practitioners, as is the case in Betancourt’s “revival” of tradition, they also mark ethnicity that practitioners do not express as such, but rather in terms of Havana and el campo.

Whether expressed as past vs. present, Havana vs. el campo or some other dichotomous relationship, the social or cultural connotation that certain initiation styles held cannot be ignored. If ritual practice in Havana did not actually confer superiority on babalaos, babalochas or iyalochas, it did hold a certain type of authority, level of development and sophistication that habaneros believed practitioners in the provinces lacked. This attitude implicitly projected Africanness (as something not Cuban), poverty and backwardness on certain regions and practices, an attitude that paralleled twentieth century elite visions of Cuban society. Betancourt’s reinvention of the pata y cabeza initiation, therefore, unearthed longstanding tensions between practitioners in Havana and Matanzas who believed that their practices were more authentic and more correct than the other.

**Agayú and Olokún: From Matanzas to Havana**

In addition to the pata y cabeza ceremony Betancourt also appropriated two orishas more closely associated with Matanzas than Havana in the last half of the


36 Joel San Martín, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007.

37 David H. Brown documented this attitude in his research related to the first decades of the twentieth century, but it could just as easily have its origins in the late twentieth century, the period in which Brown collected his oral histories. *Santería Enthroned*, 104.
twentieth century. Agayú Solá (also known as Aganjú, Agallú) is a very powerful deity known for his power of destruction and as the father of Changó. Agayú is identified with San Cristobal in the Catholic Church, the patron saint of Havana, motorists, pilots and stevedores. Practitioners of Ocha-Ifá in Havana stopped initiating people to Agayú directly, by placing him on the head of initiates, some time in the early twentieth century, although the reason is not clear. Instead, if a babalao or oriaté determined that an individual’s orisha cabecera was Agayú, that individual had Changó, Agayú’s son, placed on his head and Agayú was placed on the shoulders.\(^{38}\) In Matanzas, however, practitioners continued to initiate individuals directly to Agayú without Changó throughout the twentieth century.\(^{39}\)

David H. Brown suggests that some Yoruba traditions either lost or never had the need or knowledge to initiate Agayú directly and therefore resisted other traditions that accommodated it as heretical, incorrect or impure.\(^{40}\) There may be some merit to this argument, although there is also a material consideration that should not be discarded. The cost of initiation is in large part based on the orisha cabecera. Some orishas require more food and more attention during initiation than others. If an individual must be initiated to Agayú, who all practitioners agree is a dangerous and violent orisha, initiation via Changó would ensure food and ritual fees for two orishas, rather than one. The babalao or oriaté conducting the initiation could therefore earn a handsome fee through an indirect initiation to Agayú. That said, Agayú is not an extremely popular orisha

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cabecera, so practitioners could hardly become wealthy from initiations to him. It is something to consider, nonetheless, especially during the Special Period when some practitioners unscrupulously initiated those they believed to have the means, to the more expensive orishas.\(^{41}\)

Olokún is another orisha more closely associated with Matanzas in the twentieth century than Havana. Believed to be a deity so strong and destructive that he cannot live on land, Olokún lives chained to the bottom of the deep sea where Obatalá subdued him soon after the creation of the world. An androgynous deity, some say Olokún is half man and half fish. He is called upon in times of insuperable illness and in Havana was always the domain of the babalao, while in Matanzas it was a woman, Fermina Gómez, who dominated the worship and manipulation of him.\(^{42}\) As with Agayú, Olokún is generally believed to be too powerful for practitioners to be initiated to him directly. An individual with Olokún as his or her orisha cabecera is initiated directly to Yemayá, instead. Unlike the case of Agayú, however, it does not appear that individuals were ever initiated directly to Olokún, so Betancourt’s direct initiation process to Olokún is new to Cuban practice, regardless of the region.\(^{43}\)

Olokún is an interesting orisha, both because of the power practitioners believed, and continue to believe, he had, as well as the fact that he is not connected with any of the Catholic saints and never was. He is one of the orishas more closely associated with Olodumaré, the creator, than with human beings.\(^{44}\) The orishas syncretized, however

\(^{41}\) Kevin M. Delgado, “Spiritual Capital: Foreign Patronage and the Trafficking of Santería,” 60.


\(^{44}\) Brown, *Santería Enthroned*, 125.
superficially, with the Catholic saints were the *orishas* that tended to survive in Cuba. Of the over 200 *orishas* recognized among twentieth century Nigerian Yoruba, only twenty four existed in twentieth century Cuba and most of those twenty four could also be identified as Catholic saints. Olokún’s survival is therefore remarkable on several levels.

As with the direct initiation of Agayú, Betancourt was in many ways enabling his ritual practice to respond to the changing needs of practitioners during an increasingly difficult period. But he was also establishing a dialogue, however confrontational, with other practitioners. In appropriating two *orishas* popularly identified with past practice, Matanzas, and backwardness, Betancourt believed that he was returning to the roots of Ocha-Ifá in Cuba, using it as a source of legitimation. In reinterpreting the knowledge of his Cuban ancestors he made it relevant to practitioners of the 1990s, who were often the most economically and socially disadvantaged because they had state jobs that paid them in pesos; they were least likely to have relatives abroad sending remittances; and they were most often discriminated against in more lucrative sectors like tourism because of their appearance. Betancourt consciously sought to carve out new social and political space for Cubans of African descent by making Ocha-Ifá more visible and more authentically Cuban through the inclusion of the practices of other traditions, rather than dismissing them as incorrect.

**Gēlêdé: Reinventing the *Bruja***

Betancourt’s appropriation of practices known to have existed in Cuban Ocha-Ifá was one thing and generated criticism among practitioners that, for the most part, went unnoticed in mainstream Cuban society. But until 1998, Victor Betancourt had not actually introduced any new rituals or practices to Ocha-Ifá. The *pata y cabeza* initiation
and the direct initiation of Agayú and Olokún were all practices that arrived in some form to Cuba with the Yoruba slaves and continued to exist, in different ways, in Havana and Matanzas well into the twentieth century. The concept of *brujería*, however, was something altogether different. As a result of Fernando Ortiz’ early work on crime, the term *brujería* was associated with all religions of African origin, Africans and Cubans of African descent, causing the most harm to men of African descent, who white Cubans believed hunted white children to be offered in sacrifice. Women were also believed capable of using witchcraft in negative, although in less gruesome ways, usually by poisoning the water supply. Betancourt’s creation of an Egbe Gélèdé (society of *ajés* or witches for lack of a better term) and the initiation of women to it was not only a new practice to Cuba, but an appropriation of popular stereotypes that were alive and well more than thirty years after the triumph of the revolution. These stereotypes would serve to empower women of African descent in society.

Unlike his other innovations, Victor Betancourt has remained uncharacteristically silent on the creation of a Gélèdé society in Cuba. He has written extensively on the initiation of women to Ifá, both to explain why and how it was ritually possible, although in a limited sense to avoid revealing secrets, and to defend the practice from those critical of it. Betancourt has shared his opinion that Yoruba women arrived in Cuba as slaves who were priestesses, *brujas*, and princesses with journalists and researchers, but has not connected the *brujas* of the nineteenth century to the Gélèdé society he created at the end of the twentieth century. The only two sources calling attention to Betancourt’s Gélèdé society are an anonymous and undated web based discussion group, listing the initiation

of the first Gëlèdé in the Americas as one of Betancourt’s accomplishments, and a 2006 article in an online review from Cuba explaining what and who the Gëlèdé are.\textsuperscript{46} Of the two sources, only the article written by a member of Betancourt’s organization explains the Gëlèdé.

According to Maybell Padilla Pérez, a member of Ifá Iranlowo, the Gëlèdé originated in the West African city of Kétu in the fourteenth century and focused on the worship of the feminine power, Igba Iwa, as the beginning and end of all life. When Europeans arrived in the region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they interpreted this potentially destructive power of the Gëlèdé as witchcraft in the European concept of the term, of consorting with the Devil, killing children and drinking their blood, and causing mayhem wherever they were found.\textsuperscript{47} Several anthropologists researching Gëlèdé in twentieth century Nigeria subscribe to a similar view of the women belonging to the society. While they agree that the term \textit{ajé} (the Yoruba term for witch) cannot be equated with the English definition and cultural connotations associated with the word witch, they tend to accept the assignations of European origin that the women can and do kill children and commit other destructive acts against the society of which they are a part. Twentieth century Nigerian Yoruba, in order to appease and control this destructive behaviour, held elaborate masquerade ceremonies to both celebrate and distract the \textit{ajé}.\textsuperscript{48} Although there is historical and archaeological evidence that the


\textsuperscript{47} Padilla Pérez, “Sacerdotisas y brujas,” 1.

\textsuperscript{48} For examples see Drewal, \textit{Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency}; Drewal, “Gëlèdé Masquerade: Imagery and Motif,” \textit{African Arts} 7.4 (Summer 1974); Henry Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, \textit{Gëlèdé: Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba}, Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990, 1983; Lawal,
Gélèdé existed prior to British colonization of the region, there is little evidence of its association with witchcraft and societal destruction until the Europeans arrived. Moreover, at least one researcher suggests that the Gélèdé became more numerous after the arrival of the British.\textsuperscript{49} It is still unclear whether or not a Gélèdé masquerade takes place in Cuba. Betancourt claims to have also revived the Egúngún masquerade that was popular in Havana in the nineteenth century on the Día de Reyes, which may have some connection to the Gélèdé masquerade.\textsuperscript{50}

Members of Betancourt’s Egbe Gélèdé strive to be good mothers and wives, attend to the upbringing of their children and the family, and to study the lives of little-known or undiscovered women whose lives are the topic of debate in society.\textsuperscript{51} In a context in which women of African descent, who managed to live comfortably, were often perceived to be sex workers or, if lucky enough to have a job in tourism, thought to have exchanged sexual favours with a manager for it, the Egbe Gélèdé offers an alternative image of women of African descent.\textsuperscript{52} The revolution guaranteed maternity to all Cuban women as a fundamental right through programs to decrease infant and maternal mortality, make the basic necessities of life affordable, and the creation of a Family Code and labour laws that gave women some legal protection from abusive

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\textsuperscript{49} Margaret Thompson Drewal, \textit{Gélèdé: Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba},


\textsuperscript{51} Maybell Padilla Perez belongs to Victor Betancourt’s Ifá Iranlowo, “Sacerdotisas y brujas.”

