

IMAGINING POWER

The Aesthetics of Aché in Santería

The March sun heats my shoulders as I lock my Chinese bicycle to an iron fence in a dead-end street in downtown Havana. It is 1995. I have come to the house of a senior *babalawo* (Lu.), a priest of the oricha Orula and practitioner of the Ifá divination system. He is well connected to the thriving black market in the city, and I have come to change money. The priest and his wife, who is a priestess of Yemayá, the oricha of the ocean, are famous for their knowledge of Santería. Since the early 1960s they have spent their time helping people with their problems and initiating them into the religion. I have been coming to their house for three years.

After knocking on the peeling paint of the double door, I hear a voice calling me from the balcony above. It is Luisa, the priestess.¹

“¿Quién es?” she asks in her loud, gruff voice as she squints in the morning sun. “Who is there?”

“Good morning. It’s Michael. How is it going today?”

“Orestes isn’t here, but I will come down and let you in,” she says as she disappears from behind the iron grill of the balcony. After a long moment, the lock on the blue double door cries out and the right door groans. Luisa tells me to enter. I follow her up the narrow steps. The walls at the landing are marked with tire tracks from the many bicycles that have made this same journey. At the top of the stairs, Luisa tells me to sit on the couch. In front of me is a large statue of Our Lady of Caridad del Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba, who is associated with the oricha Ochún, who “is the river and love and all the good things in this life.”² The statue is faded blue, and the head of the virgin is dusty.

"Orestes told me he could help me change some dollars into pesos," I say.

"Yes, he knows people. He will help you, but I don't know when he will return. It shouldn't be too long. Want some water?"

"No, thanks," I say. With this, Luisa moves to the balcony. She looks at the sky and sucks her teeth. I have seen this before. I think I know what is coming.

Luisa is a strong-willed woman, but after almost forty years with the forceful Orestes, she is often quiet. She usually lets him do the talking, but in his absence things are different. With no introduction, she begins to tell me a story:

"A few years ago, the old man and I went to Venezuela to do some work. We were going to make Yemayá to one of his godchildren in Ifá.³ We did the spiritual mass and worked the egun. We went to the river and we did the cleaning. It was the day of the matanza, and we were in the room [where the secret ritual work is done]. I was the oyubona (Lu. second god-parent), and the oriaté had started the osain. But when he handed me the herbs, I asked him where the peony and the peregún were." Luisa crosses the room and leans against the door to the room where her orichas live.

"He said, 'We couldn't find them around here.' I had been watching what was happening up until then. I had noticed that these herbs were missing. But I was the oyubona, I was responsible for what was happening, so I said, 'You can't do it without these leaves. The godparents have to add peony and peregún to the osain.' He objected, but after a while we got a car and drove a couple of hours and found the plants we needed so that we could continue."

Luisa moves back to the balcony. The sun lights up her face, and her eyes remain steady, fixed on something far away. These stories always have a point and I am pretty sure Luisa will let me know what it is. "To have aché you must have three things. You must have a conscience, you must have obedience, and you must be human. You can't make an oricha without peony and peregún, and so I stopped the ceremony right in the middle. I made him get those herbs before we continued." As the conversation continued, Luisa explained what she meant by conscience, obedience, and being human. A person with conscience does what she knows is right, she follows tradition, and she acts responsibly and righteously. A person with obedience listens to the orichas and the egun and follows their directions. A person is human when she defends other people's interests, when she fights for justice, and when she is compassionate and generous. "To be a good santero, to have aché, you have to have conscience, obedi-

ence, and be human." Although we go on talking for a couple more hours about the history of the religion, the esoterica of ritual, and family events of the past few years, this story about aché is what I keep thinking about.

IDEAS ABOUT GENERATIVE POWER

A senior priestess, who is usually reserved, addressed an ethnographer, a business associate, and a younger priest. She chose to speak of a key concept in the religion and to explain what kinds of people have power, talent, character, and competence. Her story situates her as a person with aché. She is capable, powerful, and knowledgeable, and she acts with conscience, in obedience to the tradition, and in the interest of her godchild. The priestess has shown herself acting forcefully and dynamically in a ritual setting, and in the process she has adumbrated and embodied the characteristics of a person with aché.

In Santería, everyone has ideas about aché: what it is, how it works, and how to get it. Opinions abound because most practitioners agree that ritual manipulates aché to assist people in resolving their difficulties and obtaining their goals. This power is present in all objects, plants, animals, and humans, but it is concentrated in priests and priestesses of the orichas and in the orichas themselves. By bringing together the correct substances and the correct supernatural forces, ritual transforms people's circumstances in the world. At the level of the individual, aché allows people to act with force, intelligence, and impunity. Most practitioners consider this power to be both innate and augmented by behavior and ritual. People will say of a gifted diviner, "He has an aché for divining"; thus the term can also refer to a particular talent that a person has. When someone offers an inspired interpretation of a ritual situation or performs well, santeros respond by saying, "*Aché pa' ti*" (aché for you); here aché is offered as a high compliment and an honor conferred by others who have power, talent, and knowledge. Aché causes curses to take effect and gives solace to the suffering. Still, this key concept is quite variable.⁴ No two santeros ever give the same explanation of aché; instead aché is *imagined* differently by different actors.

