



SANTERÍA

AFRICAN SPIRITS IN AMERICA

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W I T H A N E W P R E F A C E

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BOTÁNICA

If we would walk along the streets of any Hispanic neighborhood in New York, wedged between the busy groceries and newsstands we might see small retail stores called *botánicas*. To the uninitiated, their merchandise must look mysterious indeed: candles and beads, herbs and oils, cauldrons and crockery, and plaster statues of Catholic saints. Yet, for those who know their meaning, each of these items has a part to play in *santería*, the religion of the *orishas* in New York. *Santería* came to New York in the heads and hearts of Cuban emigrants, who came in waves after the revolution of 1959. It has prospered here, bringing growing numbers of Puerto Rican and black Americans into the way of the *orishas*. If we enter a *botánica*, we can get our first taste of this ancient African spiritual path in modern America.

This particular *botánica* is called La Caridad del Cobre and is found in the middle of a bustling Cuban neighborhood in the Bronx. In its picture window is a huge, life-sized statue of its patron, La Caridad del Cobre, the Virgin of Charity, Cuba's patron saint.¹

At the dawn of the seventeenth century, Caridad appeared to humble fishermen and left them her holy image, which came to be enshrined at the town of Cobre at Cuba's eastern tip. Today her plaster image reveals a beautiful dark lady in perfect repose, crowned and holding a wise royal child. At her feet are the three fishermen, awestruck, hands clasped in adoration.

In the *botánica's* window, Caridad is attended by a number of smaller statues of the important saints and virgins of Cuban folk piety—the dark Lady of Regla, crippled Saint Lazarus on his crutches, regal Saint Barbara with crown and sword.

But these are not only Catholic saints. To the initiated, they are just the public faces of more puissant and mysterious spirits, the *orishas*. The Lady of Regla is the Catholic face of Yemaya, lovely mother of the seas. Saint Lazarus is a public way of representing Babaluaye, the *orisha* of disease and healing. Saint Barbara is Shango, the great thunder king in the guise of a woman. And Caridad, the beautiful patroness, is Oshun, the sweet river goddess.

Some might see these Catholic images as disguises for the *orishas*, ways to preserve a secret tradition while pretending to practice another. It is true that secrecy has been vital to preserve the integrity of the tradition and protect it from the intolerance of bigots. Prejudice and oppression have taught the children of the *orishas* to be prudent in how they present their soul life to outsiders. Still, thoughtful devotees maintain that the Catholic saints are not disguises for the *orishas* but rather personae. They say that the saints are *caminos*, “ways” of the *orishas*, ways that the *orishas* manifest themselves to the Catholic world. Just as the Catholic church believes that the Virgin Mary manifests herself in different ways to different cultures, so these *santeros* have sought a universal vision of the *orishas*. For them, the *orishas* are capable of appearing to ordinary Catholics as pallid white saints and to *santeros* as the invisible forces of *ashe*.

The window scene of the *botánica* is reminiscent of the courtly serenity of the Yoruba temple, but, once we go inside the store, we are overwhelmed by a riot of merchandise for sale. Shelves and glass cases are crammed full of religious articles. One large case is devoted entirely to necklaces of brightly colored beads, each coded to a particular *orisha*: yellow or gold for Oshun, blue and white for Yemaya, pure white for Obatala, red and white for Shango. The beads themselves are cheap plastic, but some are finely strung with meticulous at-

tention to numerical patterns. Each *orisha* manifests in different *caminos*, and the patterns must reflect which *caminos* the devotee wishes to invoke.

In fact, everything in the *botánica* is color and number coded to the *orishas*. Spiritual work done with Oshun, for example, should be done in fives and with the color yellow. In order to focus her life-giving *ashe* on their problems, devotees will light for her five yellow candles, offer her five yellow cakes, and wear yellow beads in various groupings of five, depending on her *camino*. These are her mystical coordinates that put her *ashe* to work for her human children. A complete chart of the *orishas* is given on pages 42 and 43.²

Piled high in unlikely corners are large crockery tureens in a variety of colors. These are *soperas*, great lidded bowls that will contain the most fundamental symbol of the *orishas'* presence—their holy stones.