\textsuperscript{52} Sawyer, \textit{Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba}, 119.
partners and exploitative bosses. Yet, motherhood and family were popularly conceived in terms of white women.\textsuperscript{53} The stereotype that women of African descent were more sensual and insatiable than white women emerged with new force in the Special Period, as foreigners descended on the island looking for an exotic experience that was increasingly found in some form of prostitution. Although women who resorted to prostitution to acquire a meal, hard currency or material goods represented Cuban women of all backgrounds, popular stereotypes connecting the sensuality of women of African descent to poverty, need and the black market made them appear overrepresented in sex work.\textsuperscript{54} Women of African descent may have had children, but their alleged lasciviousness denied them the maternity assigned automatically to white mothers. An organization promoting the contribution of women of African descent to society, from an African-derived perspective, challenged the negative stereotypes that made women of African descent prostitutes while denying them maternity.\textsuperscript{55}

There is, however, a more practical purpose to Betancourt’s creation of the Egbe Gêlêdê than that of appropriating negative stereotypes and using them to make claims on the state and society. All of the women eventually initiated to Iyáonifá were also initiated to the Egbe Gêlêdê first. The \textit{odúś} of Ifá that, although never reproduced exactly from generation to generation or region to region, hold some clues as to why the Gêlêdê is important to initiating women to Ifá in Cuba. Because Betancourt is a self-described

\textsuperscript{53} Sheryl L. Lutjens, “Reading Between the Lines: Women, the State and Rectification in Cuba,” \textit{Latin American Perspectives} 22.2 (Spring 1995).


\textsuperscript{55} Ruth Landes noted a similar character among the Candomblé women of 1930s Bahia, Brazil. \textit{The City of Women} (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994) 75.
autodidact who claims to have read Cuban and Nigerian texts in search of clues to the Yoruba religious past, it is not unreasonable to suggest that he came across the same version of the *odú*s that follow below, in order to devise a philosophy and methodology for initiating women to Ifá via the Egbe Gëlèdé.\(^{56}\)

The Cuban Gëlèdé is a secret society of women who worship the *orisha* Iyami, or the feminine power Igba Iwa.\(^{57}\) In different regions of Nigeria Iyami is also known as Iya Nla, who in turn is sometimes identified as the *orisha* Odú or Oduduwa.\(^{58}\) The *odú* (myth) Osa Meji, explains that the *orisha* Olodúmare sent three *orishas* to earth upon its creation: Obarisa (also known as Obatalá), Ogún and Iya Nla (also identified as Odú, Odúa, Odúduwa). Obarisa was given *aché* (spiritual power) and Ogún was given war but Iya Nla was not given anything, so she complained to Olodúmare who responded by giving her the title “Mother of All” and a calabash with a bird in it. When Olodúmare asked Iya Nla what she would do with her powers she told him that she would use them against her enemies but would give wealth and children to all who appeased her. Those who joined her could not be harmed.\(^{59}\) In *orisha* worship establishing equilibrium is central to both ritual and practice. Olodúmare never concedes power to the *orishas* that cannot be contained or countered in some way. Osa Meji, therefore, also reveals how to appease Iya Nla.

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\(^{57}\) Padilla Pérez, “Sacerdotisas y brujas.”

\(^{58}\) Ifé-identifying regions or ethnicities that recognized Oduduwa as male do not make these connections.

Orúnmila, the diviner of the Ifá oracle, wanted to go to the land of the *ajé* (witch, wielders of bird power). In order to approach the *ajés*, the Ifá oracle [the *orisha* Odú] warned Orúnmila to sacrifice a wooden image, a baby sash, and metal anklets before going to visit the “haven of the-wielders-of-bird-power.” He did this and returned safely singing: “I have entered into a covenant with Death, and never will I die. Death, no more. I have entered into a covenant with Sickness, and never will I die. Death, no more.” Orúnmila disguised himself as a woman by wearing a mask, a baby sash (or sling for carrying babies, worn only by women), and metal anklets to keep him anchored in this world. He “knew” the secret of the *ajé* and “tricked” them. In “becoming” an *ajé*, Orúnmila could not be harmed.

In the *odú*, the bird represents and contains the power of Iya Nla. But the bird is both a key and a problematic symbol. In Nigerian Gèlèdé traditions birds dominate the images used in masks for the masquerade and are also symbolic of the women, as representatives of Iya Nla, with extraordinary power. European concepts of witchcraft also attributed birds and the ability to fly to women accused of being witches, so it is not entirely clear which tradition emerges in the *odú*. What is clear, however, is that the *odú* Osa Meji is one of the sixteen major *odú* with which all practitioners of Ocha-Ifá in Cuba are familiar. Practitioners use the *odú* to make sense of the world in which they live and will, therefore, focus on different elements, but all versions of Osa Meji explain both the origin of Odú’s power (the bird) and the steps necessary to appeasing the potentially destructive forces of that power. In the case of the Cuban Gèlèdé, the creation of a

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61 See for example Lawal, *The Gèlèdé Spectacle*, for historical and contemporary images of birds in Gèlèdé.
society of *ajé* was the way for women to join Iya Nla or Iyami, who is also Odú the oracle of Ifá, so that they could not be harmed by working with Ifá. One more example of how the *odú* of Ifá can be interpreted and manipulated should strengthen this hypothesis.

Throughout the twentieth century Cuban *babalao* justified the exclusion of women from Ifá on the *odú* (myth) of Ifá Ireté Ogbé which lays out the relationship between the *babalao* and Odú (the *orisha* or oracle). In it, Odú is invested with great powers given to her by Olodúmare, including the power to kill humans – but only if they anger her. Upon being called to earth by the *awos* (diviners), Olodúmare gave Odú a bird and told her that it would go anywhere she wanted it to and do anything she wanted it to do. She named it Aragamago, put it in a calabash and said that no one else could look at it. Anyone who looked at the bird would be blinded. The *awos* consulted Ifá [considered here separate from Odú] and told Orúnmila to make an offering to the earth so that he could marry Odú. Odú let Aragamago out of the calabash to eat the offering. She told Orúnmila that she had tremendous powers but did not wish to fight him. She would share her power with Orúnmila if he obeyed her taboo – his wives could not look upon her face. Additionally, the one who is initiated to Ifá will not be allowed to suffer.  

According to Victor Betancourt, in his years of practice and research on Ifá he never came across any *odú* prohibiting women from being initiated to Ifá. He did, however, find several *odús* proscribing certain activities for women, including Ireté Ogbé, which specified women could not look upon Odú’s face. If Ireté Ogbé is read in

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62 Afolabi A. Epega, Philip John Neimark, *The Sacred Ifá Oracle* (New York: Athelia Henrietta Press, 1995); Maybell Padilla Pérez also noted that Ifá does not take life from those consecrated to it. “Sacerdotisa y brujas,” 3.

conjunction with Osa Meji, as I believe Betancourt has done, the women who are *ajé* or members of the Gèlèdè are protected from the potential wrath of Odú because they joined her (they became wielders of bird power). As long as they obeyed her taboo of not looking upon her face, they would not be harmed.

Unlike Betancourt’s earlier innovations, there is little evidence to suggest that the Gèlèdè was ever transported to Cuba, as such, via the transatlantic slave trade, although traces of it certainly abound. Lydia Cabrera may have discovered evidence of traces of Gèlèdè in Cuba around the turn of the twentieth century. In *Yemayá y Ochún* Cabrera links Olokún to a possible masquerade that a *babalao* danced only rarely, and under very specific circumstances. It was followed by a sacrifice to Olokún in the deep sea and the last *babalao* to have allegedly danced the masquerade was Adeshina who passed away in 1905. The masks, according to Cabrera’s source, originated in a *cabildo* in Regla (which would link them to Adeshina), but were transferred to the *cabildo* of Fermina Gómez in Matanzas some time in the early twentieth century, although Cabrera was never able to verify their existence.  

In twentieth century Nigeria, anthropologists have documented elaborate Gèlèdè masquerade ceremonies, in which men dress as women and wear wooden masks with different bird symbols carved into them. Yemayá, also known as Iya Nla, is the *orisha* of worship in these ceremonies. Cubans also use the name Iyami or Iyami Ajé for the

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orisha and Lydia Cabrera’s mid twentieth century ethnographical research linked both Iyami and Iya Nla to Yemayá. If these examples are not representative of Gélèdé in the manner intended by Betancourt, and as described in Nigeria and Benin, they certainly suggest some historical continuity between West Africa and Cuba.

Clearly, the subject of the Gélèdé in Cuba requires more research, as do Victor Betancourt’s goals and visions for it. What is apparent at this point, however, is that the Gélèdé once were, and continue to be, linked to Yoruba orisha-worship in some regions of West Africa and among some Yoruba ethnic groups. The odús that guide and orient practitioners of the Yoruba religion make clear connections to Odú, the ajés, the Gélèdé societies, and the enormous power of women over two fundamental aspects of their world – life and death. Moreover, all of the women eventually initiated to Ifá in Victor Betancourt’s casa templo, or with his assistance, were first initiated to the Cuban Egbe Gélèdé.

