

"I BOW MY HEAD TO THE GROUND"

Creating Bodily Experience through Initiation

Bright light shines from the next room, and music pours into the dark living room where a young Euro-American sits alone. As he waits, he watches the pattern of the blinking Christmas lights in his godmother's suburban Maryland home. A 1990 calendar advertises Botánica San Lázaro, which his godmother, Idaberta, owns and manages. George Carter knows that the songs honor the orichas that constitute the pantheon of Santería¹; his *padrinos* (Sp. godparents) are creating the sacred herbal water, *osain* (Lu.). Soon they will use it to cleanse him and baptize the divinities that he is to receive. He is separated because only the fully initiated can witness the making of the *osain*. As a new godchild of the same house, I sit with him and wait.

He is called into the room and kneels over a large basin in the middle of the floor. I too am called in and watch as the ceremony unfolds. He hangs his neck on the edge of the basin and water pours over his head. "Get his neck," says a voice from behind him; his godfather, José, splashes the liquid onto the man's neck and rubs vigorously. "Good." The *osain* flows through his hair and across his closed eyes. He is lifted up and sent into a nearby bathroom. Again he kneels; this time he is next to the bathtub. Again he closes his eyes, and again the *osain* is poured over his head; his godfather washes the back of his neck with soap and sings to the seat of his being, his head. The man is told to wash himself from head to toe with the *osain* and is left alone.

When he returns to the room, a cluster of objects stands in the middle of the floor. A cement head with cowrie shells for eyes, nose, and mouth

sits in a small terracotta saucer, and next to it sits a smaller image that resembles it; these are Elegguá, the trickster, the lord of the crossroads and the ruler of destiny. Behind these stand a small, black iron cauldron; here is Ogún, the fierce and independent oricha of iron and warfare. With Ogún lives his brother Ochosi, the archer and god of the hunt; his power resides in the metal bow and arrow inside the cauldron. Next to the cauldron stands a metal cup that is closed and topped with a small rooster. This is Osun, a guardian who represents the neophyte's head; in it are the herbs used to make the osain. Osain pools in the saucers and in the cauldron, and drips down the metal shaft that elevates Osun. These orichas, the Guerreros, are the beginning of a person's "road in the saint." The man has come to "receive" them.²

Boxes are brought in from the patio. The godfather reaches into a box and pulls out a black rooster. He washes its underwings, the bottom of its feet, and its beak with clear water. He holds it by the legs, and its wings flap. The aleyo is told to turn slowly in a circle; as he rotates, he is brushed with the rooster in long sweeping motions from his head toward his feet. This is repeated until he has rotated completely. His hands are turned palm up and brushed with the bird's wings, then turned over and brushed again, and finally turned palm up and brushed a third time. The bird is stretched out and its neck cut. The blood flows onto Elegguá. Its head is placed next to Elegguá and its neck touches his saucers; the bird kicks, and the padrino pushes down hard to squeeze the air from the bird's lungs in order to quiet the animal. It kicks again and squeals; this time, the aleyo reaches down and forces the air from the bird and silences it. The slaughtering process is repeated with three doves, one each for Ogún, Ochosi, and Osun, and then again with a Guinea hen.

Following the *matanza* (Sp. slaughter), the aleyo is told to "do *moforibale*" (Lu. prostration). A mat is spread out in front of the orichas; his godfather stands next to them. The man lies down on the mat, first on his left side and then on his right. His knees are bent and his arm curls beneath his head as he "goes to the ground." "¿Bueno?" he asks. "Is this all right?" "Yes." He does *moforibale* to show his respect to the orichas that he has just received and to the oricha that "lives" in his godfather's head. His godfather touches his shoulders with his fingers and helps him up. The aleyo crosses his arms across his chest and is drawn to his elder's cheek, first on one side and then on the other. His padrino says softly, "*Santo. Ocha. Alafia*" (Lu. and Sp. saint, oricha, and peace, respectively). This ges-

ture is repeated as he greets all of his elders and receives their blessings. George now belongs to their ritual family.