As actors working the notions of aché they have received in their training, santeros have extremely varied sources for their social knowledge of ritual power. In Cuba and other places where the religion thrives, many forces have shaped the practice of the Regla de Ocha. Historically, Santería has been defined as a paradigmatic syncretic religion. The common wisdom

has been that enslaved Yoruba were brought together on sugar plantations and in urban areas where, with the assistance and at the behest of the civil and church authorities, they formed *cabildos* (Sp. mutual aid societies) where they mixed Cuban-style Roman Catholicism with the “traditional” beliefs of the Yoruba (cf. Brandon 1993:55–103; Ortiz 1984; Argüelles Mederos and Hodge Limonta 1991:35–83). The most obvious example of this syncretism is that the orichas were “worshiped” in the form of Catholic saints. According to the accepted history, Spiritism arrived from France in the nineteenth century and was also mixed with these practices and reconciled with them. In addition to Santería, Cubans also practiced two other “syncretic” religions with distinct ethnic origins: Palo Mayombe, also called Palo Monte, from the Kongo of Central Africa, and Abakuá from the Efik and Ejagham of the Cross River delta in Nigeria. Because of Cuban cultural politics extant since the turn of the century, it has often been convenient, if not necessary, for practitioners of these religions to engage the discourse of anthropology and label themselves “syncretic” from time to time (see Palmié 1995).⁵

Putting aside the difficulties of static concepts such as *tradition* and the fact that Santería practitioners very rarely use the verb *worship* when describing their religious activities,⁶ this history has other problems. Recent research has showed the limited historical and demographic impact of the *cabildos* in Havana and elsewhere in the colonial period. Santería is the most widespread of the Afro-Cuban religious traditions, but historical records show that very few *cabildos* were labeled with the Afro-Cuban ethnonym Lucumí. Thus the number of *cabildos* of any given ethnicity cannot be taken to imply any specific level of cultural influence (López Valdés 1995). Similarly, following the lead of Bastide’s research in Brazil on religious institutions and knowledgeable practitioners (1978), research on the history of the Regla de Ocha has showed the relative importance of specific priestesses and priests born in Africa to the growth and contemporary form of the religion. In the Ifá tradition, all *babalawos* trace their spiritual ancestry to five known practitioners who were active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (D. Brown 1995). Similarly, knowledgeable practitioners describe current ritual forms as influenced greatly by the famous reformer Efuché, a priestess born and trained in Africa, who arrived in Cuba in the early twentieth century, at least fifteen years after abolition (Pichardo 1994). This history makes clear that the contemporary structure of Santería did not result from some indiscriminate and vague syncretic process, but rather from individual practitioners acting upon their lifeworlds.⁷

In my own research, I have come across many references to a tome published in the 1940s that codified the Regla Kimbisa. This tradition was a revitalization movement that attempted to merge the three most prominent Afro-Cuban religions with astrology and numerology (Cabrera 1977), and the book to which so many of my associates refer compiled and integrated ideas, rites, and attitudes from these disparate traditions. Even today practitioners will invoke this book to authenticate a claim or a ritual detail. From these examples it should be clear that no history of this religion can be easy or straightforward.

Practitioners act on ideas and enact rituals that they have culled from a huge variety of sources. The extent of the mixing between Santería and other traditions is never fixed and is often opaque. Because the source of religious ideas and practices is never clear and because the tradition is reproduced through time, syncretism merely names a standard aspect of all cultural processes in which different systems of meaning-making are reconciled to some degree. Instead of discussing Santería within the context of a mixing with other traditions, it is more edifying to begin with the agency of practitioners. Though it might be misleading to say that Santería itself is a syncretic tradition, an admixture of other traditions, it is accurate to say that many practitioners of the religion are syncretic in their approach to their religious activities.⁸ As the individuals reproduce the tradition, it has changed and continues to change. Santería practitioners—like all people—constitute and work on their world through a variety of structures and systems of meaning. Careful attention to their actions, and to explanations of those actions, can provide a portrait of the creativity of social power and performative competence in a single community (see Arens and Karp 1989; Bauman 1989).⁹

IMAGINING ACTION

By focusing on practitioners’ accounts of *aché*, on their actions, and on their evaluations of other people, this chapter focuses on the details of cultural life in a particular time and place and explores how ritual, as a communicative and socially constitutive process intended to affect the flow of power in the universe, is a context in which people can respond to the contradictions and tensions engendered by social and cultural change (see Bauman 1989 and Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). After exploring how *aché* is imagined by several different practitioners, the chapter examines how

these notions of ritual power structure action, how they are used to evaluate the actions of others, and how these notions are deployed in social life to gain authority. Here I want to lay out the key elements that Santería practitioners use to understand and act on the world in the religion. I will outline certain principles, but this approach should not be construed to suggest that the ideal is in any way primary. Rather, these basic beliefs are only a part of the cultural practices that constitute the Regla de Ocha.

In recent years, practice theorists and other scholars have returned to key questions in social theory and in particular have focused on the critical symbolic and social structures with which actors address their circumstances (e.g., Comaroff 1985). As anthropologists and others have struggled to understand the pluralistic universe, several approaches have emerged to address the difficult nexus of individual agents and the symbolic and social structures with which they apprehend the world and their actions. We have seen a parade of academic discourses since the turn of the century: William James's pragmatism,¹⁰ functionalist universalism, modes of thought, symbol mediation, and practice theory. These disparate schools share an interest in the external and objective realities of social and cultural structures as well as the internal and subjective experience of individual agents. Building on Emile Durkheim's insight that ritual connects the individual imagination to the collective through communicatively constituted, social representations (1954), the symbolic schemas themselves have been the focus of much exploration as have the strategies with which actors engage them (see Berger and Luckmann 1966; Bourdieu 1989; Hardin 1993). Scholars have used many rubrics to address these symbolic schemas: the moral imagination, the social imaginary, metaphor, and tropes are the most common, but all these approaches share various key features, such as a focus on representations and superstructure; an interest in the cultural processes that bind people together as they produce and reproduce social life; and an interest in the ways in which individuals and groups use symbolic, ideational material to improvise and organize action in social life.