**Female Priests: Las Iyáonifás**

Women in Cuba made extraordinary gains during the first thirty years of the revolution. In 1953 they had accounted for 13.7% of the workforce, although women of African descent were over-represented in this category due to their presence in low or no-skill jobs. By 1989 women composed 45% of the workforce and 57.2% of university students. The onset of the Special Period, however, threatened to reverse these gains, as women returned to the home to better manage scarce resources, care for children and the

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66 Cabrera, *Yemaya y Ochun, kariocha, iyalarichas y olorichas*.

67 Lutjens, “Reading Between the Lines,” 103; de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 273.

68 Lutjens, “Reading Between the Lines,” 104.
elderly, and/or engage in economic activities that were part of their reproductive activities in the home. Maxine Molyneux noted early in the Special Period that women dominated most informal sector activities, such as paladares, food stalls and renting of rooms in their homes.\footnote{Molyneux, \textit{Institutional Change in Cuba’s Special Period}, 33.} But Cubans of African descent, because they continued to live in inadequate housing, often distant from areas frequented by tourists, did not have even the basic material conditions to be able to supplement their incomes.\footnote{Sawyer, \textit{Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba}, 121.} Increasingly, Ocha-Ifá became a way to resolver (solve), not only through community and sharing, but as an economic activity itself. Women, and even men, could either supplement their income through the performance of religious duties or, if they were successful and in demand, live off of their earnings as babalao\textit{s}, iyalo\textit{chas} and babaloch\textit{as}, with the potential for earning several hundreds of dollars per month.\footnote{Delgado, “Spiritual Capital: Foreign Patronage and the Trafficking of Santería.”}

Victor Betancourt’s desire and ultimate decision to initiate women to what, in Cuba, had always been a male domain reflected certain societal changes taking place over the course of the Revolution. Although initiating women to Ifá was not originally his idea, after the North American woman, Daifá, was initiated in the US, Betancourt, rather than viewing the initiation as heresy like many other babalao\textit{s}, began to ponder the possibility of enabling women to work with Ifá.\footnote{Betancourt, Interviewed by the author, Havana, November 2007.} If it could be done, it would give women access to a position of power and influence in a religion that used gender to restrict or limit the participation of certain groups of people. But in order to enable a
practice previously unheard of in Cuba, a practitioner had to establish a coherent ritual argument and find some evidence of such a practice in the history of the religion.

As one of the main goals in founding his casa templo, Betancourt sought to identify and recover lost or rarely practiced traditions that had existed at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century in Cuba. The dominant role of women in Ifá emerged as a central element of many of the traditions that interested Betancourt and research he conducted, on the region of West Africa that is now Nigeria, convinced him that women were once initiated to the priesthood. Yoruba women such as Ma Monserrat González, Fermina Gómez, Latuán and María Towá who arrived in Cuba during the nineteenth century, most as slaves, Betancourt argues, were skilled diviners who had a significant amount of knowledge of the odúṣ (signs) of Ifá, at a time in which Ifá was not widely known or practiced in Cuba. Many women at the turn of the twentieth century led ceremonies for certain orishas that, by the end of the twentieth century, were the exclusive domain of babalaos. Furthermore, Ma Monserrat González of Matanzas presented the first Odúa (the orisha but also the power of Ifá) to a Cuban babalao. Women, not men, formed the bridge of knowledge between Africa and Cuba.

Believing that the subaltern position of women in Ocha-Ifá originated with slavery and a tendency to relegate women to domestic service, especially cooking, Betancourt recognized that women were as capable as men in divining and should recover their lost ritual space. Through research, Betancourt found the odú Ireté Ogbé

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73 Betancourt Estrada, “El fenómeno Iyónifá en Cuba.”

74 Betancourt Estrada, “El fenómeno Iyónifá en Cuba.”

was the only justification for not allowing women to work with Ifá. In the *odú* (myth) the *orisha* Odú tells Orúnmila that she will share her power with him as long as his wives do not look upon her face.\(^7^6\) The *odú*, in Betancourt’s understanding, did not prevent women from working with Ifá or being initiated – it only prevented them from looking at the oracle. Moreover, the initiation of women to the Egbe Gëlèdé would also protect them from Odú’s wrath.

After fifteen years of research and preparation, Victor Betancourt initiated two Cuban women, María Cuesta Conde and Nidia Aguila de León, to Iyáonifá, the term he applied to both the female diviners and the female priesthood, in March 2000.\(^7^7\) In reinterpreting the *odú* Ireté Ogbé, Betancourt interpreted gender relations in Ocha-Ifá as complementary; masculine and feminine elements (the babalao and Odú or the iyáonifá) could and should be present in the Ifá room:

In the Ifá room initiation to the feminine *orisha* Odú, the mother of all living beings and the first woman diviner, who married Orúnmila and had sixteen children who were converted into the sixteen Olodú or major signs of Ifá is represented. This demonstrates that to consecrate any diviner (babalao or Iyáonifá) masculine and feminine participation should be present.\(^7^8\)

For Betancourt, it was ‘natural’ that men and women participate in Ifá as a necessary element of ritual reproduction.

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\(^7^6\) Betancourt Estrada, “Respuestas a Felipe Ifaláde,” 2.

\(^7^7\) Victor Betancourt Estrada, “El fenómeno Iyónifá en Cuba,” *Consenso* 1 (2005), available from [www.consenso.org/01/articulos/02_01.shtml](http://www.consenso.org/01/articulos/02_01.shtml), internet; accessed 8 February 2006.

\(^7^8\) Victor Omolafaoro, “Respuesta a Felipe Ifálade,” 2.
María Cuesta Conde was just thirty years old and worked as a dancer in a cabaret when Betancourt initiated her to Iyáónifá. 79 She was one of the fortunate Cubans of African descent to have employment in the tourist sector, but as in the case of most, it was in entertainment, where African-derived culture is exoticized. 80 Critics argue, however, that even non-state sponsored manifestations of African-derived culture can contribute to the perception that the culture of Cubans of African descent is “primitive, backward, anachronistic, not as a living, breathing culture and struggle that defines [them] as a people.” 81 Maintaining the integrity of Ocha-Ifá and surviving the Special Period were not easy tasks.

Just days after María Cuesta Conde’s initiation, Betancourt initiated his wife, Nidia Aguila de León, and in 2002, Matanzas babalao Ernesto Acosta Cediez sought Betancourt’s help in initiating Venezuelan lawyer Alba Marina Portales. 82 Several years after initiating the first women and after confirming through practice that women were both ritually and intellectually capable of working with Ifá, Betancourt decided to extend initiations in Iyaonifa to other women, with the goals of demanding legitimate rights for women, contributing to the moral and ethical development of Ifá, and purifying the cult through the incorporation of the “feminine gender.” 83 By the first years of the twentieth


80 Sawyer, _Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba_, 110.

81 Anonymous, quoted in Sawyer, _Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba_, 127.


83 Betancourt Estrada, “El fenómeno Iyónifá en Cuba.”
century Betancourt and Acosta had initiated roughly twenty women, mostly of African
descent, to Iyáonifá. Many of the women initiated to Iyáonifa in Cuba are well educated
professionals. One is a pharmacist, one a chemist, another a nurse, and one was a
member of the PCC in Matanzas, but was allegedly removed from her position for not
informing the Matanzas leadership prior to initiation.\footnote{Betancourt in Hurtado, “El poder de Olokún.”} Some of the women continue to
practice their professions or work in their jobs outside of Ifá, but others like Maria Cuesta
Conde and Nidia Aguila de León dedicate their lives to Iyáonifá full time. In this
endeavor, they are no different from women who make and sell pizza from their homes or
rent rooms in their houses – they reproduce a type of labour that they already performed,
that of caring for people in need, be they family members or part of the community.\footnote{Molyneaux, \textit{State, Gender and Institutional Change in Cuba’s Special Period}, 33.}
Unlike professional women who left stimulating intellectual jobs for economic reasons,
the iyáonifás, who work as such, enjoy a stimulating work environment in which they
must continue learning and refining their knowledge in order to benefit their clients and
increase their religious prestige. Returning to the domestic sphere did not necessarily
entail a return to tradition and a less personally rewarding life.

Skeptics, those who do not oppose the initiation of women but question their
ability to actually perform the same activities as babalao\textit{s}, argue that, in spite of what
Betancourt may claim, the iyáonifás cannot, by tradition, perform the same activities as
male babalao\textit{s}.\footnote{Tomás Fernández Robaina, Interviewed by the author, Havana, May 2006.} There is some merit to these claims. Babalao is a Yoruba word
meaning father (baba) of the secret (lao or lowo). Iyáonifá is also Yoruba meaning
mother (iyá) of the oracle (onifá). Parenting, or reproducing, the religion is a dominant theme in Ocha-Ifá that terminology can elucidate, but in the case of Ifá there is another subtlety. Unlike in Ocha where the terms babalocha and iyalocha simply indicate a father or mother of Ocha or the orisha, the suffix on baba and iya in Ifá indicate different things. Practitioners of Ifá are much more secretive than practitioners of Ocha with regard to what they permit aleyos (non-initiates) to witness and the amount of information they will divulge to non-babalaos. Being a “father of the secret,” therefore connotes reproducing knowledge of some sacred information as well as the confidence and ability to be able to guard that secret from others. Being a “mother of the oracle” does not connote any specific knowledge of sacred or secret information, only a reproductive function. The ACY has noted that in contemporary Nigeria the title and position of iyalowo (mother of the secret) exists and connotes a woman who can divine with the okpele (divining chain) after reaching menopause. The title also connotes the reproduction of knowledge, as in the title ‘babalao.’