In an eastern city of the United States, this young man enters a new religious community; he is receiving a group of important deities and entering into ritual kin relationships with his initiators. He must have his head washed, his body cleaned by animals, and must perform the *moforibale*; to enter this tradition, he uses his body in ways that are new to him. As he receives the gods, he learns new patterns of body use. The creation of these new bodily patterns in the Guerreros initiation ritual presents an interesting case: the signs used in the ritual have meanings that can be communicated verbally, but here the signs are experientially apprehended through the body; they are not simply understood but also enacted. As he uses his body in new ways, his subjectivity is transformed.

In recent years, studies of cultural performances have demonstrated clearly that meaning is not latent in ritual signs and awaiting discovery; instead people involved in ritual performances engage signs and activate them (Schieffelin 1985:707). Through performance, people communicate cultural meanings; by employing the various culturally relevant and available communicative resources, including specific generic and gestural forms, people produce their culture. This production takes place in all cultured behavior, and ritual—any ritual—effectively opens the door to understanding the entire culture (V. Turner 1967).³ Cultural performances "are occasions in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history . . ." (MacAloon 1984a:1). Although communicative resources such as ritual do carry specific expectations for all involved, only through enactment and negotiation can meaning be established and understood. As Richard Bauman (1986:3) has written, "Performance, like all human activity, is situated, its form, meaning, and functions rooted in culturally defined scenes or events—bounded segments of the flow of behavior and experience that constitute meaningful contexts for action, interpretation, and evaluation." Cultural performances—performances of cultural forms—can have meaning and functions only when enacted (Abrahams 1977:95), and enactments often produce heightened experiences for participants.

Because this initiate, George, was not born into Santería, these experiences are new to him. These new bodily activities, quite common to the tradition, represent a change for George. To enter the tradition fully he

must learn to use his body in new ways; he must master certain gestures and series of actions. As he experiences himself enacting new gestures and cultural forms of behavior, he realizes that his body is both a sign communicating meanings in a new way and simultaneously a locus of new experiences (Cowan 1990:4; cf. B. Turner 1984:1). His body is not simply a constructed sign that links him to the group (Douglas 1978:87); instead, the individual's body mediates all of the ritual signs, for he can only act by employing his body (cf. Ekman 1977). The enacting of these forms by the body represents the "modes of construction" of a culturally specific and useful body (Feher 1989:11). George needs to be able to enact each of the three gestures that I will explore in order to enter the religion more fully. He must understand *and* experience the importance of his head, he must learn the detailed gestures of sacrifice, and he must enact respect by prostrating himself in front of his elders. George learns to be a part of the community by using his body in specific ways.

This initiation ritual begins the establishment of new "habitual body sets, patterns of practical activity, and forms of consciousness" (Jackson 1989: 119-120). The activities of the ritual and the meanings therein are inseparable. In social action, an essential communicative form in Santería, pragmatic and semantic dimensions fuse; ideology is not an explicit discourse but an embodied, lived experience (Comaroff 1985:5). Because meaning merges with actions, the ritual represents the creation of a new *habitus* in the initiate; it is an enactment of some of the "principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations" (Bourdieu 1989:72). Practitioners rarely provide detailed evaluations of social actions or of ceremonies, but they do refer to certain rituals as *bien hecha* (Sp. well done) or *linda* (Sp. beautiful). This choice of language suggests that the sought-after quality is aesthetic and nonanalytical—a kind of satisfaction or well-being. The manipulation of physical objects, those used on altars and in sacrifices as well as bodies, produces the elusive but desirable beautiful ceremony.⁴

This habitus represents a new social position for the neophyte in the case described earlier. This ritual is an important initiation on the road to the priesthood; it creates new bodily patterns for the initiate and thus inscribes the body into the new discourse. Previously abstract, verbal knowledge is enacted and incorporated. Never before has he had his head washed in osain; never before has he been cleaned by the sweepings of birds' wings; nor has he performed the *moforibale*. The giving and receiving of the *Guerros*, repeated many times and in many places each year, assimilates people more fully into the community and gives them limited access to the super-

natural world, and this example is no different. Here, however, the medium for assimilation is George. He must enact respect and embody the tradition.

This embodiment of tradition in the ritual context structures George's experience. As he uses his body in new ways and places it in new positions, he makes physical certain relationships and experiences them bodily; the initiation, then, regulates experience "through its capacity to reorganize the actor's experience of the situation" (Munn 1973:605). Although initiations vary according to the performers involved and these variations affect the structure of the ritual (Hanks 1984:131), the aleyo's body always structures the experience.