Because social life includes the social imaginary,¹¹ we must focus on the representations that individuals and groups create, maintain, and reproduce. This interest in collective representations grows from Durkheim's sociological studies. In all their forms, these images—popular beliefs, cultural performances, and verbal arts—communicate cultural values and social relations (Bascom 1965), and people use them strategically in social life to accomplish their goals (Bauman 1977). "It is these representations, these beautiful stories that we tell ourselves, that structure individual and

collective development. We might say, in a metaphorical way, that they serve as a counterpoint, as an accompanying music to the sinuous flow of human existence" (Maffesoli 1993c:64). Because individuals use the social imaginary to picture the world and work upon it, it provides "a means by which people extend their vision of what is possible" (Beidelman 1986:1).

The imaginary, especially as produced in representations, provides people with the opportunity to reflect upon and evaluate their worlds; here its complementarity with performance studies becomes most evident. The social imaginary is constituted of representations, and those representations are manifested in social life *by means of performance* (cf. Bauman 1989:262–263; Schechner and Appel 1990). Once performed, these images become part of the fabric of life. They play a key role in the social construction of reality, and people use them to structure their experiences and their subsequent performances. These performances taken in unison make up what Mauss (1973:73) and Bourdieu (1989:72) call *habitus*, that collection of bodily actions and transferable dispositions that form the life-world of each individual. In social life, individuals reproduce these images and the habitus of which they are constitutive, and they do so in particular arrangements that correspond to the structural properties guiding action at that time; in turn, their actions affect the structural properties themselves (Hardin 1993:15–21, 272). When considered more statically, representations allow scholars to explore cultural ideals, and when considered in practice and social use, they give scholars entry into the process of social production and reproduction.

This process must be understood as an attempt to bind people together. For Durkheim this social binding is the primary and quintessential function of all social representations, and the totem was a representation of society standing for an individual's relationship to the group (1954). For his modern French students all representations have this same, basically religious function. Michel Maffesoli has written extensively on the prevalence of representations as binding agents (see Maffesoli 1988). He argues that the image can be material, immaterial, or even simply an idea that people communicate about, but whatever the case "the central point or essential function which one can ascribe . . . to the image is that it leads to 'binding' (*reliance*), to what Durkheim calls the 'social divine'" (Maffesoli 1993a:4). These representations bind people together precisely because they allow them to operate within the same cosmology or world view, what Maffesoli (1993b) calls the "social ambiance."

This social ambiance must be maintained through social and cultural

practices enacted by individuals. These socially given images allow individuals to use them in ever changing and flexible ways. Certainly these images reveal a great deal about the lived experience of the people who use them (Fernandez 1986; Jackson 1989:137-155; Lienhardt 1961:147-170), but they are also the symbolic resources employed to deal with new problems.¹² As cultural resources deployed at critical moments, socially given images provide an access point to explore individuals' behaviors and conceptions of that behavior; in much the same way, images provide people with standards and thus the means to evaluate and comment on the behavior of their peers.

The themes that appear repeatedly in different representations direct us to the key symbolic issues within a given culture, and people employ, improvise upon, and transform the images that express those themes. To explore the social imaginary, many different representations must be compared—ideally, the most highly marked cultural performances contrasted with the most quotidian practices and socially controlled discourse with the idle chatter of the most average people.¹³ Common motifs reveal the essential themes, and the social and the cultural must be articulated fully. As Clifford Geertz has written:

The application of critical categories to social events and sociological categories to symbolic structures is not some primitive form of philosophical mistake, nor is it another mere confusion of art and life. It is the proper method for a study dedicated to getting straight how the massive fact of cultural and historical particularity comports with the equally massive fact of cross-cultural and cross-historical accessibility—how the deeply different can be deeply known with becoming any less different; the enormously distant enormously close without becoming any less far away. (1983:48)

Although Geertz addresses himself to the problem of cross-cultural translation, he does provide a method for the study of the moral imagination, a method similar to the ones used by Beidelman (1986), Comaroff (1985), Fernandez (1982), and Jackson (1986).

PRINCIPLES OF ACTION

I am having another long phone conversation with Ernesto Pichardo,¹⁴ the famous *italero*¹⁵ from Miami. He has been answering my questions and teaching me divination since I was initiated as a priest in July 1992. He was initiated in 1971 as a young man and immediately began training as a di-

viner and master of ceremonies (*Lu. italero, oriaté*). His practical experience is beyond question. He has an incisive and analytical mind with which he has reflected on the social and ritual workings of the religion. I have learned a great deal from him.

It is the evening of October 23, 1995. I sit at my desk in Washington, D.C., as Pichardo elaborates his notions of *aché*. As I scribble notes, the conversation moves between English and Spanish¹⁶:

Ashé is the *mana* of every person and every object. The capacities of human beings to attract the spirits and divinities are one aspect of it, and each object has its own *ashé*. When you bring it into relation with another object, it becomes a new *ashé*. The introduction of the object forms a new mixture and the energy changes the situation. It transforms and becomes demonstrable and visible. If a situation requires aspirin and that is all that is required to change the situation, the aspirin has shown its *ashé*. Thus the object's *ashé* depends on the context in which it is being used.