The meaning of practitioners’ titles aside, there is some evidence to indicate that Iyáonifá does not give women equal access to or treatment in Ifá. Tomás Fernández Robaina, for example, argues that the iyáonifás continue to face restrictions in their Ifá activities based on their gender. In Nigeria, anthropologist Margaret Thompson Drewal documented the more recent initiation of women in late twentieth century Ijebu (a Yoruba city), but noted that the women were not allowed to enter Odú’s grove (and look

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upon her face) or be initiated through Ițefá rituals, although they were able to interpret Ifá and, in other contexts, divine. Betancourt explained much the same limitations on women to me during an interview I conducted with him at the end of a children’s Ițefá (initiation) ceremony that I witnessed. Seated on stools in his patio, Betancourt explained that the initiation ceremony was almost the same for girls as for boys. The one major difference was that the girls were not able to enter Odú’s grove (and he pointed to a structure surrounded by a piece of fabric at the back of the patio that served as the grove). Although the salience of Odú’s grove in Ifá is deep knowledge and cannot be shared with outsiders, there is a connection between entering Odú’s grove and enjoying full membership and rights in Ifá that the iyáonífás do not have.

Critics, those who actually oppose the initiation of women to Ifá, also suggest that Betancourt is tricking the women into believing that they can work with Ifá, which may be the case if the iyáonífás do not actually have the same rights and responsibilities as the babalàos. Some critics, however, go as far as to predict the death of women initiated as iyáonífás on the sixteenth day of their initiation (sixteen representing the major odú of Ifá). The ACY, however, insists that Victor Betancourt has not discovered or invented anything new. In contemporary Nigeria there exist three categories of women who work with Ifá - the apètèbí (apeterbi), Ìyánífá and Ìyálówò. As in Cuba the apètèbí has a very limited role but the Ìyánífá and Ìyálówò can care for the deity and divine with the okpele once they reach menopause.

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90 Drewal, Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency, 180.
93 Consejo de Sacerdotes Mayores de Ifá, “Nota aclaratoria al artículo publicado en El Caiman Barbudo sobre las Iyanífas.”
In the broader Cuban society Victor Betancourt’s initiations of women to Ifá sparked much less criticism than the arguments used to support and defend his practice. The year following the first initiations, Betancourt published an article in the digital review *Consenso* on the phenomena of Iyáonifá. The article drew criticism from a babalao who insisted that Ifá was Cuban, not African, and therefore could not tolerate women in Ifá. It is interesting that the babalao’s Cuban identity was connected to limiting women’s roles in a religion of African origin. Rather than confronting the babalao’s machista attitude concerning women though, Betancourt responded with the argument concerning the denial of one’s ancestors quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, discursively confirming the claim that Cuban society was to blame for the subservient position of women in Ifá, as well as the negative attitudes and stereotypes directed at religions of African origin.

In the following edition of *Consenso*, however, T. Avellaneda (a pseudonym) produced an entire article titled “*Manifestaciones del racismo en Cuba: varias caras de un viejo mal* [Manifestations of racism in Cuba: various faces of an old evil],” as a response to Betancourt’s comments regarding the heritage of Cubans of African descent. Using Marti’s myth of racial democracy where “*en nuestro pais hay una sola etnia: la cubana, con independencia de los componentes raciales que la han ido conformando* [in our country there is only one ethnicity: the Cuban one, independent of the racial components that have created it],” Avellaneda insisted that most Cubans (black, white or mestizo) did not know their ancestry and that any attraction or association with

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organizations, such as the Canary Island Society, the Chinese Society, the Arab society, or African religious societies were cultural recognitions of their ancestors, not racial recognitions. While I would not go as far as to claim that Canary Islanders, the Chinese or Arabs were successfully, or even happily, assimilated into Cuban society, I will argue that Cubans of African descent unevenly assimilated into society. As I discussed in chapter two, the revolutionary period did a great deal to right some very old wrongs concerning Cubans of African descent, but silencing the discussion on race did not make discrimination disappear. Moreover, the racialization of inequality made race all the more salient to those experiencing discrimination. The circumstances of the Special Period enabled the reappearance of discrimination as individual struggles for survival gained prescience over community, and latent attitudes concerning Cubans of African descent as being prone to criminality, lasciviousness, and backwardness served to lock them out of well-paying jobs. Betancourt’s argument concerning remembering one’s ancestors was an admonition to Cubans of African descent to confront white society in the appropriation of their culture and in its claims to establishing a racial democracy.

Although Cubans, including most Cubans of African descent, publicly express ambivalence concerning the salience of race in Cuba, census data from the last century suggest that its impact has been greater than one might think. Prior to the Cuban Revolution, the 1943 census had found the population composed of 74% whites, 9.6% blacks, 15.5% mestizos. Combined, Cubans of African descent registered just over one

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96 Dr. Pedro C. Salcedo y de las Cuevas, Director General, Republica de Cuba, Censo del Año 1943 (Habana: P. Fernandez y CIA, S en C) 719, 743.
quarter of the population. In the 1981 census, demographics had changed somewhat, largely a result of the exodus of large numbers of white Cubans in the 1960s. In 1981 66.1% of the population was white, 12% black and 21.9% *mestizo*. Numbers did not change appreciably, however, between 1981 and 2002, the last census, when the population was composed of 65% white, 10.4% black and 24.9% *mestizo*. If the numbers of blacks and *mestizos* are combined in both 1981 and 2002, the population of African descent reaches 33.9% and 35.3% respectively, well below the estimates of many researchers. Some, like Fernández Robaina, insist that Cubans of African descent jump the colour line in the census, if they can, claiming to be *mestizo* if they are black and white if they are *mestizo*, providing inaccurate census data concerning race. Although race is a socially constructed phenomenon, dependent on circumstances and criteria within a given society and context for its endurance, Cubans of African descent may be more interested in manipulating, rather than denying, race. If this is indeed the case, as the population of Cubans of African descent has visibly increased since 1959, the statistics reflect a general preference for lighter skin colours that effectively deny, not the race of an individual, but as Betancourt argues the heritage of an individual. And that heritage includes the discrimination that created African slavery and decades of societal prejudice against Cubans of African descent, as well as the rich cultural traditions that Betancourt argues deserve respect and proper recognition.

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97 Not all Cuban censuses account for race so there are periods for which it cannot be determined. ONE, “Cuba población por color de la piel segun censos, 1981 y 2002,” available from [http://www.cubagob.cu/otras_info/censo/graficos_mapas/g5.htm](http://www.cubagob.cu/otras_info/censo/graficos_mapas/g5.htm), internet; accessed 30 August 2009.

But Cubans without immediate family histories of Ocha-Ifá also began to embrace it as an identity. Guillermína Ramos Cruz, a graduate of the Facultad de Pedagogía (Faculty of Pedagogy) and Licenciada in Historia del Arte (B.A. in Art History) at the University of Havana, was initiated to Ocha in 1990. Her family was predominantly Baptist and Presbyterian yet, she made a conscious decision to seek out a religion of African origin in order to develop her own identity as a woman of African descent. Her testimony is revealing of emerging contradictions toward race that the revolutionary government maintained through to the 1990s, but gained momentum as inequality resurfaced.

When I saw myself in a Havana university among so many people who expected me to stop being me; that I had to be a little black example, I thought I was denying a bit of myself. And when I graduated from the University of Havana in Art History, after studying so much Greece, and so much Rome, and so much Italian Renaissance (that I think is truly important because that is where culture is); and after studying so much Baroque and Rococco, then I said; now I am going to learn about myself. When you see yourself manipulated you want to know more about yourself. When you have to learn Yoruba, the language of your grandparents in a dictionary, that gives you strength, you can be great from your own realm, if you are aware of yourself.99

Initiated in 1990 after graduating from university, the alleged religious explosion had not yet occurred. And yet it is clear in Ramos Cruz’ testimony that her decision to embrace Ocha-Ifá was in large part grounded in her experience as a woman of African descent in revolutionary Cuba. For a good portion of her life Ramos Cruz felt she had to

99 “Cuando yo me ví en una universidad de la Habana, en medio de tanta persona que pretendía que yo tenía que dejar de ser yo, que yo tenía que ser una negrita ilustrada, yo pensaba que estaba negando un poco de mi esencia y cuando yo me gradué en la Universidad de la Habana en Historia del Arte, después de estudiar tanta Grecia, tanta Roma y tanto Renacimiento Italiano, que yo creo que es muy importante porque allá está la cultura, y después de estudiar tanto Barroco y Rococó, entonces yo dije; ahora voy a aprender de mí misma. Cuando tú te ves manipulado quieres saber más de ti, cuando tienes que aprender Yoruba, la lengua de tus abuelos, en un diccionario, eso te da una esfuerza, tú puedes ser grande de tu propio dominio, si no te vas sintiendo ajeno a ti mismo.” Guillermína Ramos Cruz in Tabáre Guerere, Las diosas negras, la santería en feminino (Caracas: Alfadil Ediciones, 1995)129.
deny her race, her heritage and Cuban history in order to take advantage of what the Revolution could offer her. But what the Revolution ultimately provided her with was the realization that racism had not been eliminated; that it existed within the revolutionary government itself, through such areas as education; and that Cubans of African descent had a history and legacy as rich as the Europeans, but more relevant to them because it was their own.

Most babalao, however, express their opposition to Iyáonífa in hostile, machista terms. Babalao Jorge Felipe Marín, for example, insists that while he has nothing against women, the subject of discrimination against women is a discussion for sociologists and politicians, not practitioners of religion. For Marín, there are two very good reasons why women are prevented from working with Ifá. Citing an odú about Yemayá learning how to divine by watching her husband Orula and then making a living at it in his absence, Marín insists that upon Orula’s discovery of Yemayá’s betrayal he consulted Ifá and was told that he could give Yemayá cofá (advice, spiritual influence), but he could no longer live with her. “Ese es el nacimiento de la mujer no como babalawo, ni sacerdote sino como apeterbi de Orula, esclava de Ifá, sirviente de Orula o mujer de Orula…[This is the birth of women not as babalao, nor as priests, but as apeterbi of Orula, slave of Ifá, servant of Orula or woman of Orula…].”¹⁰⁰ Not all men will use the term “slave” to refer to the apeterbi, but many cite this same odú to justify women’s limited participation in Ifá. In the same line, Marín refers to another odú in which Orula’s wife took advantage of his absence to invite her lover into the house, cooked Orula’s favourite food for him,

¹⁰⁰ Marín, “Réplica a ‘El fenómeno Iyáonífa’.”
and offered him Orula’s bed, thereby betraying Orula. In the dominant Ifá world view women are seen as being weaker than men, they become targets of carnal desires and use deception to achieve their goals. These views justify the exclusion of women and preserve male superiority in Ifá.