In Santería, the teaching of ritual skills and moral behavior happens informally and nonverbally, and thus embodiment is especially important. Ritual elders tire quickly of answering questions and suggest that the best method of learning is involvement. By paying attention and attending many rituals, an aleyo becomes known as "*serio*" (Sp. a serious [student of the religion]; see Friedman 1982). People do learn this religion through the exegesis of important concepts, but they learn primarily through observation and enactment. Because learning centers on practice and entering actively into this tradition, the body naturally emerges as central to any analysis of this kind of ritual (cf. Wafer 1991 on the body). This learning takes place slowly, so it is extremely difficult to document. The body exists in a complex relationship with social knowledge and interpretation. The informal learning style of Santería makes social knowledge a kind of esoteric power. People who know certain ceremonies exercise power in the community. My analysis reflects the social realities of this community. Ritual focuses on the body and its manipulation, and personal experience represents the primary method for understanding; when a practitioner integrates experience with more commonly held, culturally produced expressive forms such as divination stories, social knowledge is expanded. "The essential part of the *modus operandi* which defines practical mastery is transmitted in practice . . . without attaining the level of discourse" (Bourdieu 1989:87). The aleyo here clearly grasps this emphasis on practice and the use of the body; as George Carter remarks, "Although I had never done too much in Santería before, I, I guess I wanted to be part of the community which I was joining, to act like they do. I wanted to be involved and do what they did so I could learn the religion" (1990). Involvement must be physical to be complete; although George knows a great deal about the beliefs and sacred stories of Santería, he greatly values entering the habitus of the community and expects to learn from his experience.

It is important to note that neophytes who undergo rituals are not somehow miraculously transformed by some inexplicable and awesome power. Rather, ritualizations in Santería frequently place the individual in a series of ceremonies that engage many aspects of the individual's subjectivity. Virtually all initiations—including receiving the Warriors—result from divination rituals; as the previous chapter explains, these ceremonies evoke the specific aspects of the multiplex subjectivity of the client and then recontextualize them within the religious system. Divination almost always results in the prescription of additional ceremonies to address specific needs in the client's life; these rituals often overwhelm the human subject with repeated gestures, unfamiliar smells, alien sights, and unusual songs and other sounds. The sensory force of the ritual augments the emotional investment in the ceremony that results from the divination. After the ceremonies are completed, practitioners routinely socialize their experiences of transformation through narratives that focus on particular but patterned aspects of the process and on the role of the spirits and orichas in their lives. These narratives represent an important but uninvestigated area of mythological information within the religion, an area that is constantly renewing itself through social action and lived experience.

WASHING THE HEAD

Because no expressive bodily activity happens without real bodies and no meanings can be assigned to gestures without reference to a specific event (Poole 1975:101), the specific example at hand best reveals George's bodily practice. The community of ritual specialists washes George's head as he prepares to enter the community. He leans over with eyes closed to receive their attention and blessings. The herbal mixture "cools" his head and "refreshes" him. His head is washed over the basin and then again in the bathtub. Each time the priest rubs the osain and the herbs floating in it into his skin and scalp.

In the bathroom cleansing, which I have witnessed many times, the gestures of the ritual are highly stylized. The aleyo leans over the tub and places the chest on the edge; the hands rest on the bottom, one on top of the other. I have seen this priest, whom I will call José, demonstrate to people how they should position themselves as they receive the *despojo* (Sp. cleaning). Through this instruction in how properly to perform the gesture, José shows that he has an aesthetic by which he evaluates it. Similarly, José

washes the head with a specific pattern of movements. He takes the osain from its basin in a small gourd and pours it first over the crown of the head and then over the neck. Again starting at the crown, he lathers the soap by moving it around the head in growing circles until he reaches the neck, which he scrubs vigorously. He then rinses the head with more osain and squeezes the water from the hair with a motion similar to the one with which he lathers it. These highly stylized gestures reveal a culturally structured pattern of bodily movement, and, although they are performed by the padrino, they suggest that the *despojo* does contain gestures that the aleyo learns and experiences through his body.

