

Afro-American Religion and Oracles: *Santeria* in Cuba

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the island of Cuba underwent a surging economic expansion based on increased production of sugar. At the same time the Yoruba people of what is present-day Nigeria were waging a series of disastrous wars with their neighbors and among themselves. Prisoners of these wars were sold in huge numbers to European slave traders and hundreds of thousands of Yoruba were brought to Cuba to labor in the new sugar mills.¹ Yet despite the atrocious conditions of the Middle Passage, and the disorientations of plantation slavery, the Yoruba were able to reconstitute their identity and equilibrium by means of their religious practices. The transplanted practices were gradually adapted to complement and reflect the Roman Catholicism of the Spanish colonies. The resulting tradition came to be known as *santeria*, the cult of the saints.² In order to assess the role of African religion in the make-up of Afro-American religion it would be useful to develop a way to distinguish African from European religion. I think that the best way to do this is to examine the ritual side of a religion: what I am calling the ritual approach. A ritual approach is the way a people "go about" their religion, the way they put it into practice. To paraphrase Anthony Wallace, a ritual approach is what accomplishes what a religion sets out to do.³ This is a loose distinction, valuable, I think, because it is more useful and interesting than the traditional ways of dealing with the African religious inheritance in the Americas. If it is truly useful it should have applications to other Afro-American religious traditions. To begin to explore these possibilities we can begin with a very brief sketch of *santeria*.

In the mythology of *santeria* each human being before he is born chooses a destiny. It is not a limited predetermination of particular events, but rather a range of possibilities suited to every personality. When an individual comes into the world it is his responsibility to achieve the most that is possible within that destiny and that requires a relationship with the

¹T. J. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labors in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849-1856*. London, Frank Cass and Co., 1968, p. 113. Cf. Roland Oliver and J. D. Fage, *A Short History of Africa*. Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1962, p. 158. Also Phillip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*. Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1969, p. 260.

²William R. Bascom, "The Focus of Cuban Santeria." *Journal of Southwestern Anthropology*. Vol. 6, No. 1, (1950), pp. 64-68.

³Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological View*. New York, Random House, 1966, p. 102.

*Dr. Murphy is in the Department of Religion, Temple University.

spirits. One may live one's destiny with *ache*, power, or one may be the victim of it. The spirits are the forces of *ache* that allow one to achieve the full potential of one's destiny. To accomplish this an individual must know his destiny and the will of the spirits.

Santeria is a religion of oracles. Its worship is structured upon seeking the guidance of spirits in meeting the ordinary problems of life. To actually practice *santeria* one must have specific information about what the spirit may desire in order that he may grant the favors that one seeks of him. An oracle is a system of communication between gods and men.⁴ In *santeria* the information that details the desires of the spirits may be acquired in two ways. One may consult the spirit directly when he is incarnate in a human medium, or one may consult *Ifa*, the language of destiny. These two kinds of oracle are marked by different priesthoods: that of mediumship and that of divination. We will discuss each in turn.

THE ORACLE AS MEDIUM: THE BABALOCHA/IYALOKHA PRIESTHOOD

In this system, the spirit speaks through a medium in possession trance. The spirits are called *ocha* in the Afro-Cuban language, *lucumi*; and *santos* in Spanish. They are invisible personalities far more powerful than men, but they are not omnipotent. Like all life forces they must be continually nourished. A Lucumi proverb says that without men there would be no *ocha*. The spirits need the praises and sacrifices of men to continue to be effective.

The *babalocha/iyalocha* (*baba* = father, *iya* = mother) are priests of the spirits.⁵ They are fathers and mothers of the human children of the spirits because they are the senior members of the cult community. They are also fathers and mothers of the spirits themselves because they give birth to the spirits in this world through their bodies. The *santeros* say that the spirits mount their mediums like a rider on a horse.⁶ The spirit rides the medium at various ceremonial occasions, called by his favorite drum-beats, dances and foods. The *babalocha/iyalocha* offer their mediumist skills for the benefit of the community. Through them the spirit may prophesy, expose discord or immorality, or harangue the community for its failures to pay him sufficient worship. In all cases he gives the community direct and specific information on how to best make use of his efficacy.