In spite of the possibility that the iyáonifás do not have the same rights and responsibilities in Ifá as the babalaos, most female practitioners of Ocha accept the view that women cannot work with Ifá and cite tradition, rather than any doctrine or philosophy, to support their view. Few women express the opinion held by Regla an iyalocha from Matanzas, who simply stated that she did not see why women could not be initiated to Ifá if that was what they wanted. Women are as capable as men of divining and providing advice and orientation in Ocha-Ifá, so if moving into Ifá could expand their abilities, they should do it. Unlike most women, Regla did not respond to issues of tradition or male resistance, but assessed the capacity of women to do the job. Perhaps it was her experience in flouting gendered stereotypes by learning to play the batá (which most men object to) and then forming an exclusively female musical group that led her to this conclusion.

Only one babalocha with whom I spoke expressed support for women becoming iyáonifás. Joel, a white, gay practitioner from Matanzas, who identifies himself as “black on the inside,” and member of the ACY’s Matanzas chapter, believes that women should

101 Marin, “Réplica a ‘El fenómeno Iyáonifá’.”
102 Félix Espinosa and Amadeo Piñero, Ifá y la creación (Havana: Ediciones Cubanas, 1997) 45.
103 Regla Mesa, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, November 2007.
104 Regla’s batá group Obini bata [women of the bata] provokes mixed reactions from practitioners who recognize that the drums are not consecrated but continue to believe that women should not play them. Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, November 2007.
be able to work with Ifá just as men can. But just as not all men are destined to become babalaoṣ, Joel did not see all women as destined to become iyáoniṣá. Practitioners had to develop and hone their skills and talents to the religious role that best suited them. ¹⁰⁵ For Joel gender did not have much impact on practice, but aptitude did.

In spite of appearances to the contrary, neither María Cuesta Conde nor Nidia Aguila de Leon appear to have questioned the subservient role of women in Ifá until Victor Betancourt suggested that women could be initiated to Iyaoniṣá. Publicly, these women state that Betancourt suggested their initiation to Ifá, they did not demand or exert pressure on him for an expanded role. ¹⁰⁶ Although it certainly enables women to move into a formerly male dominated office, Iyaoniṣá does not appear to make women equal to men in Ifá. Moreover, evidence to date does not indicate that women requested or demanded their new place in Ifá. ¹⁰⁷ Betancourt created it for them out of his own volition. The Iyaoniṣá phenomena in Cuba cannot yet be viewed as a women’s movement to demand or reclaim ritual space in Ocha-Ifá. It must be viewed as part of Betancourt’s bigger religious project.

**Heterosexual Dominance of Ifá**

If women’s ability to work with Ifá, long identified as a strictly masculine religious domain, could be (re)invented, the same could not yet be said for homosexual

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¹⁰⁵ Joel San Martín, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007.


¹⁰⁷ The iyoniṣá have been silent on their initiation to Ifá. Victor Betancourt insists that he conceived of the idea of initiating women who he believed capable of working in Ifá. There is currently no evidence to suggest otherwise. Interviewed by the author, Havana, December 2007.
practitioners, particularly men. Victor Betancourt’s theory of complementarity that enabled women to work with Ifá did not extend beyond heterosexual relationships. He explained to me in an interview:

…we know that in order for a human being to be born, two must intervene, in the same way. And the ceremonies can be different, the woman on the bottom and the man on top or the man on the bottom and the woman on top, the man gives and the woman receives. Right here, in the sacred encounter, there are ceremonies and rituals that remind us of how a man and a woman can give birth.¹⁰⁸

When asked specifically whether gay men and lesbians could be initiated to Ifá, Betancourt’s response was, “¿Para qué? [What for?]”¹⁰⁹ Betancourt not only sees gender relations in Ocha-Ifá as complementary, with masculine and feminine elements equally represented, he also sees them as explicitly heterosexually reproductive, if not literally, at least metaphorically, and that possibility for biological reproduction must exist within those working with Ifá.

Most babaláos, however, do not conceive of ritual gender relations in quite the same way as Betancourt, but they are equally homophobic and heterocentric. In their 1997 book, Ifá y la creación, Felix Espinosa and Amadeo Piñero explain that homosexuality exists among human beings as a result of Entidades Malévolas. In the beginning, they argue, humans were hermaphrodites that could reproduce themselves. Then, Obatalá made man and woman from one human being and Odúa made men and women attracted to each other as a way of partially uniting the two parts that used to be one being – the men and women looked for the parts they were missing. Some deities

¹⁰⁸ “...sabemos que para que nazca un ser humano, tienen que intervenir dos, de la misma forma, y los ceremoniales pueden ser diferentes, la mujer abajo o el hombre arriba, o el hombre abajo y la mujer arriba, el hombre introduce y la mujer recibe. Aquí mismo, dentro del encuentro sagrado, hay ceremonias y rituales que nos recuerdan como un hombre y una mujer pueden dar a luz.” Betancourt, Interviewed by the author, Havana, November 2007.

rebelled against this separation, wanting all beings to remain androgynous, while others conspired with the *Entidades Malévolas* that confuse the paths of reincarnation so that some people were born with “a sex that is not to their liking” and conspired against the established order. “And this pretension turns them into a caricature of what they cannot be; they serve as a mockery to the ignorant and the wicked, and lead a life that is surreal and futile for reproduction.”\(^{110}\) As in Betancourt’s understanding of gender relations, gender is reduced to heterosexual reproduction.

The above story, however, is not the one usually cited to explain the exclusion of homosexual men from Ifá. Echoing the Cuban revolutionary government’s position on homosexuality, *babalaos* overwhelmingly cite issues of trust as the reason homosexual men cannot become *babalaos*. Some *babalaos* even back up their concern with reference to the *odiú* in which Orunmila’s wife betrayed him in his own house with her lover. Joel, the gay *babalocha* who believed that women were as capable as men in working with Ifá, cited lack of trust as the reason that homosexual men *were not* initiated to Ifá. Joel did not, however, see lack of trust as a valid reason to prevent homosexuals from being initiated because he believed that the character of the individual (man, woman, gay or lesbian) would secure that trust, not gender or sexual orientation.\(^ {111}\)

These opinions concerning the masculinity of *babalaos*, while articulated differently, parallel the revolutionary government’s position on homosexuality and practitioners of religions of African origin throughout most of the revolutionary period.

\(^{110}\) “Y esta pretensión los convierte en una caricatura de lo que no pueden ser; sirven más bien de mofa a los ignorantes y los malvados, y llevan una vida surrealista y vana para la reproducción.” Espinosa and Piñero, *Ifá y la creación*, 33.

\(^{111}\) Joel San Martín, Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007.
Those composing the government saw homosexuality as a symbol of capitalist decadence and weakness, which in turn translated into fear that homosexuals would betray the revolution.\(^{112}\) In “Homosexualities in the Tropic of Revolution,” José Quiroga argues that in the film *Fresa y chocolate*, the gay protagonist, Diego, defines himself as a proper homosexual who will always choose Cuba, culture and the revolution over sex, unlike the maricones (faggots) and locas (queens), in order to seize power within his own society, as a response to the repression he suffered in heterosexual, revolutionary society.\(^{113}\)

*Babalaos* have acted much the same as Diego in the revolutionary period. Because the male homosexual served as the ultimate embodiment of capital decadence and weakness, or, in revolutionary terms gusanera (parasitical class, those opposed to the revolution), and Ocha-Ifá was often linked to homosexuality in revolutionary discourse, especially if a practitioner committed a crime, babalaos have vociferously denied homosexuals and insisted that only real, macho, heterosexual men can become babalaos. This claim, however tenuous, removes them from the gusanera and, because Ocha never adopted this absolutist stance, promotes Ifá and the babalao as the morally superior religion of African origin.

In Ocha the character or behaviour of a homosexual man was the most frequently cited element determining his participation among the practitioners I interviewed. All the men, including gay men, insisted that an individual’s behaviour in society was very important in determining his level of participation, and acceptance in Ocha. Joel, the

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babalocha from Matanzas, insisted for example that intimacy belonged behind closed doors whether the people involved were hetero or homosexual. Heterosexual practitioners had more difficulty articulating their opinions. Several, including one woman, insisted that the public behaviour of some gay men with problems relating to or expressing themselves in society had led to generalized negative opinions about gay men. As Quiroga emphasizes in the context of Fresa y chocolate, “that type of gay man who is properly called a “homosexual” (as opposed to faggots, queens, and the like, Diego explains) and who presents the revolution with no other problems…” than the fact that he has sex with men, “does not defend, but, rather, condemns.” Respect and deference to heterosexuality was an important characteristic for the acceptance of gay practitioners in at least some Ocha houses. Only when I asked specifically about lesbians did practitioners think about their role or limitations in Ocha. Whether or not lesbians were accepted in Ocha, practitioners insisted that their subject positions as women, not as lesbians, served to limit their role in Ocha.

Although babalaoS always insist that they will not initiate gay men and that gay men cannot be babalaoS, for whatever reason they prefer to give, Tomás Fernández Robaina has noted that there are some homosexual babalaoS who were initiated as children before their sexual orientation was known. They may face discrimination from other babalaoS, but, having learned the odú of Ifá and all the rituals and ceremonies, they continue to function as babalaoS. The fact that individuals who became babalaoS

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114 For example María Dolores Pereira, Juan Garcia, and Kimbo. Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007.


before their homosexuality was known to their peers can continue to practice as *babalao* with no ritual repercussions, supports an argument for a socially constructed intolerance of homosexuality rather than a religious tradition that did not include it, or, more specifically, excluded it. There is no real ritual evidence preventing either homosexual men or women from being initiated to Ifá, it is a purely Cuban invention emerging from a particular historical conjuncture.