The head, which receives most of the attention in the cleaning, carries complex and multiple symbolic meanings in Santería. First, the head, called either *orí* or *eledá*, is the spiritual faculty and central locus of a human being (Murphy 1981:287). Before birth, each *orí* goes before the Creator and receives its essential character. This character, which people closely associate with an individual's destiny, can be either "hot" or "cool" (Cabrera 1980:121). Although practitioners disagree about how mutable the head's character is, the ritual washing here in refreshing herbs and water helps to cool a hot head. The head also idiomatically refers to the oricha that rules a person; an individual and the deity also establish this relationship in front of the Creator before birth (see Bascom 1991:115).

This central deity, often called "the owner of the head," represents an important part of the individual's character. For example, the white, calm, and generous oricha Obatalá rules the head of George's padrino, and so people assume that José is slow to anger, relatively intellectual, benevolent, and, others might add, "big-headed." In fact, at times practitioners confuse the "owner of the head" and the individual; "an Obatalá" refers to a child of Obatalá who in ritual may act in the role of that oricha. The *eledá* can be identified through various divination systems, and a growing relationship between an individual and the *eledá* often leads to initiations, after which the *aché* of the oricha literally resides inside the initiate's head; after a full initiation, the oricha can "mount" the initiate in trance possession and thus take control of the body that they share.⁵

In the Guerreros initiation, the aleyo, with the help of the *oloricha*, cleans and refreshes his head. Thus, the ritual attention to the head marks it as socially and religiously important. The osain is both an empowering and a cleaning agent; when applied to the head, it strengthens the spirit that dwells there. By cleaning the head, the ritual cools and refreshes the whole person. As the night goes on, after the aleyo departs from the site

of the initiation, the leaves of the mixture, entwined in his hair, often begin to scratch and cause itching. George Carter recalls, "I felt a little strange scratching my head after José [his godfather] had spent so much time attending to it. He prayed and I scratched; it, it seemed so, so strange to treat what had been made sacred as something annoying, but my scalp really itched. Later, I said a prayer to my head [ruling oricha] in thanksgiving and slept with a white cloth over it"⁶ (1990). This attention to the head, moreover, represents the beginning of a new cultural pattern. Many of the religion's rituals and customs underscore the centrality of the head. People entering Santería often start their affiliation when they need healing, and frequently the first ritual they undergo is the *rogación de la cabeza* (Sp. prayers for the head), where coconut, water, and cotton are applied to the head to "feed" it. Similarly, most practitioners cover their heads with hats (Sp. *gorros*) or handkerchiefs (Sp. *pañuelos*) during ritual activities. If their destinies include initiation, and they often do (Rogers 1973:28-29), their heads will receive still more attention.

Through various initiatory rites, the head is a focal point. Santería must be understood as an initiatory religion; initiations punctuate the changes and elevation of a person in the tradition. In one of the first initiations that a person receives, a priestess places necklaces (Lu. *eleke*, Sp. *colares*), consecrated, like the Guerreros, with herbal waters and the blood of sacrificial animals, over the neophyte's head and onto the shoulders. Each necklace has a different pattern of colored beads and conveys the power of one of the deities. An initiate most often receives the necklaces of the five most powerful and popular orichas; the necklaces, spiritually powerful and ritually charged, reflect the *aché* of each of them. The necklaces are both manifestations of the particular power of each deity and a channel for communication between the neophyte and the deities (Brandon 1983:355-356). They rest on the shoulders and reinforce the spiritual agent living in the head. Their form reflects the belief that the deities reside in the head. When the necklaces are received, the aleyo must again bow over a bathtub and have the head washed by the *oloricha*; all initiations include this bodily action of submission and reception of blessings.

The initiation of a full priest, capable of being mounted by an oricha, reiterates the attention on the head, that centralized idiom of spiritual power and life. In this ritual, the initiators wash the head of the neophyte and then shave it completely. The elders then mark the neophyte again, cutting a small cross into the top of the head; into this incision the initiators rub the most sacred herbs that contain the *aché* of the principal

oricha. The head is covered with cloth, which will be worn for many hours to come. Finally the primary initiator crowns the neophyte with the tureens that contain the sacred stones that are the "spirit of the orichas" (Brandon 1983:397-401; see Ecún 1985 for examples of the variations within different initiations); the head, again, is the focus of the ritual.