Most studies of spirit possession have interpreted the phenomenon as either a kind of psychological experience or social compensation for economic deprivation.⁷ Both of these approaches, I think, denigrate

⁴William R. Bascom, "Two Forms of Afro-Cuban Divination." *Acculturation in the Americas*. Sol Tax ed. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1952, pp. 169-179. Cf: William R. Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1969.

⁵Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte*. Miami, Ediciones Universal, 1975, p. 18, 39. Cf: Roger Bastide, *African Religions in the New World*. New York, Harper and Row, 1972, p. 118.

⁶Cabrera, *El Monte*, pp. 30-31.

⁷Vincent Crapanzano and Vivian Garrison eds., *Case Studies in Spirit Possession*. New York, John Wiley and Sons, 197_. Felicitas Goodman, Jeanette H. Henney, and Esther

possession behavior because they disregard the native point of view. The *santeros* are unconcerned with the experience of possession, which in their view is nonexistent, and quite intent on the messages from the incarnate spirits. The theory that spirit possession compensates for social and economic deprivation also lacks the check of the native point of view. A *santero* may well ask: are not the economically privileged, with their popular culture, compensating for their ignorance of the spirits as much as the *santeros*, with their *santeria*, compensating for their economic deprivation? From the point of view of the *santeros*, the *babalocha/iyalocha* are not having experiences but providing service to the spirits and to the community. Through the elaborate scenario of possession ceremony, they are providing a system of communication and an oracular ritual approach between gods and men.

*THE ORACLE AS DIVINATION:
THE BABALAO PRIESTHOOD*

In this system, rather than the dialogic oracle of mediumship, destiny speaks through its appropriate language, a geomantic system of communication known generically as *Ifa*. Orula is the spirit of *Ifa*: he represents destiny, order and the cosmic workings of fate. Orula does not mount his priests, but rather speaks through *Ifa*. The *babalao* is a priest of Orula, he can speak the geomantic language of *Ifa* and interpret it for those who consult him.⁸ The *babalao* has a clientele who seek him out when they are confronted with a problem or a prospect which requires an understanding of destiny. For the *santero* it may be any kind of problem: a recurring sickness, a difficult pregnancy, a decision to be made about moving or taking a new job. Any kind of activity where the knowledge of the possibilities of destiny and the aid of the spirits is important. The querent comes to the *babalao* and asks *Ifa* for guidance. An answer is received which the querent and the *babalao* interpret together. The *babalao* then prescribes the offering necessary to achieve the optimal result in accordance with destiny and the will of the relevant spirits. Through *Ifa* the *babalao* perceives the destiny of the querent and thus can discern the origins of his present problem and the means for its solution.

Ifa speaks directly to the situation of the querent through the random fall of shells. For the *santero* it is this very randomness which accounts for the accuracy of the *Ifa* system. It is based on the assumption that what is entirely random, beyond the intention and control of man, is the truest expression of fate. Pure chance, uncontaminated with human motive, is pure fate. *Ifa* is based on a heads/tails principle. The method most in use by the *babalao*s is a chain called an *ekwele*. The *ekwele* is about 4-5 feet long with eight curved pieces of gourd shell mounted on swivels at regular intervals. The chain is grasped in the middle and dropped on a surface so

Pressel, *Trance, Healing, and Hallucination: Three Field Studies in Religious Experience*. New York, John Wiley and Sons, 1974. I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*. Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1971.

⁸Bascom, "Two Forms . . ."

that the gourd shells reveal either a concave ("heads") or a convex ("tails") side uppermost. The resulting combination yields one of 256 possible combinations called *ordun*.

Each *ordun* refers to a series of verses in the lucumi language which details the archetypal activities of the spirits in mythic times. In the *ordun* verses, the spirits are presented with problems for which they consult *Ifa*, and are given the sacrificial information necessary to resolve the problem. The *babalao* and the querent review the verses together to decide their relevance to the querent's particular problem. The oracle is questioned further for affirmative or negative answers to qualifications of the archetypal situation. The *babalao* then prescribes the relevant sacrifices for the querent's particular interpretation of the situation. The *babalao* must commit to memory a huge amount of material and exercise keen insight into his client's personality in order to adapt the mythical archetypes to the particular problems of his clients.