If Ifá represents masculinity and heterosexuality, Ocha serves as its foil in popular perceptions of ritual practice. Because men who can, increasingly move from other religions of African origin, including Ocha, to Ifá, a ritual tendency to feminize Ocha has emerged in the past two decades. Not only do women dominate among practitioners, they can also hold high positions within ritual practice, such as *oriaté* (in some traditions), that women in Ifá generally cannot (the exception being Betancourt’s *casa templo*). Gay men can also aspire to the position of *oriaté*, meaning that they can direct ceremonies, initiations, and can even control possession based on their skill in assessing a particular event. Like women, gay men are prevented from touching or playing the *batá* or trio of sacred drums that opens a ceremony. The position of the *babalao* is the only one allegedly available exclusively to heterosexual men that provides them with a high degree of prestige and authority.

There are three main philosophies practitioners and researchers use to support the argument that Ocha was feminized in the past several decades. First, Ocha is seen as

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118 The Havana-based practitioners I spoke with did not recognize female *oriatés*, except in the history of Ocha, whereas Matanzas-based practitioners insisted that it was something to which men and women could aspire.
more democratic because anyone can be initiated to Ocha; it does not discriminate. If an
orisha chooses an individual that individual must devote his or her life to it because only
tragedy can come from ignoring the orishas. Additionally, in spite of a general lack of
societal acceptance of homosexuality, Ocha and even Ifá believe in the destiny of one’s
ori, or head. The head was made by Orula and individuals must follow the destiny of
their orí, even if it does not correspond to their physical form. If an individual is
homosexual he/she must be true to him/herself. While in theory practitioners can refuse
to initiate an individual if they so choose (and babalaoas outright refuse to do so), leaving
that person free to find another casa templo, most practitioners insist that if the orisha has
chosen someone that individual cannot be turned away.

The second reason researchers more than practitioners attribute femininity to
Ocha is because the orishas possess those initiated to them, mounting or riding the
olorisha, regardless of their gender, making all practitioners at some point assume a
passive, feminine ritual role. Some suggest that women are more susceptible and
adapted to possession, although the orishas possess men as readily as women. Lourdes
Argüelles and B. Ruby Rich argue, for example, that because the orishas arbitrarily
“mount” practitioners, Santería was and still is a form of gender transcendence. While
it is true that practitioners identify their personality or behaviour with their orisha

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119 This is the opinion of literally every practitioner I have talked to.

120 I have heard versions of this explanation from several practitioners over the last decade. It corresponds
to some degree to the Ifá story regarding homosexuality in Espinosa and Piñero’s book.

121 Mary Ann Clark subscribes to this view. Where Men Are Wives and Mothers Rule: Santería Ritual
Practices and their Gender Implications, 43.

122 Lourdes Argüelles and B. Ruby Rich, “Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes toward and
cabecera, none of the practitioners with whom I have spoken in Cuba identified themselves specifically with the gender of their orisha cabecera. One of the questions I asked all of my informants was, “Who is your orisha cabecera and what is he/she like?” They all responded by telling me about their orisha cabecera, the various caminos that orisha had and in what way they were like that orisha. None of the women initiated to masculine orishas presented or identified themselves as masculine, nor did the men initiated to feminine orishas present or identify themselves as feminine. Perhaps coincidentally, two gay practitioners I interviewed had female orishas as their orisha cabecera and identified elements of their personality with those orishas, but as with the practitioners identifying as heterosexual, they did not view the orishas’ gender or personality as having anything to do with their sexuality. One gay man initiated to Ochún made a point of telling me that his orisha cabecera could be violent and destructive in a certain camino.

Furthermore, I have seen orishas possess people of different genders, witnessing for example a gay man suddenly become the angry, macho orisha of lightening, Changó, and a petite woman transform into the trickster orisha Eleggua. Observing the man and woman before and after the orishas had left them, it was obvious that neither of these people behaved remotely like their orisha cabecera in the secular world – both were calm, subdued and sober individuals while not under the influence of their orishas. Transcendence, therefore, might be better explained as a transcendence of the secular,


125 I witnessed these two possessions during a fiesta de Santa Barbara in Matanzas’ barrio la Marina in December 2007.
day to day world that may include gender constraints, but could also include liberating practitioners from other constraints within society or the family.

Ironically, in spite of the assumption that a practitioner’s *orisha cabecera* will possess him or her from time to time, heterosexual men actively avoid possession if they have a female *orisha cabecera*. Cuban researcher Fernández Robaina has conducted extensive interviews with practitioners and attended numerous ceremonies in the last several decades both as a practitioner and researcher, but has never witnessed a female *orisha* possess a heterosexual man. Some of my informants in Matanzas, however, claimed to have witnessed female *orishas* “mount” heterosexual men without calling into question their sexuality. Kimbo saw possession as proof that the *orisha* attached to the practitioner was appropriate and Joel saw the aversion heterosexual men had to possession by a female *orisha* as a phenomenon specific to Havana, where Ifá and communication with the *orishas* via an oracle are more popular than communication via possession. In fact, several of my informants from Matanzas cited the dominance of Ifá and the *babalao* in Havana as the main reason for the difference in ritual practice between Matanzas and Havana.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has examined some of the ritual innovation and invention that one Havana-based *babalao* embarked on during Cuba’s Special Period. Although in many respects the changes Victor Betancourt introduced to the practice of Ocha-Ifá in his *casa*

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templo were the result of self-directed research and reflection on a religious tradition he inherited from his African ancestors, the impact of the Cuban Revolution, especially the Special Period is evident in the products of that research.

Cubans of African descent were disproportionately impacted by the Special Period, not because the Revolution had failed to eliminate the structural basis of racism that limited their opportunities, but because it had failed to eliminate the social basis of racism that enabled racist attitudes to endure in private. Silencing the discussion on race enabled their preservation. This preservation of racist attitudes that found Cubans of African descent unattractive, lascivious or backward contributed to renewed structural inequality as Cubans scrambled to acquire the hard currency increasingly necessary for day to day survival. One or all of the above stereotypes excluded Cubans of African descent from working in the tourist sector, leading many to turn to alternative activities.

Betancourt’s appropriation of negative stereotypes, such as brujería and simple initiation procedures was empowering. It enabled him to make Ocha-Ifá more inclusive for Cuban practitioners, under circumstances in which high prices and complex rituals served to limit the participation of Cubans of African descent in the rituals of their ancestors. The inclusion of women into what, by the end of the twentieth century, had become an increasingly popular ritual option among men, helped to ensure the continued importance of the role of women in Ocha-Ifá, even as that role remained ambiguous and uneven. Continued hostility toward homosexuality, however, reveals the impact of revolutionary ideology among those Cubans who gained the most during the Revolution. The babalao’s refusal to open their office to those who once formed part of the gusanera in revolutionary discourse reveals, however, a desire to maintain their hard won superior
position in the religious hierarchy, rather than a lack of desire to challenge societal views on homosexuality.

Perhaps the area in which Betancourt has been most successful was in calling attention to racial discrimination, without actually naming it. Cuba, not Africa, had a rich tradition of orisha worship that would be lost if contemporary practitioners forgot where they came from. Certainly this called attention to a particular race and the particular circumstances that transplanted that race to Cuba from Africa, but it was anything but separatist. Cubans of African descent were Cubans who had inherited a particular set of beliefs and practices from their African ancestors, but they were disconnected from contemporary African practice. Cuba, not Africa, provided continuity – that was where the past, and future, of Ocha-Ifá lay.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

In Ángeles Street one night we had a drumming ceremony and someone reported us. It’s true that we were drumming until 3 or 4 in the morning and nothing happened. Days later I ran into a friend in the street who was coincidentally speaking with the sector chief [of police] and he introduced me, and the officer says to me, “So you’re the famous Victor, the one with the drums the other night. I tried to send three patrol cars. The first, crashed; the second, we couldn’t find the keys for the ignition and the third got a flat tire. Right there I said: leave this man with his drums.”

In July 2006 Fidel Castro turned over leadership of Cuba to his brother Raúl and underwent surgery for an undisclosed illness. In Havana and Matanzas practitioners of Ocha-Ifá carried out sacrifices to Olokún, the orisha of the deep sea, in a quest to save his life. Olokún is a very powerful orisha, called upon only in times of great suffering and need. It is believed that Olokún has the power to cure even the most serious illness. Victor Betancourt Estrada, a babalao popularly believed to be critical of the Cuban Revolution and the government, was one of the babalao who led a ceremony at the edge of the sea to ask Olokún’s to spare Fidel Castro’s life. He wanted “hacer un llamado de súplica para convocar Olokun, divinidad de los mares, y pedirle que no haya calamidades y que se reponga tanto el comandante como todo aquel que se encuentre

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1 En la calle Ángeles una noche dimos un tambor y alguien nos denunció. Verdad es que llegamos hasta las 3 o las 4 de la mañana tocando y no pasó nada. Días después me encontré en la calle con un amigo que casualmente estaba hablando con el jefe de sector y me lo presenta, y entonces el policía me dice “Así que tú eres el famoso Victor, el del tambor la otra noche. Trató de mandar tres carros patrulleros. El primero, chocó; el segundo, no aparecieron las llaves para arrancarlo y el tercero se ponchó. Ahí mismo dije: deja a ese tipo con su tambor.” Victor Betancourt Estrada quoted in Rogelio Fabio Hurtado, “El poder de Olokún,” Consenso 5, 3 October 2006, available from www.desdecuba.com/10/articles/1_01.shtml, internet; accessed 15 May 2009.
enfermo [to make a request to call on Olokún, deity of the seas, and ask that there not be disasters and for the recovery of el comandante and any other sick person].”