During the ritual of receiving the Warriors, George receives Osun, an equivalent of his head. As I mentioned earlier, Osun contains the same herbs that are used to make the *osain*. When he receives Osun, he learns a simple ritual to call upon the oricha; thus he now has a simple but effective method of communication with a central part of himself.⁷ If the aleyo continues in the religion and undergoes the full initiation, if he "makes the saint" (Sp. *hacer santo*), the practitioners will place an herbal mixture, called *aché de santo* (Lu. power of the saint), in the head and also place it within the Osun, which has a cup to receive this mixture. Thus, the Guerreros initiation, too, emphasizes the head beyond the cleansings. After this ritual the neophyte has an image of his head with which he can communicate. If the Osun falls, for example, the aleyo knows that danger is at hand.

The head, then, represents the bodily center of the spiritual life in Santería. Its import reveals itself throughout a variety of initiation ceremonies. Moreover, because other initiations repeat the cultural forms of this ritual, the Guerreros initiation anticipates a whole social and religious commitment to the Santería community. The head receives respect because "the head carries the body."⁸ As the seat of spiritual power and possibility, as the place that the ruling oricha dwells, people associate the head with destiny or "the road of life." Elder priests and priestesses clean the head, feed it, and sing to it. While George experiences these things he is literally incorporating important values in Santería. Although he may reflect upon them as the actions happen through his physical involvement and the attention to his head, he joins a wider practice that is common to all people involved in Santería. Similarly, it anticipates other cleanings, sacrifices, and initiations that are socially constituted and bodily enacted and learned.

The social actions that focus on the head do not reveal the meanings of the initiation. The meanings, communicated through signs, do not lie in a separate plane outside the immediate domain of actions (Jackson 1989:122). The actions of these people as they enact the ritual bespeak a commonality.

It is because actions speak louder *and* more ambiguously than words that they are more likely to lead us to common truths; not semantic truths, established by

others at other times, but experiential truths which seem to issue from within our own Being [*sic*] when we break the momentum of the discursive mind or throw ourselves into some collective activity in which we each find our own meaning yet at the same time sustain the impression of having a common cause and giving common consent. (Jackson 1989:133)

This passage argues the extreme importance and power of signs and their messages for the *participants* of ritual; participants, by both framing events personally and conforming to the larger social and cosmological order that the ritual communicates, come to embody the very contrast of structure and agency. By enacting the ritual, the initiate accepts socially and publicly the order that the ritual signifies (Rappaport 1989:469). George and his padrinos act together and, regardless of any other conflicts that they have, they serve his head and thus care for his essence. George expresses that attention as he leans over the basins to make his head available, and his padrinos show it in gestures of washing. Here, through these actions, as George accepts this cultural emphasis on the head, he begins to accept the new habitus of the religion.

“MAKING SACRIFICE”

By receiving the Guerreros, George Carter “opens the roads” for himself by “making sacrifice” (Lu. *rubó*, Sp. *hacer ebó*). He is committing himself not simply to the members of ritual house, nor is he simply attending to his head; he is also committing himself to a life-long relationship with the Warriors themselves, and this relationship will include, at a minimum, a regular weekly offering to the orichas. However, it is likely that he will have to sacrifice other animals in the future. The initiation is the first time that George has witnessed the sacrifice of birds, and he now is religiously bound to make regular sacrifices himself. Thus, sacrifice represents another form of behavior in which George participates at his initiation but that he must also learn to enact himself.

In the sacrifice, the birds are washed. Holding them by the feet, José brushes each animal across the aleyo to sweep off any negative influences that may be lingering on George. Slowly José sweeps from the head down toward the feet. An oloricha draws back the birds’ wings and holds their feet; with the Guinea hen and the rooster, José pulls the neck to extend it, then pierces it with a knife, and the blood runs down the knife and onto the

awaiting orichas. The doves receive similar treatment; however, instead of cutting their necks, José bends their necks to the side and then plucks them off. Because a special initiation confers the right to use a sacrificial knife, the aleyo will have to pull the heads off any birds he sacrifices to feed his Warriors. These formal processes, which George is witnessing and learning, will represent an essential aspect of his religious life in the future.