People are different. If your know-how is extensive, then the work of the *orishas* is extensive. If not, then the work of the *orichas* will only reflect your human capacity. The ability of the communicator is key. It's just like in the Christian church. The institution is limited by the ability of the people in that institution. Because of the knowledge that an individual may have, it is that natural ability plus the learned that will make the difference between one priest and another. Natural ability and learning must go together, because ability cannot be relied on 100 percent, unless you are going to rely on possession 100 percent of the time. Even then, you have to know how to draw in possession and that is learned.

The *ashé* of an individual is more flexible than the *ashé* of an object because of our capacities and our characters. Character, the level of spiritual development, and the initiations a person has undergone all affect the *ashé* of an individual person. When a person makes *orisha* [is initiated as a priest or priestess], the *ashé* goes inside and outside. The ceremony introduces the divinity's energy into this specific body. Over time, that *ashé* is discharged and recharged because of different ceremonies that are done by the individual. With an *aleyo* there is nothing in the body and the *ashé* is not maintained in the same manner. Even after initiation, you still have to transform the human, and the divinity's energy transforms with that body. When the *orisha* first comes down and possesses a priest, it is mute. Later, after *ashé* is given to the mouth, it is vocalized and can speak. You will see that first it speaks very clearly in Yoruba, then in a mix of Yoruba and Spanish, and then more and more in Spanish or whatever the native language of the priest is. But it never loses the Yoruba, and the *orisha*'s body language always responds to the content of the Yoruba chants.

After a person has that supernatural presence with the *orisha*, the individual must function as a receptor and radiator of that energy. The person's ability to

move that supernatural presence and to attract other energies makes the difference between one person's ashé and another.¹⁷

Within the Regla de Ocha, practitioners identify two interrelated series of principles upon which they structure their actions. Just as these principles come into play in the social field through action, they are also discussed and debated within the discursive practices of the tradition. The first set of principles is discussed in the generalities of belief among practitioners and is manifest in practically all cultural performances. The second set of principles grows from the first and is specific to individuals; these principles arise from particular divination rituals performed when orichas are "born." Taken together these two groups of principles constitute an essential part of the habitus of the tradition.

1. Orichas and egun are living beings that affect human life. The fact that practitioners describe orichas as being "born" in ritual underscores the vitality the divinities have for their followers. Similarly the spirits are said to "eat," "speak," "work," and "mount"; this discourse reveals the agency attributed to these spirits. Their effects on the world are described in many ways. Cosmogonically, before birth each individual is believed to agree with an oricha to serve that power while on earth. This "head" oricha protects and guides the individual and is ultimately responsible for her success on earth. Individual character and comportment do determine the quality of the relationship between the "head" oricha and the individual, and a successful person has the blessings of the orichas, blessings that can be seen in the traditional prayers for "health, luck, tranquility, resolve, strength, and spiritual evolution."¹⁸

Each oricha is considered to "rule" a particular part of human life. These correspondences between domains of human activity and specific orichas are usually learned early in life by those born in the tradition and quite soon by those entering the tradition as adults. Yemayá, the oricha of the ocean, is also responsible for most aspects of motherhood. On the most mundane level, she gives children to those who petition her, and she protects children everywhere. She is also said to be the mother of all humans and "the first oricha to come to the defense of humanity."¹⁹ In the same way that Yemayá rules motherhood, Ochún is "the river and love and all the good things in this life." Ochún rules the heart and gives people the human love they need. She is the basic connection between people that keeps society functioning, and in many of her stories she solves a problem by making contact with another supernatural power.

Through their "rule" of different domains of human endeavor, the orichas affect the lives of their followers.

The effects that the spirits of the dead have on the living are both more frequent and less obvious. As a group, the dead are said to give people resolve. They are most often represented by a carved, figurative cane, and their presence is said to steady humans' lives. Spirits venerated include the deceased ancestors in the ritual family, those who have gone before in the blood family of the individual, and spirits who are otherwise essential because of some prenatal commitment to the individual (*cuadro espiritual*). Through dreams, intuitions, and revelations made at possession rituals given in their honor, the dead (Sp. *los muertos*) guide, protect, and heal the humans to whom they are connected. Within these general responsibilities, different categories of the dead are known for their skills in certain areas. The *congo* (Sp. of Bantu origin) spirits are thought to be strong-willed, powerful, and extremely good at guiding people through hostile social circumstances. The *gitano* (Sp. gypsy) spirits have terrific psychic powers and therefore warn people of impending troubles and diagnose and treat difficult illnesses. Similarly, known individual spirits continue to have the skills they possessed when alive. Thus, a person's wise mother might appear in a dream or a *misa* to offer moral guidance. Although these categorical skills are certainly based on stereotypes of social groups or on the attributes of deceased individuals, from a practical standpoint these spirits usually deliver as expected.

2. Every human being has an individual destiny in the world. Much of the traditional wisdom and cultural actions within the Regla de Ocha revolve around the nature of an individual's destiny. Called *destino* or *camino* (Sp. destiny, road), this aspect of life cannot be avoided by individuals. There is no widespread notion of absolute predetermination, but practitioners agree that certain issues and character traits repeatedly come into play in the life of specific individuals.