In so many myths of the *orishas*, we are told that they left the primordial community of Ile-Ife by descending into the earth. All that remained of their presence were stones, still resonating with their *ashe*. Devotees can find these *orisha* stones among ordinary ones if they can learn to listen carefully enough. For the *orisha* stones are alive with the *orisha's ashe*. They are most likely to be found in the element most expressive of their force—ocean stones for Yemaya, river pebbles for Oshun, meteorites for the thunder king Shango.

The stones can answer that they are alive with an *orisha's ashe* by means of a number of oracles derived from Yoruba Ifa. The fall of coconut or cowrie shells, the patterns of Ifa chains or palm nuts, can be interpreted to listen to the stones' deep voice. If the stones are indeed alive, they are to be collected in a *sopera* whose color represents that *orisha*. There they are venerated as the *fundamentos* of the *orisha*, the most fundamental, tangible representation of the *orisha* on earth.

As embodiments of the *orishas*, the stones must be treated as the living things that they are, and so they are lovingly bathed in cooling herbs, cleaned and oiled, and fed with the blood of animals.³

Orisha	Saint	Principle	Number	Color
Agayu	Christopher	fatherhood	9	green, red, & yellow
Babaluaye	Lazarus	illness	17 or 13	black or light blue
Eleggua	Nino de Atocha, Anthony of Padua	way-opener, messenger, trickster	3	red & black
Ibeji	Cosmus & Damien	children	2	those of Oshun & Shango
Inle	Rafael	medicine	7	green
Obatala	Mercedes	clarity	8	white
Ogun	Peter, Santiago	iron	7	green & black
Olokun	Regla	profundity	7	blue & white
Orula	Francis	wisdom, destiny	16	green & yellow
Osanyin	Joseph	herbs	3	green
Oshosi	Norbert	hunt/ protection	7	lavender & black or blue & orange
Oshun	Caridad	eros	5	yellow
Oya	Candelaria	death	9	maroon, red, or brown
Shango	Barbara	force	4 or 6	red & white
Yemaya	Regla	maternity	7	blue & white

Foods	Dance Posture	Emblem
fish, meat	long paces, carries children	oshé
tobacco, rum, doves, hens	infirm, lame	crutches, reeds, & cowries
white chicken, rooster, opossum, rum	buffoonery	hooked staff
—	children's play	twins
—	fishing	leaves, earth
♀ goats, pigeons	calm reality	whiteness, fly whisk
♂ roosters, dogs	bellicose	iron
rooster, spiced rum	seas	shell
chicken, dove	dances through Oshun	ifa
rodents	does not dance	leaves, forest
doves, rum, guinea hens	hunting calls	bow & arrow
♀ white hen, goat, sheep	coquette	fan, gold, peacock feather
only fowl, hens, doves	bacchanal, storm	lance
♂ rooster, sheep, goat, pig, bull	aggression, violent acrobatics	oshé
duck, turtle, goat	smooth or raging seas	fan shell

The *orishas*, like all living things, must eat. Few aspects of the way of the saints is more misunderstood than blood sacrifice. To outsiders, it often appears as the essence of primitivity, for some romantically authentic, to others revolting and barbarous. But it is really none of these things. It is a way to show the relationship and interdependence of living things.

Animals die so that human beings may live. Urbanites forget the source of their food, that their consumption of beef or chicken—even vegetables—requires the death of living things. All are related by delicate exchanges and balances of nature that make human life possible. In santería, sacrificial animals are never slaughtered cruelly or wantonly. The cuts are quick and clean, and their flesh is eaten by all at the great feasts. Their blood is offered to the *orishas* to show human beings their dependence on the world outside them and to give back to the invisible world something of what it gives to the visible. *Santeros* are naturally reluctant to discuss animal sacrifices with outsiders, and we must be patient if we are to learn more.

In the apartments of New York, these blood offerings require containers like the *soperas*. They hold the fundamental stone symbols of the *orishas*, they contain the sacrifices that are offered through them, and they conceal the sacred stones from the eyes of the profane.

As befits a king, Shango has his own kind of *sopera*, the *batea Shango*, always in wood and always elevated on a wooden mortar stool, the *pilón*. *Santeros* in New York have not forgotten Shango's shrines and the Yoruba equation of kingly power and fertility. And they have remembered Shango's dispute with Ogun, the blacksmith, so that all Shango's tools are of wood, especially his mighty *oshe*, the double-headed ax. We can see a variety of *oshes* in the *botánica*. Some are just crude ax shapes sawn from plywood, but others are delicate and decorated with tribal marks like their Yoruba prototypes.