Whenever divination suggests the need, George will feed his Warriors. He will gather the necessary birds and perform this ceremony, which is central to the religion. Just as he has witnessed at his initiation, he will wash the birds’ underwings, their heads, and their feet. He will say the prayers and sing the *cantos* (Sp. chants) that he has heard and learned. Although he may not understand the Lucumí words that he uses, he will stretch out the birds and pull their heads off to slaughter them. He will mimic the way he has seen matanzas performed and thus will constitute his own tradition within the tradition. Because he has never before witnessed sacrifice, the initiation represents a crucial moment of learning for George. He watches, and he learns new behaviors. As he said of the experience, “I was anxious because I had never seen a matanza before, but I guess, well, I was also, I think I wanted to see how to do it so I could feed my Elegguá and give him the blood and do works. I had read the songs and the prayers in different places, and I had read about sacrifices, but I knew that seeing one would teach me even more. Only if I saw a sacrifice would I know how to do one” (1990). By watching, George learns what he cannot learn elsewhere; he understands what gestures to perform in a sacrifice.

Perhaps the most striking example of this learning lies not in the future sacrifices that George will make but in the event itself. When the rooster continues to move and make noise after its head is severed, José leans on it to force the air from its lungs. When the bird again kicks and squeals, George, imitating what he has just seen, quiets the bird. “I wanted to try and see how to do it. I wanted to quiet that bird *with my own two hands*” (Carter 1990). This moment represents the essence of the initiation process. Here George is observing the “techniques of the body” that Santería employs (Mauss 1973), but he goes beyond simple observation and uses his body in ways that are new to him: he enacts culturally specific behavior and practices his performance.

By forcing the air from the rooster, he shows the community around him not only that he wants to be a member but also that he will act in appropriate ways. He begins to assert his competence (Bauman 1977:11), although, as a person with the status of a child, he risks failing. But he has successfully

acquired an understanding of how this gesture is used (see Hymes 1974:75) and thus begins to act socially within this religious community. Because social action has a kind of power in the community, George asserts himself as a serio. By mimicking his padrino, George performs a relatively unimportant ritual task; the ritual in no way revolves around quieting the rooster, but is a bit more pleasant for everyone because of it. Quieting the bird also demonstrates that George is willing and capable of entering the tradition. Here he performs his membership in the group; the tradition diffuses as people enact specific gestures, and the aleyo follows the lead of his godfather⁹: “Carter is a serious guy and he is not afraid to jump into things. If I do something in a ritual, he repeats. . . . He will be a good santero when the time comes. He will be a good santero because he puts himself into a ceremony and doesn’t hesitate” (González 1992).

Just as the sacrifice itself is an important practice that George learns in the initiation, the sweeping of the body by animals for cleansing purposes represents another traditional behavior that he begins to enact. Rubbing rituals use animals or fruit to remove negative influences, and they represent an entire subclass of ritual offerings to the deities. Diviners frequently suggest these “works” (Lu. *ebó*, Sp. *trabajos*). Here George is learning the correct speed to turn and the gestures that are done with the hands. As he goes through these acts, he again learns culturally specific behavior. As he turns and is swept by the wings, George is again acquiring the practical and bodily patterns of Santería ritual.

MOFORIBALE: I BOW MY HEAD TO THE GROUND

Although previous work on cultural performances has focused on the role of individuals as signs (see Stoeltje 1988) and the presentation of social structure for reflection (for example, see Stoeltje and Bauman 1989), authors have not embraced an ongoing examination of the process of learning a social and cosmological order through performance. Performance studies must account for the production and maintenance of social relationships by actors in the social field (McArthur 1989:115); “ritual action effects social transitions or spiritual transformations; it does not merely mark or accompany them” (MacAloon 1984b:250). The ritual causes change simply by its occurrence; it expresses and communicates its meanings with or without the participants’ consent or knowledge (Myerhoff 1984:170).