Elders in the tradition often say, "*Cada persona tiene su propio destino*" (each person has his/her own destiny) or "*cada cual vino al mundo con su propio camino*" (everyone came into the world with his/her own road). Practitioners employ the image of the road much more frequently than they refer to destiny itself, and the meanings of the roads are manifold. In a general sense, it refers to the future, and when it is used in this way, people will say there is an illness, obstacle, or blessing in your road. Another set of common expressions discusses the road as possibility and ease of movement. Practitioners will say that a person's roads are closed

and prescribe particular ritual activities to open the road. Closed roads translate into the absence of opportunity and choice, a reduction in freedom. In fact, the trickster and messenger oricha Elegguá controls the road, and when positively predisposed to an individual “opens the road to blessings and closes the road to difficulties.” Within the divination system known as the shells (Sp. *caracoles*) or *dilogún* (Lu. lit. sixteen, referring to the number of shells used), many proverbs associated with the 256 possible divination figures allude to destiny or the road. Here are a few examples from different divination figures²⁰:

Ocana-Odí: “The one who does not take a known road gets lost and has to turn back” (*él que no va por camino conocido, pierde y tiene que virar hacia atrás*). This proverb suggests that the individual follow a well-known course of action to avoid being set back. Another proverb is often quoted in this figure: “When the roads are closed, only intelligence, will, and faith open them” (*cuando los caminos se cierran, sólo la inteligencia los abre, con voluntad y fe, estos se abren*). This proverb explains how one might open the roads when they are closed.

Ogunda-Odí: “If I keep my promise, my road will be straight” (*si cumplo lo que ofrezco mi camino será derecho*). This proverb urges the individual to fulfill her duty in relation to the orichas and the spirits so that everything will turn out well.

Oché-Metanlá: “When a good road is chosen, the goal is reached” (*cuando se elige buen camino, se llega a la meta*). Here the wisdom of the *dilogún* admonishes the individual to choose and follow a course of action carefully.

Obara-Odí: “The dog has four feet and takes a single road” (*el perro tiene cuatro patas y coge un solo camino*). Practitioners regularly invoke the wisdom of this figure when they sense that an individual under their supervision has too many commitments or is attempting to keep too many options open at the same time.

These proverbs reveal the importance of the trope of the road. Although the details of a person’s road can never be completely known, many ritual practices focus on discovering the nature of destiny.

3. Revelation, especially divination, reveals the essence of situations and problems as well as their solutions. As people work to understand their roads, they seek revelation from the dead and the orichas. In almost all cases the revelation has three components. It describes the person’s circumstances in detail and thus establishes the credibility of the agent delivering the revelation. It articulates the origin of the situation; while at

times the source can be quite mundane, it is often quite extraordinary. Revelations also include prescriptions for solutions to any difficulties that may be present; these suggestions can address the behavior of the person, prescribe certain courses of action (like moving or not going on a planned trip), and list specific ritual work which the person needs to undertake to change the underlying, spiritual causes of the situation. Revelation establishes an interpretive frame for the situation, the specific circumstances in which the person finds herself, and a recommended course of action. Important revelations—like those made at initiations—often guide people as they make subsequent life decisions.

Revelation occurs primarily through one of three mechanisms: dreams, spirit possession, or divination. Dreams are the most unreliable but the most universally accessible. Although most people agree that the revelations of dreams must be authenticated by means of divination and there is disagreement about whether the dead or the orichas are responsible for dreams, their widespread presence makes dreams an extremely powerful and influential form of revelation. Through possession, spirits of the dead and the orichas appear to their followers in key ritual performances. Both usually spend time delivering messages to their followers, and people use this information to guide their choices and actions. During possession, very full revelation often transpires with the origin, specific circumstances, and the course of action all being articulated by a presence manifested from the otherworld. The dramatic texture of possession performances often makes these revelations particularly impressive to individuals who frequently recount them again and again when they are trying to explain their actions to people around them. However, some practitioners maintain that even these revelations must be verified through formal divination.

In the religion, three main forms of divination provide the mechanisms through which the spirits “speak.” Coconut divination uses four pieces of coconut meat to answer yes-or-no questions. Rare are the initiates in the religion who do not know and use this system. People use it constantly to learn whether the spirits have accepted their sacrifices. People who have physical manifestations of the orichas living with them employ this system every week as they “attend” to their orichas. The shells are less widely available and less widely used. These sixteen opened cowrie shells are the “mouths of the oricha” and are tossed on a mat to reveal a specific *odu*. This figure refers to specific circumstances, relevant allegorical stories, applicable proverbs, praise songs, and advice. Priestesses and priests receive the shells when they are initiated and must study for years before they can

understand and competently apply the 256 possible figures to the life of another person. Similarly, Ifá divination can only be learned by the men initiated into the priesthood (Sp. *culto*) of Orula. This divination system again has 256 possible outcomes but uses either sixteen palm nuts or an *ópele* (Lu.), a chain with eight concave disks, to identify the relevant divination figure. The dilogún and Ifá divination resemble each other in many ways, though some of the divination figures have different names.

Precisely because revelation plays such a critical role in the religion, different kinds of revelation are considered to have differing levels of accuracy. Although there is no universal agreement on this subject, perceived accuracy and reliability are related to the hierarchical position of the supernatural agent responsible for the revelation. Dreams, like revelations from reading cards or gazing into a crystal ball or glass of water, are often said to come from the dead. For most practitioners, the dead have less authority than do the orichas, so their revelations must be ratified by the orichas when there appears to be a contradiction between their wishes. Similarly, a priestess's head-ruling oricha has authority over all of the other orichas, so for example, no priestess of Ochún would follow advice from Ogún that contradicted advice already received from Ochún. Over all of these powers Orula's revelations have final authority. When there is any serious dispute between divinities over the life of a person, that individual seeks the guidance of Ifá divination, because Orula alone has the authority to negotiate claims between different orichas.