When the meaning of the *soperas* and *bateas* becomes clear, we might notice on a shelf behind the counter a neat

row of little iron cauldrons no more than six inches high. They are fire blackened with rounded bottoms perched on three nubby legs. These will contain the *fundamentos*, the fundamental symbols, of Ogun, miniature tools of the blacksmith's forge—an anvil, a rake, a hoe, a pick, a machete, a spade, a pike, a sledge. Like the stones of the other *orishas*, Ogun's tools are worked from the ore of the earth and receive warming blood and cooling herbs. They are the medium through which Ogun eats and works.

As a warrior *orisha*, Ogun's tools are also weapons of war. Ogun fights for his children, and his tools must be in a constant state of preparedness. They must be kept clean and well oiled with palm oil. As the devotee grows in the religion, he or she will learn how to use the tools as symbolic medicines to protect against those who would do the devotee harm.

Beside Ogun's tools, the *botánica* has placed a stylized bow and arrow wrought in iron, the fundamental symbol of Oshosi, *orisha* of the hunt. Oshosi and Ogun are natural companions, for both blaze paths through the forest and both are knowledgeable about the secret powers of forest leaves. These rugged, independent *orishas* walk together to protect the devotee from the jungle of dangers outside one's doorstep. Life continues to be hard for the children of the *orishas*. New York's dangers may not be those of Cuban slavery, but devotees still need spiritual toughness to battle the hard world of the inner city.

Ogun and Oshosi often walk with a third companion, whose fundamental symbols are usually kept out of sight. Yet, in a small case on the floor behind the counter, a sharp observer may see a cluster of small cones of grey concrete about three inches high. Embedded in the concrete in the right places are three small cowrie shells forming a pair of eyes and a jagged, open mouth. These are rough busts of the *orisha* Eleggua, opener of the paths of *ashe*.

Eleggua is the Cuban Lucumi name for Eshu, perhaps derived from the Western Yoruba praise name Eshu-Elegba.⁴

Like his African counterpart, New York's Elegua is a powerful, restless observer of the human condition. He is sometimes imagined as a little boy, a mischievous trickster fond of dangerous practical jokes. At other times, he is a serious monitor of human behavior, gatekeeper to the world of the *orishas* and messenger to Olodumare.

These images of trickster and monitor of conscience have prompted some devotees to find correspondences between Elegua and the Christian idea of the Devil. Purists are quick to point out that Elegua is not a force for evil like the Dantean Prince of Darkness lurking in Christian mythology. Yet Elegua does resemble the Advocate of the book of Job, restlessly overturning human complacency.⁵

Elegua's conical shape is a convenience to contain medicines that energize the concrete to convey hard, aggressive *ashe*. He is properly placed in the home of a devotee at the threshold, and, together with the other warrior *orishas*, Ogun and Oshosi, he guards the door against intrusive forces from the jungle beyond.

The concrete Eleguas in the *botánica* are hollow and inert, waiting for an herbalist's touch to transform them into the *orisha* at the threshold, who opens the way to his devotees and closes the door against a hostile world.

In a long glass case next to the beads is the real focus of the *botánica* that gives the store its name. This is the botanical merchandise of packets and dried clusters of herbs sacred to the *orishas*; herbs to make holy infusions, to focus and channel *ashe*. *Santeros* find that herbs impregnated with *ashe* have amazing powers to cure body and soul.⁶ Blessed in ceremonies to Obatala, elecampane can cure bronchitis. Consecrated by Shango, sarsaparilla will alleviate nervous disorders. Oshun's river fern can be infused into bathwater to relax the mind and turn the evil intentions of others back on them.

Herbs can be made to energize spiritual medicines. Bits and pieces of small symbolic objects can be tied together and infused with the appropriate herbs to protect the wearer from evil influence. *Santeros* call these protective bundles *niche osain*, medicines sacred to Osanyin, *orisha* of forest leaves.

Osanyin is imagined as a leaf man, with one leg like a long stem.⁷ He hides in the forest and yields his secrets only to those who know where to look. This relationship with Osanyin made the old *santeros* true botanists, some with staggering knowledge of thousands of plants and their properties. Osanyin's fundamental symbol is a short staff called an *osun*.⁸ We see them now on the upper-most shelf of the *botánica*, six-inch steel dowels, surmounted by a small cup rimmed with little bells on chains. Fixed to the lid of each cup is a two-inch steel rooster. The cup will contain *ashe*-filled herbal medicines; the rooster plays on Yoruba associations between birds and magical powers as well as the sacrificial blood that releases the herbs' power.