The *moforibale* represents an important religious behavior that George

acquires during his initiation and through which he performs his social obligations.¹⁰ After the washing and after the divinities eat, he must “put his head to the ground” in front of his padrino and the other members of his ritual family. Because the oricha that “owns his head” is female, he must go down on each side with his head facing the direction of the oricha he is honoring. If the aleyo’s head were male, the *moforibale* would have a different form; instead of reclining on each side, a person ruled by a male oricha must prostrate with the forehead on the floor and the arms and legs extended straight out. Here the body gesture marks the gender of the ruling oricha and not the person; the gender of the oricha defines the way the person must bow. Again, as in the previous discussion of the *despojo*, the stylization of these gestures reiterates their cultural significance. José explains how to go down, and then George lies down; he asks if he is doing it correctly. His padrino raises him and blesses him. This series of gestures is central to the kinship that the ritual creates.

I had seen people do the *moforibale* before, and I knew that it was an important form of respect. Respect is important in Santería. We have to respect the elders because we receive the orichas from their hands. The dead gave birth to the orichas. That’s a proverb that means we have to show respect. . . . My head doesn’t have a saint in it so I have to put it on the floor in front of my padrino, whose head does have an oricha in it. (Carter 1990)

Here George articulates the complexity of the *moforibale*, which indexes a series of important relationships. One head honors another by going to the floor. A new initiate shows respect to a ritual elder. By going to the floor, George enacts spatial, social, and cosmic relationships.

By receiving the *Guerreros*, the aleyo becomes attached to the initiator’s ritual family and begins a serious commitment to the religious community. By receiving the *Warriors*, neophytes commit themselves to a life-long relationship with not only the *oloricha* but also the ritual house, the wider religious community that congregates at important festivals. Inside this community exists a complex family of ritual kin (Brandon 1983:480; cf. D. Brown 1989:162–186). The initiating priest, after the ritual, becomes the padrino and the neophyte the *ahijado* or *ahijada* (Sp. godson, goddaughter). This relationship entails mutual commitment, and both parties are expected to treat the other as a family member (Murphy 1988:83; cf. D. Brown 1989:174–186). Just as parents raise a child, so too will the godparents enculturate the aleyo; they demonstrate the proper behavior, and

the aleyo learns by following their example; they “speak without a voice” (Flores 1990:49).

Ritual kinship is construed in terms of *casas* or *ilé* (Sp., Lu. houses) and *ramas* (Sp. branches, lineages). A house is a single *oloricha* and the people initiated by that person. Filial relationships occur at every initiation, and thus a person can have many *ahijados* and many *padrinos* simultaneously. Those previously initiated by José become George’s brothers and sisters “in the saint.” To differentiate between different kinds of godchildren, José refers to individuals by the initiations that they have received from him; for example, after this initiation George becomes his *ahijado de Guerreros* (Sp. godson of the Warriors). These lines of relationship are traced through generations of living and dead ritual forebears. Thus, José’s godmother *de asiento* (Sp. of the full initiation) becomes George’s grandmother in the saint (Sp. *abuela de santo*).¹¹ These larger groups are the *ramas* that connect people across time. Just as an aleyo descends from a godparent and ritual ancestors, the *orichas* are also “born” from each other. George’s Warriors are born from José’s. Ritual elders (Sp. *mayores*) expect respect, and *moforibale* expresses that honor concretely and directly (D. Brown 1989:170).

The *moforibale* reiterates social order as it exists and as sanctioned by the morality of Santería tradition. For example, an aleyo, when needing help from the *orichas*, employs a godparent as intermediary or, at the very least, as a guide. This relationship subordinates the uninitiated to those with experience within the religion. The godparents have knowledge, spiritual power, and, according to Santería morality, a social responsibility. In the *Guerreros* initiation, George must approach the *orichas* with the aid of his ritual family.

By working the *orichas*—that is, being initiated, attending as many rituals as possible, and serving the community—the aleyo gains knowledge; however, that knowledge remains, by definition, social (Gregory 1986: 141). Increased skill with the *orichas* increases his responsibility both to the *orichas* and to his ritual house. Initiation creates access to ritual knowledge; it attaches the neophyte to the house’s members, both living and dead. Although the hierarchical system of initiations limits and regulates the access to ritual skill, people learn the skills themselves in social interaction within the ritual house. Degree and seniority of initiation determine the ritual status and social responsibility of a practitioner; to act within these boundaries is to act “coolly.”

In the *moforibale*, the touching of the head to the floor, a ritually younger person salutes the “head” of the elder. Thus, George honors José’s *oricha*; he physically submits his *oricha* to the *oricha* of his elder.