4. The correct ebó performed at the right time in the proper way beneficially changes the objective circumstances of the person who offers it. The word *ebó* cannot be translated easily, although it is a core religious concept in the Regla de Ocha. The root *bo* means "to adore" or "to worship," and the prefix indicates that the verb has been transformed into a noun; thus *ebó* indicates an act of worship or adoration of the spirits. These acts of adoration take a wide number of forms: They include prayers (Lu. *adurá*), the use of medicines to affect the body (Lu. *ogún*), observing taboos set by the spirits (Lu. *ewó*), small food offerings (Lu. *adimú*), spiritual baths and cleansings (Lu. *ebó kere*), offerings to the head (Lu. *eborí eledá*), blood sacrifice (Lu. *ebó eyé* or *ebó oto eye balé*), and the drumming rituals where the orichas "come down."²¹ The various initiations within the religion also serve as ebó, whether the early ceremony of placing the necklaces upon a new godchild, the receiving of an oricha to attend to and interact with, or the dedication of a whole person's life to the orichas in the asiento, the initiation of a new priest.

Regardless of the form it takes, ebó always relates humans to the spiritual world. In the cosmology of the Regla de Ocha, all of existence resides in one of two realms: *Ayé* represents the phenomenal and visible world, the land of the living, and the theater of human endeavor, and *orun* (Lu. heaven, the otherworld) contains the powerful and potentially dangerous agency of the spirits.²² Ebó serves to bridge these realms and to facilitate communication between them. Considered schematically, the religion's practices can be grouped into divination, sacrifice, and possession. In divination humans seek information from the spiritual world; in sacrifice, humans offer food to the powers of the otherworld; and in possession, these worlds fuse briefly for the benefit of both.²³ In fact, most ritual performances include some mixture of these idealized categories; for example, a dilogún divination ritual opens with an invocation of the dead and the orichas and an offering of water and money to the oricha who will speak. Such a ritual reveals the impact of the otherworld on this world and prescribes a specific type of ebó.

For any specific ebó to be efficacious, it must contain the correct ingredients and be performed in the proper way. Practitioners have certain cultured expectations about which *eboces*²⁴ for which orichas assist humans with which kinds of problems, but these generalizations do not always apply. Ochún is famous for helping barren women become pregnant after she receives an ebó of a pumpkin filled with honey, cinnamon, cloves, and vanilla—all foods that she favors. Practitioners know this ebó to be powerful and often employed, though it does not always produce the desired effect. When an ebó does not work, practitioners will choose one of three explanations. They might suggest that the priestess who made the ebó does not have *aché* in a general sense, that she lacks the basic generative power to effect changes in the spiritual and phenomenal worlds. They might also suggest that the ebó was done incorrectly. Although the priestess has *aché* and this ebó was the appropriate one for the circumstances, some flaw in the ritual performance impeded its effectiveness. The possible flaws are virtually infinite, but in each case an oversight or a mistake in the ritual process has rendered the ebó ineffective. Third, practitioners might suggest that the ebó performed was not the correct one for the situation. Here again explanations abound. In addition to Ochún, Yemayá also assists those seeking children and perhaps a similar ebó should have been offered to her. Perhaps a malicious spirit has been sent against the mother-to-be and is interfering with the conception process. Though many speculations emerge from failed eboces, the religious ideology says

that accurate divination reveals the correct ebó, including its timing, its ingredients, and their number. A specific ebó performed correctly by a competent priestess should change the dynamics in the spiritual world and thereby transform the situation in the physical world.

5. Respect must be paid to the elders and, by extension, to tradition. This principle of the religious ideology of the Regla de Ocha structures much of social life and symbolic action. Upon initiation as a priest, ritual kin relationships come into play with the neophyte as godchild and the initiator as godparent. A godchild always owes respect to her godparents, and for many people this rule is incontrovertible and absolute. Frequently this ideal results in godchildren reproducing the performances of their godparents in a rigid and unreflective way. Justifications of ritual actions often include appeals such as “My godfather did it that way and so do I” and “It is done in that way in my branch of the religion.” This emulation of the godparent as a carrier of the tradition works to reproduce and “traditionalize” social and cultural forms in an extremely precise way, although other practitioners may offer critiques of these performances. Of course, social life includes a good dose of acrimony, and godchildren and godparents struggle with one another and at times separate permanently.²⁵

Even in the most extreme situations, however, godchildren are expected to name their godparents when they pay tribute to all the spirits and humans with whom they work in the religion. The *moyuba*, an important verbal form in the tradition, is a long invocation that lists and honors all the egun, orichas, and priests and priestesses with whom a practitioner has had a relationship, and the prayer ends with invocations of protection for living godparents and others who have initiated the speaker, regardless of their current social relationship. Other verbal forms reveal the importance of this respect. Proverbs on the subject are manifold. “The ears do not pass the head” (Sp. *las orejas no pasan la cabeza*) points to the proper relationship of minors to elders with the minors below. The elders should lead the minors in all things. People commonly say “Respect to be respected” (Sp. *respete para que lo respeten*) to explain a moral course of action. Respectful people often garner the respect of others, but it is in no way guaranteed.