In Matanzas, Mercedes Valdez and her husband Pedro García asked for Obatalá’s help in saving Fidel Castro’s life. Like many Cubans, Mercedes believed that Fidel had been initiated to Obatalá, the orisha of wisdom: calling on Fidel’s orisha cabecera was one way to request that his life be spared. Mercedes and Pedro also sacrificed to Olokún because “en el agua nace todo; porque sin agua no hay vida [in the water everything is born; because without water this is no life].” Mercedes and Pedro qualified their actions, however. Pedro’s explanation for his offering to Olokún in exchange for Fidel Castro’s health was as follows: “Si eres humanista, como el gobernante y, sin embargo, hoy en día, no has dado otra luz, otra enseñanza, otra doctrina... nosotros no le guardamos rencores. Entonces estamos haciendo lo mismo que hizo Jesús Cristo cuando Judás lo traicionó...[If you are a humanist, like the leader and, nonetheless, today, you haven’t given other light, other teaching, another doctrine….we don’t have any resentment toward him. So we are doing the same thing that Jesus Christ did when Judas betrayed him…].” Who exactly the Judas is in this scenario is unclear from Pedro’s analogy; however, it clearly indicates that he did not wish to use his religion against Fidel Castro, as the revolutionary government had frequently charged forty years before. Pedro does suggest that el comandante may have failed to live up to his own goals in some way, but, nonetheless, deserved his respect and support.

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Issues of race, religion, gender and politics in Cuba have been the focus of considerable historical research at different periods of the Cuban Revolution. Many of these works have addressed religions of African origin and their practitioners in some form, but few have made the religions of African origin the central concern. I have concentrated on practitioners of Ocha-Ifá to analyse the ways in which Cubans of African descent used their religion during the twentieth century to express identity and belonging in a nation that has only partially lived up to its claims of racial democracy. Rather than viewing practitioners as victims of Cuban nationhood, I argue that they negotiated with and manipulated dominant discourses and policies concerning race, religion, culture and citizenship in their quest to preserve their African heritage.

At the time of Cuba’s independence from Spain, the Cuban elite and US occupying forces viewed the religious and cultural practices of Cubans of African descent through different lenses. Where Cubans generally believed they were harmless amusements, US administrators viewed them as proof of an uncivilized people incapable of self-government. Those Cubans of African descent who did not choose assimilation to white society found themselves in conflict with elite goals to prove their civilization to foreign occupying forces. In Havana and Matanzas, where Ocha-Ifá was particularly strong, practitioners used the state apparatus to continue practicing their religion, exercise and sometimes defend their rights as Cuban citizens, and create their own identities in the emerging nation. Yoruba orisha worship and oracular divination, inherited from and transformed by the transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery in Cuba, functioned as one of the most enduring, for the most part, race-based forms of political organization in the island. In the casa templos, practitioners worshiped African orishas, honoured
African ancestors, and worked out the ways in which their religious beliefs, practices and heritage simultaneously informed and challenged national identity.

Because this study has focused on practitioners of Ocha-Ifá, it deals only tangentially with elites or government officials. There is abundant historical material documenting elite and government activity and thought, and many researchers have reconstructed their past. 4 Less well documented, but similarly visible in historical records are the activities of elite Cubans of African descent; those who were educated and assimilated, to varying degrees, into white society. 5 Practitioners of religions of African origin were often the most marginalized of the population of African descent and were more likely to be illiterate than Cubans of African descent who chose some degree of assimilation. The historical records they left are, therefore, sparse and usually constructed by non-practitioner scribes or government officials the first half of the twentieth century.

Early Republican governments used José Martí’s myth of racial democracy to absolve themselves of responsibilities to Cubans of African descent. Because white and black men had fought together and spilled their blood as brothers in the common cause of Cuban independence from Spain there was no need to speak of black or white, only

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Cuban. But in not speaking of black or white, culture was introduced as the code for African or African descent and became the trope for elite anxiety. If Cubans could not imitate their US protectors on racial or ethnic terms, they could at least attempt to imitate them in the cultural forms they chose to express and patronize. African drumming, dancing and religious worship would not convince US officials, anxiously awaiting an opportunity to intervene in Cuban domestic affairs, that Cubans were capable of self government. For Cuban elites, suppressing and prohibiting African-derived cultural practices was a gesture aimed at proving they could create a civilized society.

White elites were not the only ones attempting to purge Cuban society of African cultural elements. Cubans of African descent who attempted to assimilate to white society also rebuked those of African descent who continued to practice religions of African origin, sometimes reporting them to law enforcement authorities. Practitioners of Ocha-Ifá used the means at their disposal, including the state apparatus, to continue worshipping their orishas, challenge unfair treatment, and avoid detection. To practitioners of religions of African origin there was no contradiction in being a responsible citizen and worshiping the orishas. Religious belief and practice guided Africans and their descendents through prescriptive and proscriptive measures in the same way republican laws and punishment sought to regulate the behaviour of Cuban citizens. Although archival documentation from the first part of the twentieth century is inconsistent and incomplete, and in most cases practitioners living at the time have since passed away, it is still possible to recreate the specific context in which religions of

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African origin functioned. Further archival work in provincial archives, which have been underutilized by researchers, may help to fill out the picture. An examination of provincial newspapers and police records would also shift the focus of study from Havana to other regions, eliciting regional responses to local governments’ application of the law.

Although this study focuses on Ocha-Ifá during the Cuban Revolution, I have chosen not to assign a special or unique character to either the revolutionary government or revolutionary ideology. I agree with much of the literature on this period that the Revolution was indeed revolutionary and unique in many social, political and economic respects, but with regard to religions of African origin the revolutionary government followed patterns of treatment and behaviour that were established well before the 1959 triumph of the insurgents from the Sierra Maestra. Government officials supplemented these theories with Soviet ideology that further discriminated against practitioners of religions of African origin.

José Martí’s myth of racial democracy assumed new salience in the context of the Cuban Revolution that required a united front to face the challenges of a hostile US and a domestic population unaccustomed to equality, but it remained a response to an old problem – how to convince Cuba’s racially and ethnically diverse population that they belonged to the same nation and had the same responsibilities for maintaining it. Late twentieth century struggles for supremacy in Ocha-Ifá led to creative application of racial democracy to ritual practice. Some practitioners equated religious practice with race and ethnicity, further blurring the lines of identity. Others argued for the truly Cuban
character of the religion as a result of continued social, cultural and racial tension, expanding the terms of the debate.

The continued privileging of European-derived culture over African-derived culture, however, was one factor that enabled the continuance of racism. Early republican governments and elites viewed all religions of African origin as superstitions that would be eliminated through modernization and education. This failure to recognize religions of African origin as religious traditions on par with Christianity, enabled intellectuals to both label them as atavistic and proof that Cubans of African descent were at risk of reverting to a “primitive state.” The showcasing of religions of African origin for their folkloric value continued to view the religious and cultural practices of Cubans of African descent as survivals that would disappear in a modern, technically oriented society. This view did not recognize religions like Ocha-Ifá as living traditions capable of adapting and responding to changing social or political circumstances – it perpetuated the belief that Cubans practicing the religions were backward and ignorant, in need of education and support that revolutionary society could provide. It was not until 1991 that the Cuban state officially recognized religions of African origin as religions as valuable and problematic as any other major world religious tradition.

Because researchers often assume that all Cuban governments had a negative impact on practitioners of religions of African origin, they tend to overlook or ignore the ways in which practitioners appropriated state ideology and discourse for their own purposes. Practitioners of Ocha-Ifá, in their struggle to pursue their religion, were also shaped by the very forces whose impact on their lives they sought to contain and

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8 Much of Fernando Ortiz’ work subscribes to this view, but his first publication contains the seeds for his later hypotheses. *Hampa afro-cubana. Los negros brujos (apuntes para un estudio de etnologia criminal)* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1973).
minimize. State accusations that their beliefs contributed to “prácticas contra la moral,” which I have suggested referred to what elites considered obscene, sexually explicit bodily movements during religious ceremonies, led to the re-evaluation of ritual practices. There is no evidence to indicate that Ifá prohibited the initiation of homosexual men until at least the 1940s, but it was prohibited more clearly by the 1980s.  

Although the revolutionary government used the figure of the male homosexual as a trope for all elements of culture and society it rejected in a quest to build socialism, there was an existing body of literature linking religions of African origin to sexual deviance.  

The folding of homosexuality into concepts of capitalist decadence and counterrevolutionary activity, however, meant that if male practitioners did not want to be categorized as such, they had to prove their virility. Practitioners of Ifá absorbed and utilized revolutionary discourse and ideology to prohibit the initiation of gay men, first, to prove their manliness and, second, to prove that they were not acting against the Revolution. By the late 1990s, however, through the efforts of Vilma Espin, and later her daughter Mariela Castro, Cubans began to debate the issue of homosexuality in Cuban society. Mariela Castro promoted rights for homosexuals, as well as transvestites, bisexuals, and transgender Cubans through the Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual (CENESEX). As of 2009, Cuba is on the verge of creating legislation to allow for same-

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9 David H. Brown argues that the prohibition against homosexuality in Ifá emerged in the 1940s, although there is no real evidence of it at that time. Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 88.

sex marriage. How practitioners of Ifá will respond to these developments is difficult to predict, but changed societal attitudes will certainly be incorporated into ritual practices and beliefs to ensure the continuation of African tradition in Cuba.