The approaches of the medium and the diviner are related by their oracular basis. To marshal the support of the spirits for a particular situation the *santero* must have particular knowledge of what the spirit wants. Oracles provide this information and thus make the operation of the religious system possible. The *santero* would remind us that no oracle is foolproof. In spirit possession the medium must be particularly receptive or all kinds of static will disrupt this tenuous and powerful meeting of sacred and profane worlds. In *Ifa*, though destiny speaks through the universal language of *Ifa*, there are myriad problems of interpretation. Both these kinds of disruption or static in the communication between gods and men are manifestations of the principle of disruption, the spirit *Eleggua*. *Eleggua* is both the gatekeeper of the spirit-world and the brother and constant companion of Orula. He is inseparable from any communication with the spirits, but he represents the unpredictability in any encounter with the divine. Like the Hermes of ancient Greek mythology, *Eleggua* is the messenger of the gods and a notorious liar. No oracle can be one hundred percent accurate unless *Eleggua* is propitiated, and he is never satisfied.

We have discussed two "tracks" of communication in *santeria* and now we can move to the speculative side of the issue. I think that *santeria* is essentially oracular and that it is this feature which distinguishes it from the Roman Catholicism with which it has co-existed. Catholicism, in my view, has been hostile to oracles. With the canonization of scripture and the stabilization of the hierarchy in the second and third centuries, the charismatic elements of the church were suppressed. The period of revelation was closed. Communication between God and man became strictly mediated by an institutionally sanctioned hierarchy of priests.

Within these structures, communication with the divine is quite different from oracular communication. God speaks in scripture, which in Catholicism is interpreted for the laity in sacraments. Whatever communication exists between God and man it is in the once-and-for-all eternity of the sacramental symbol and not in a two-way dialogue relevant to a

particular situation. God has spoken once and for all time. Man may petition God with prayer, but he cannot ask him for a sign.

The folk elements of Catholicism have attended to individual problems more directly. The saint cults provide stereotyped formulae for action for resolving individual problems. Yet even these orthodox devotions provide neither feedback nor options that consider each situation in its specificity. A novena, for example, is only a very general pattern of action for the sacrificial exchange. The *santero* sees specificity as the key to efficacy. He reasons that though the spirit may be supplicated with the orthodox cult, it is the oracle which will reveal what the spirit wants for his favors. In any human relationship of exchange, one offers thoughtful and tangible gifts so that one may receive the same in return: *do ut des*, I give that you may give. Catholicism, as it has generally been practiced, has not provided an open system of communication to particularize and personalize that sacrificial exchange. The Yoruba slaves developed *santeria* in order to keep their sacred African traditions alive; yet it developed the way it did because of its unique oracular approach to the sacred world.

Santeria, like other religions of the Caribbean, has been called syncretistic because it has integrated beliefs inherited from Africa with those of the European slaveholders.⁹ In learning about these religions, most students are troubled by the co-existence of belief systems which appear to be incompatible. The question always arises: how could one claim to be a *santero* and a Catholic at the same time?

The difficulty depends upon how *santeria* and Catholicism are to be distinguished. Is *santeria* to be defined as encompassing the total religious life of those who practice *santeria*, or is its meaning confined to that area of religion which distinguishes santeros from other practitioners of religion in Cuba? I think *santeria* is best distinguished from Roman Catholicism by its fidelity to the Yoruba ritual approach. Where religion in Cuba follows Yoruba ritual models it is *santeria*, where it follows Roman Catholic ones it is Catholicism.

These forms of worship are different approaches to religion. It has been common in Western scholarship to describe a religion in terms of its beliefs. Most descriptions of foreign and nearly every description of *santeria* is a catalogue of the spirits worshipped by its practitioners. These conform to the great Tylorian model of typing religions by the kind of spirits believed in. I don't think that my typology is a revolution in religious science, but I do consider it to be more useful for distinguishing African and European forms of religion.

We have seen that the Yoruba ritual core is oracular and that the Catholic one is not. Can we generalize from the distinctions between the Yoruba and Catholic traditions in Cuba to distinctions between African

⁹Lydia Cabrera, *Yemaya y Ochun*. Miami, Ediciones Universal, 1980, p. 19. Cf: Bastide, *African Civilizations* . . . pp. 153-162.

The Journal of the I.T.C.

and European religious traditions in general? What I have seen of Black holiness services in the United States and *cumina* and Revival Zion in Jamaica, and what I have read about in Haitian *vodun* and Brazilian *candomble* leads me to believe that Afro-American religion has a marked tendency to be oracular while Euro-American religion does not.