A key ideological proverb says, “The dead gave birth to the orichas” (Sp. *los muertos parieron a los orichas*, Lu. *egun lobi ocha*). This statement encodes both a prescription for ritual action and a profound truth about the history of the tradition. The widely held belief is that practitioners must “work” the dead before they work the orichas to show respect to the dead and to have an open road with the orichas. In ritual, the dead are

named and consulted before the orichas, and this proverb is the common explanation. The proverb also leads practitioners to reflect on the fact that they have received the orichas through a lineage of ritual ancestors, and in their initiation, their orichas were “born” from their godparents’ manifestations of the divinities. Because the orichas have come through the elders, living and dead, the elders deserve respect on a never-ending basis.

In addition to respect for the dead, this proverb also underscores the importance of traditionalization as a key practice within the religion. By linking present or proposed practices, values, meanings, and expressive forms to symbolic material from the past, Santería practitioners can traditionalize their actions (see Handler and Linnekin 1984; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Tradition, then, is understood as a specific, context-derived interpretation and representation of the *present* in terms of its connections—real or imagined—with the *past* (Hymes 1975; Bauman 1992). Traditionalization in Santería provides practitioners with an explanation for the source of their practices as well as moral authority to enact those practices.

Just as verbal forms demonstrate respect and traditionalization, ritual minors must do *moforibale* to their elders in ritual and social contexts. This prostration embodies the relationship of respect that plays such a key role in the tradition. This bodily ritual form demonstrates the social deference that minors ideally show their elders. Through the ritual kin system, through verbal forms, and through the use of the body, followers of the orichas again and again show the importance of respecting the elders.

But ritual age and respect for elders as structuring principles are cross-cut by the importance given to ritual position within a given performance context. Ritual age is the dominant form of hierarchy within the religion, but this social structure competes with certain ritual functions at ceremonies. Just as revelations possess differing validity depending on the source of the oracular statement, certain social roles are more important than others in a given context, and the social order usually adjusts accordingly. The best and most common example is the *italero* or *oriaté* who enters important ritual ceremonies, and, though usually an elder, must command the assembled priestesses and priests regardless of their relative positions in the age-based hierarchy. For the duration of the ceremony, the ritual specialist sits atop the hierarchy.

In addition to these five generalized principles and growing from the importance of divination, revelations given to each individual priest and priestess at the time of their initiations undergird the habitus of the Regla

de Ocha. These principles are both cultured and individual. Many of the practices enacted by individuals relate directly to the divination ritual called the *itá* that provides each actor with a specific and fairly limited set of divination verses with which to understand life and engage the world. These verses reveal basic issues of character, sociability, health, and economics that will confront the individual again and again. They also contain stories and proverbs considered key to the person's destiny. Because of their relationship to destiny and their great value, many practitioners refuse to reveal the contents of their *itá* to anyone. Most practitioners believe that individuals act out these stories and proverbs for better or worse and so are challenged to manifest them positively. In general, people ensure these positive manifestations by making *ebó* of some sort.

From the tropes of this allegorical material, practitioners improvise individualized action to maximize their circumstances. Cognitively oriented anthropologists have long been interested in the effects of metaphors and other linguistic tropes on cultural life (Fernandez 1991; Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and much has been made of the ability of metaphor to unite disparate realms of experience (Jackson 1989:137-155). In this analogical mode of thought and action, the source image (the item which is symbolically brought into play) is transferred and mapped onto the target situation (the situation or object symbolically described by the source). In the case of *oricha* divination the source can be in a story or a proverb, and the target is or will be present in the life of the practitioner. Because the source of the metaphoric situation will manifest again and again but in unpredictable ways, practitioners attempt to identify ways to make their actions embody the source and thereby become the target of the tropes. Through this elaborate, symbolic work, priestesses and priests of the *orichas* attempt to accomplish their goals at the same time that their lives literally embody some manifestation of the divination sign that the *orichas* have determined to be relevant.

The divination figures contain "secrets" that identify the person with the allegorical material elicited from the *itá* divination ceremony. These secrets can take the form of repeated stereotyped behavior or some object that embodies certain aspects of the divination sign. For example, the divination sign *Iroso Meyi* advises the person to make *ebó* every month; this course of action responds to the character of the *odu* in which nothing is accomplished without hard and consistent labor. Similarly the sign *Obara-Eyeunle* includes a story about a town that had to make *ebó* two days in a row and this same course of action is suggested for the person

who "has" this *odu*.²⁶ The *odu Oché-Iroso* includes the proverb, "If the water does not fall, the corn will not grow," and as a rule children of this figure wear a necklace of roasted corn to identify themselves with the idealized, productive result in the source proverb. These relatively simple examples provide a taste of the open "secrets" of the *odus*, which result in symbolic actions by practitioners.

Beyond these more generally applied and cultured patterns of action, practitioners also improvise actions based on the *odus*. A brief example of this kind of symbolic action will provide some sense of divination's effects on further cultural performances. The divination figure called *Oché-Odí* includes the following proverbs: "The one who owes and pays his debt is free" and "It is not good to say everything nor is it good to eat everything." The figure also includes a long story describing how the red parrot feather came to protect people from witchcraft. This figure came out for a *santero* with whom I work here in Washington, D.C., when we were preparing to go to a ritual drumming in New York. As we prepared for the trip, he followed the tropes from the figure: He made an outstanding sacrifice to the *orichas*, thus paying what he owed. He wore a protective red parrot feather hidden under his cap at the drumming, thus integrating the warning about witchcraft from the story and the idea of secrecy from the proverb, "It is not good to say everything nor is it good to eat everything." This brief example illustrates how *santeros* use these traditional expressive forms to improvise symbolic actions.