By enacting this social and religious hierarchy, George publicly shows his acceptance of his new relationship with José and the submission that it implies. This public display makes the body a focus of interaction, and so it becomes an important locus of self-definition in the social context (see Glassner 1990:222; Mead 1938:292). Although he will “have” the Warriors after this initiation, he still needs his godparents to help him solve problems and teach him how to interact with the *orichas*. The *moforibale* is a bodily performance of this relationship.¹²

After “going down,” George is raised by his *padrino* and blessed. The reciprocal relationship is complete. George honors José’s head and receives a blessing: “The raising is a blessing which elevates, strengthens, and honors the junior . . . a sign of ritual recognition: symbolically conveying, affirming and supporting membership in a relationship” (Yvette Burgess-Polcyn, quoted in D. Brown 1989:171). The body physically learns and enacts this ritual greeting and display of honor. The body and its position communicate the respect, and the raising changes the relationship. But this relationship is not just projected onto the body; the body’s gesture constructs and communicates it. George conceives of the *moforibale* as an important act: “I was glad and excited to [mo]foribale in front of José and my *Guerreros*. It felt strange to be, to be on the floor in the middle of a room with people all around, but . . . I just felt that I had to do it to show my respect and fit into the *ilé*. It seemed even weirder to go down for the other *olorichas* that I didn’t even know” (Carter 1990). George must perform the *moforibale* repeatedly to show his respect for all who are his elders in the saint; despite its distinct and foreign feel, he goes down because he wants to show his respect to the people who have brought him into the religion.¹³ What is perhaps more important, he goes down to act as other people in the *ilé* act, “to fit in.” By reproducing an important cultural form in a noticeable social space, he embodies a social position and continues to maintain the status relationships.

EMBODIED MEANINGS AND LIVING TRADITIONS

This initiation is, indeed, a rite of passage. But an approach that relies on such a structural analysis, which isolates form and social function from more personal meaning, ignores an entire aspect of the ritual. Rather than focus on the patterns in the ritual structure, highlighting the forms the aleyo must enact alters the emphasis of interpretation. If we are to under-

stand how transformations of subjectivity and social status are accomplished and experienced, the initiate's body must remain central to the analysis. The experience of transformation in rites of passage surely includes something more complicated and more delicate than the tripartite structure as put forth (see Van Gennep 1909; V. Turner 1969:94-130). People and their experiences always overflow the concepts and categories that social scientists use to comprehend them. I am advocating a more individual approach to this kind of material. How does the initiate use the body before and after the ritual? What effect does the change have on other aspects of life? Is the new habitus limited to one context, or does it spill into other parts of the person's life? (For excellent examples of body-focused analyses of rites of passage, see V. Turner 1967, 1969:1-93.)

The meaning of this initiation cannot be understood without reference to the bodily practices of the initiate. It is by using his body in new ways and performing specific gestures that George enters into the religion. Through performing these specific cultural forms, through attending to his head in various ways, through sacrificing and all its gestures, through going to the floor in the *moforibale*, he enacts his membership in his new religious context and venerates the gods. Under the guidance of his initiators, he transforms his subjectivity. The bodily reproduction of socially prescribed behaviors keys the emergent meanings of the initiation; through enactment practitioners display their relationships with each other and the forces of the universe. Moreover, the meaning of the signs in these rituals lies not so much in their abstract meanings but in how they are experienced through the body of the *aleyo*. The meanings of the signs are only accessible and sensible through the use of the body. As Pierre Bourdieu observes, "Rites, more than any other type of practice, serve to underline the mistake of enclosing them in concepts a logic made to dispense with concepts; of treating movements of the *body* and practical manipulations as purely logical operations" (1989:116, italics mine).

People learn the bodily and social practice of Santería through initiation; by experiencing a new habitus, the *aleyo* joins his new tradition. Although he has understood the tradition in an intellectual way and has studied a great deal, by joining a ritual family and offering a sacrifice, he places himself into the practical life of the religion. He knows the tradition in a different way now, and he feels different as well. Now he understands the worship of the *orichas* and some of their stories, and he also knows how to worship them. In Santería, personal identity, social relationships, and ritual knowledge are performed by people as they bow their heads to the ground.

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in an Afro-Cuban Religion

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