Absorption of revolutionary discourse did not necessarily have a negative impact on practitioners. Victor Betancourt’s appropriation of revolutionary discourse and ideology led him to research and revive religious practices known to exist only in Cuba. It also enabled him to recognize that women were capable of conducting religious activities that were previously the exclusive domain of men. Most practitioners, whether they consciously identified with the Cuban Revolution, or not, used the discourse of revolutionary morality to both lend legitimacy to their practices and criticize the practices of others. Being honest, working hard, respecting one’s country and its people, and being a responsible parent were frequently cited in letras del año or in interviews with practitioners as proper religious conduct. These were the same basic morals the revolutionary regime had tried to instill in its citizens.

Where most researchers cite the onset of the Special Period in 1990 and/or the IV Party Congress as the catalyst for both a relaxation of state policy concerning religion and large numbers of initiations to Ocha-Ifá in the 1990s, I am more skeptical of this claim. The presentation of Ocha-Ifá to the public as folklore in the 1960s and 1970s created a broader understanding of the religion in society helping to eliminate some of the fear.


non-practitioners traditionally felt towards it. Closer contact between practitioners and non-practitioners in neighbourhoods and the workplace also facilitated more intimate understandings and appreciations for a religious practice that had provoked fear in Cuban society for decades. Cubans from diverse sectors of society, therefore, had more knowledge and understanding of Ocha-Ifá by 1990 than at any other time in Cuba’s history. While my research focused primarily on Cubans of African descent with family histories of Ocha-Ifá, some of my informants indicated that either they, or people they knew, were initiated because initiation was a logical solution to problems they experienced at certain moments in their lives. Without family histories of ritual practice, both greater knowledge and greater societal acceptance of Ocha-Ifá were what led some people to seek the help of a babalao or orishasha. Further interviews with practitioners who approached the religion from this position could help to tease out this phenomenon of the 1990s.

Where the Cuban Revolution achieved success with regard to religions of African origin, however, was in its contribution to working to decrease the fear and superstition many Cubans felt toward religions of African origins. Success can be attributed not only to the revolutionary government for promoting African-derived culture, but also to the intellectuals who, misguided or not, sought to preserve what they considered African cultural survivals as part of the national heritage. Most did not realize that African-derived religious and cultural practices existed, not because they were survivals, but because they were living cultural practices, infused with significance and purpose by contemporary practitioners who were the true educators of their religious and cultural practices, as much through what they revealed as what they chose not to reveal.
In focusing on practitioners of Ocha-Ifá in Havana and Matanzas this dissertation has offered a regionally-diverse analysis of the uneasy relationship between practitioners and twentieth century Cuban governments, which suggests that both groups contested and incorporated elements of the other into their practices. In the middle were liberal intellectuals who had their own agendas, but nonetheless contributed in important ways to exposing broader sectors of Cuban society to the religious beliefs and practices of a significant minority of the population. These joint state-intellectual-practitioner efforts to educate Cubans about their African history were the most successful during the Cuban Revolution, in spite of the introduction of some most repressive legislation to curb its growth. By the beginning of the twenty-first century Cubans were a very different people, politically, culturally, and socially, than they were in 1959. This is perhaps why, in 2006, these ambiguous identities and metaphoric challenges to state authorities led “the famous Victor” to suggest that the orishas had intervened in the material world to enable his drumming ceremony. In spite of complaints from neighbours, the police were not willing to go to all lengths to enforce the law; they would apply it at their discretion.
Glossary

Ajé – witch.

Abakuá – a religion or secret society composed exclusively of men originating with the Calabar or Caribalí.

Aché – spiritual power.

Agayú Solá – the orisha of the volcano, father of Changó. Linked to San Cristóbal in the Catholic pantheon.

Ahijado(a) – literally godchild but is the term applied to an individual initiated by a babalao, iyaloche or babalocha. It creates a family bond and links individuals through ritual ties.

Aleyo – a non-initiated person who may or may not have a considerable amount of knowledge of Ocha-Ifá and may or may not participate in some ceremonies.

Apeterbi – the female assistant to a babalao. Must be initiate of Yemayá or Ochún, depending on the tradition.

Awo – a diviner, male.

Babalao, babalawo – Is the diviner of Ifá that interprets the oracle.

Babalocha – literally “father of the orisha.” An individual initiated to an orisha.

Babaluyé – the orisha of pestilence, plagues and contagious diseases. Is linked in the Catholic pantheon with San Lázaro.

Batá – trio of sacred drums used to open a religious ceremony.

Bembe – a drumming ceremony

Cabildo, cabildo de nación – organizations of Africans based on ethnic identity in the colonial period. The Spanish intended to use the cabildos as a way to keep African ethnic groups separated so they would not rebel at the same time as they were to learn about Christianity.

Casa templo – a private house dedicated to religious activities. Emerged out of the cabildo tradition.
Changó – the orisha of lightening. Represents chaos, disaster, and war and is associated with the colours red and white. Is linked to Santa Bárbara in the Catholic pantheon. Also recognized as the first diviner of the Ifá oracle.

Collar – necklace of coloured beads representing a particular orisha.

Comparsa – a costumed musical group that traditionally performed during Carnival.

Congo – a name given to a variety of ethnic groups originating in the area of West Africa now known as Angola. Bantú speakers.

Dahomey – contemporary Benin. In Cuba Africans from this region were known as Arará

Egba – Yoruba ethnic group dominated by the Oyó Empire by the eighteenth century

Eguado – also Egbado in Cuba. A Yoruba ethnic group dominated by the Oyó Empire by the eighteenth century

Egun – the ancestors, the dead.

Elegua – an orisha, represents destiny, the opening and closing of roads, is associated with the colours red and black. Is sometimes linked to El Niño de Atocha in the Catholic pantheon, in other cases is linked to San Antonio.

Gangá – refers to several ethnic groups originating in contemporary Sierra Leone and Liberia

Gélèdé – a secret society of ajés or witches that can do good or bad, depending on their will.

Guerreros – four orishas received before the tutelary orisha in initiation to Ocha consisting of Eleggua, Ogún, Osaín and Osún.

Hijo(a) of orisha – popular term to describe an individual’s relationship to his/her tutelary orisha.

Ife – a Yoruba city, was once a kingdom, perhaps the first of the Yoruba kingdoms. Ifá divination originates there.

Iyalorisha – a female practitioner of Ocha, literally “mother of the orisha.”

Iyami – means “my mother” and can refer to Iya Nla, Odú and Yemayá
Iya Nla – means “mother of all” and refers to Odú

Iyaonifa – literally means “mother of the oracle” and is the recently created female version of Ifa.

Iyawó – “wife” in the Yoruba language but used in Cuba to indicate a newly initiated person up to one year following initiation.

Lucumí – a nineteenth century term for Yoruba preferred by some throughout the twentieth century to identify the religion and/or the people.

Madrina – literally godmother is the iyalocha involved in initiating and educating a new initiate to Ocha

Mandinga – a term applied to slaves originating in contemporary Senegal of multiple ethnicities.

Mano de Orula – the hand of Orula. Usually given to practitioners initiated in an Ifá-centric organization and indicates a ritual link to a babalao.

Mayombé – a religion of Bantú origin, related to Palo Monte

Ñañigo – an initiate of the Abakuá society.

Obatalá – an orisha, son of Olodumare, credited with creating the earth, is associated with the colour white. Is sometimes linked to la Virgen de las Mercedes in the Catholic pantheon and forms a trinity with Olodumare and Olofí in which Obatalá is the “son.”

Ocha – or Regla de Ocha. The rule of the orisha. Yoruba in origin.

Ochún – the orisha of fresh water, honey and love. Is associated with the colours yellow and white and is linked to the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre in the Catholic pantheon.

Odú, Odúa, Odudúa – capitalized it is the orisha credited with giving birth to the original sixteen Yoruba tribes or kingdoms. It is also the Ifa oracle that communicates with the babalao. Is usually female but can be male.

odú – the myths of Ifa that correspond to certain patterns created by throwing the kola nuts, cowrie shells or ekpele. There are sixteen major odu and 256 in total.

Ogún – the orisha of iron, war. Is linked to San Juan in the Catholic pantheon.

Okpele – divining chain used in Ifá divination.
Olodumáre – the orisha credited with creating the world and then stepping back, allowing the other orishas to interact with human beings. He is often equated with God in Christianity.

Olofí, Olofin – material and spiritual authority enabling a babalao to found his own branch of Ifá.

Olokún – the orisha of the deep sea. Is not linked directly to a Catholic saint, but is sometimes associated with Yemayá.

Olorisha – an individual, male or female, initiated to Ocha.

Ooni – spiritual leader of the Yoruba. Ife-centric.

Ori – Yoruba word meaning “head.”

Oriaté, Obá Oriaté – a master of ceremonies, the man or woman who directs a given initiation or celebration.

Orisha – also oricha. The Cuban-Yoruba term for deity.

Orunmila, Orula – the orisha who speaks via the tablero, ekuele and kola nuts; the interpreter of the oracle of Ifá.

Oyó – a Yoruba city and/or ethnic group. Was the last of the Yoruba Empires to collapse around 1830.

Padrino – literally godfather is the babalao or babalocha involved in initiating and educating a new initiate to Ocha or Ifá.

Palero(a) – a practitioner of Palo Monte.

Palo Monte – a religion of Bantu origin.

Patakines – an Ocha myth or story.

Plante – an Abakuá ceremony.

Prenda – a talisman or object thought to protect an individual or bring good fortune.

Rayado – literally cut. Initiates to Palo Monte have their heads cut in certain places to enable the deity to enter them.

Santería – also known as Ocha-Ifá but sometimes includes all religions of African origin.

Santero(a) – practitioner of Santería.
Santo lavado – receiving, rather than being initiated directly to an orisha. The orisha is not placed on the head as in a direct initiation.

Son – a secular musical style of African origin originally popular among Cubans of African descent but later diluted and accepted more broadly in Cuban society.

Yemayá – the orisha of salt water, motherhood and healing. Is linked to the Virgen de Regla in the Catholic pantheon.

Yoruba – the ethnic group occupying the south-west portion of contemporary Nigeria.
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