In fact, the divination signs' stories and proverbs act as generative schemata for practitioners. They mobilize and deploy the verbal texts from their personal divination signs with the goal of incarnating them; this transference of the sign into lived experience and social action is key to these more individual cultural principles. As Bourdieu has said, "Practical logic . . . is able to organize the totality of an agent's thoughts, perceptions, and actions by means of a few generative principles. . . . These discrete, self-sufficient units owe their immediate transparency not only to the schemes which are realized in them, but also to the *situation* apprehended through these schemes and to the agent's practical relationship to the situation" (1989:110). The schemes present in the texts manifest as the actions of intentional actors in the social field that includes the gods as primary agents. Thus practitioners follow the advice of the *orichas* by improvising or embodying the actions related to the *odu*. Through the use of these tropes, practitioners unite the ideal and eternal *orun* with the everyday reality of action in the tangible and observable *ayé*.²⁷

VIING FOR POWER: EVALUATION, STATUS, AND ACHÉ

This uniting of worlds never happens in isolation, however. As a priest attempts to enact the allegorical patterns of his itá, he is constantly being watched and judged by his peers. The general principles I articulated before and those symbolic resources relevant to the divination figures from the itá represent the key patterned, yet idiosyncratic, idioms of experience in the Regla de Ocha. These idioms are manifestations of what Anthony Giddens (1979) has called structural properties—properties that shape traditions, values, cultural notions of personhood, and behavior. Evaluation focuses on certain kinds of action, and it gathers around the ways in which people deploy these structural properties.

These evaluations establish certain aspects of status, and criticism must be understood as a key cultural form that results in differential access to power in certain situations (Hardin 1993:189–264). Though not called “ceremonies” by practitioners, these verbal contestations and defenses of social power must be understood as a less clearly marked but still very important form of ritual. Competence as a religious performer results in a certain level of status, but each performance potentially evokes evaluation and criticism that revise the status granted to performers; this potential for criticism often leads practitioners to a reflexive position in which they anticipate critiques and prepare explanations and justifications. The semiotic communication embedded in each performance contextualizes that event within an evaluative frame (Bauman and Briggs 1990); within the Regla de Ocha, the frame itself often becomes the ground of contestation as practitioners seek status and power.

Status competition plays a critical role within the religion precisely because of the hierarchical nature of the semisecret society of oricha practitioners. There is a widely accepted hierarchy of fully initiated priests and priestesses in the religion; this idealized hierarchy is reproduced in discourse and practice again and again. The babalawo holds a great deal of power in some circles because of his access to Ifá divination. As noted earlier, his divinations are widely considered to be the most accurate; ideology states that all other opinions must be subsumed under his authority, although in practice practitioners can subvert his authority in any number of ways. Babalawos with Olofi are rarer, even in Cuba (cf. Sánchez 1978:30); these babalawos have the authority and ritual capacity to initiate others into Ifá. Babalawos with *kuanaldo* (Lu.), an initiation that allows a babalawo to slaughter four-legged animals, are fairly common (Brandon 1983:

392 and 396; Murphy 1988:85–87); even in small communities, like Washington, D.C., there are babalawos with *kuanaldo*. *Oluos* (Lu. lords) are those babalawos who made oricha before making Ifá and thus have some authority in both domains, although they cannot initiate people to orichas other than Orula.

The oriaté and the italero are both common and frequently have large followings of divination clients who visit them regularly. At this level, status competition leads people to criticize each other's practice, knowledge, and preparation and ultimately to question the authority and competence of their competitors. Under the italeros are those practitioners who “have ocha”; the terms *oloricha* and *olocha* (Lu. owner of oricha) reflect this connective relationship. Those olochas with *cuchillo* (Sp. knife) or *pinaldo* (Lu. knife), an initiation that is commonly interpreted to authorize them to sacrifice four-legged animals, have more status than others. *Iyalochas* and *babalochas* (Lu. mother- and father-of-oricha) are those priestesses and priests who have initiated another person into the priesthood. Positions within this idealized hierarchy are always being contested and revised, and evaluation and criticism function as omnipresent tools in the struggle for respect and status.²⁸

This ideologically driven hierarchy derives primarily from generalized and objective notions of personhood. These notions of personhood, however, must be appropriated by living individuals if they are to embody and experience the qualities and capacities associated with their cultural notions (Fortes 1973:287). The five general principles of action adumbrated earlier correspond roughly with these generalized notions of personhood and the status granted through initiations while, at the same time, those individualized principles of action generated from the itá correspond with the subjective and lived experience of personhood. Criticism focuses both on the performance and its implications for the moral person responsible for that performance. Positive evaluations of a given ritual performance imply that the person has aché; it is common to hear practitioners say, “She is a tremendous priestess” (Sp. *es tremenda santera*). Similarly, a practitioner's criticism of a ritual performance is tantamount to a critique of the person's ability as a practitioner and morality as a member of the community. In the final analysis, the general principles of action are the ones applied to practitioners when they are evaluated by their peers. Performative competence and moral personhood become roughly equivalent.

For example, every olocha should be able to recite the long Lucumí invocation called the moyuba that opens every ceremony. This prayer represents

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