Herbs can be medicines for the *orishas* as well as for human beings. The *orishas* are volatile spirits who can have both benign and wrathful incarnations. A devotee's love of an *orisha* is always tempered by a respect for a much greater force. Shango wields blazing thunderbolts; Oshun is a passionate woman who cannot be scorned. As the red blood of sacrifices warms and empowers the *orishas*, green herbs can cool their overheated *ashe* when their stones are bathed in fresh, herbal water.

Herbs keep the *orishas* happy and serene and keep their human children healthy in body and soul. They are at the heart of the religion, and the herbmaster is its most vital office. Above everything else, the herbs are what make the religion work, and their properties and symbolic meanings are the most closely guarded secrets of the way of the *orishas*.⁹

The *botánica* is nothing if not catholic in its technology of spiritual work. Many patrons will supplement their work with the *orishas* with other systems of spirituality. The entire back wall of the store is devoted to shelves of twelve-inch votive candles in all the colors of the rainbow. *Santeros* have learned from Catholic liturgies that the powers of saints can be focused on the problems of the living by showing the pure flame of devotion at the feet of their images. Many *santeros* will supplement the African style of devotions to the *orishas* with more orthodox Catholic veneration of their saintly coun-

terparts. The *botánica* does a brisk business in the rosaries, Bibles, prayer books, scapulars, medals, and statues familiar to Catholic folk piety everywhere.

Some patrons of the *botánica* are said to “cross” (i. e., to supplement) the way of the *orishas* with spiritualist séances. The writings of the nineteenth-century French spiritualist Alain Kardec continue to be enormously popular in the Hispanic world.¹⁰ In the spiritualist tradition of *mesa blanca*, the world of European mediumship and that of the *orishas* has been brought together (“crossed”). The *botánica* carries large supplies of florida water, the universal solvent and conductor of these spirits.¹¹

These more European devotions are sometimes derided by purists faithful to the African origin of santería. They especially deplore the mass-produced good-luck charms and amulets that the *botánica* offers to the credulous—lucky number books, anti-jinx spells, get-rich-quick pendants. The herbs have even become modernized into aerosol sprays of doubtful content. Distanced from the ritual acts that can truly energize an object spiritually, these objects only alienate the devotee from the healing work of preparation. It is training and devotion that make a *santero*, say the purists, and only that knowledge and love can further *ashe*.

Most *botánicas* sell lottery tickets, and patrons sometimes buy one for the *orishas*, hoping the spirits will bring the lucky number to pass. At several stations in the Botánica de la Caridad del Cobré, small Plexiglas boxes have been fixed before statues of the *orishas*, and they are usually filled with coins, bills, and lottery tickets.

Despite its commercialism, the Botánica de la Caridad del Cobré offers the genuine *santero* a refuge from a much colder world outside. Thrust into the most urban world imaginable, the *botánica* preserves something of the forest, the pure and wild realm of Osanyin, and so the world of the *orishas* in New York.

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There are over one hundred *botánicas* scattered around the five boroughs and Bergen County. We can only guess how many *santeros* it takes to support them. The *botánica*, like the saints, is only the public face of the world of the *orishas* in New York. It is open to all who find it, but the community that supports it is more difficult for outsiders to know. Members have had to be suspicious for so long, prejudice has buried the tradition so deeply, that they will not often open it to strangers.

Santeros live for the *orishas* and to help those who seek the aid of the *orishas*. They are not interested in explaining or justifying the religion to the disinterested observer. If we wish to go further, we must find a personal reason beyond curiosity. We must be willing to give something of ourselves for the *orishas* to respond.

I do not yet know what inspires me in my own search into the world of the *orishas*. It is partly academic research and partly the romance of a strange world. But there is something further, something in the depth of commitment I see in the eyes of *santeros*, something in the depth of the rhythms of the drums, that I recognize in myself. It is as if I am being called.

Perhaps the owner at La Caridad del Cobré senses this willingness in me even if I cannot yet name it. He tells me that there is one *santero*, a true *babalawo* living in New York,