



*Celina González (r) and Idania Diaz (l) in front of Celina's Santa Bárbara altar. Photo: Ivor Miller.*

## The Singer as Priestess: Interviews with Celina González and Merceditas Valdés

(La Habana, 1993)

*Ivor Miller*

*Celina González:  
Queen of the Punto Cubano*

**D**rummer Iván Ayala<sup>1</sup> grew up in New York City listening to the music of Celina González.\* As a child in the 1960s he was brought to Puerto Rican *espiritista* ceremonies, where instead of using drums, practitioners would play Celina's records to invoke the spirits. This is one way that Celina's music and the dedication of her followers have blasted through the U.S. embargo against Cuba that has deprived us of some of the planet's most potent music, art and literature for over 32 years. Iván's experience shows the ingenuity of working people in maintaining human connections that are essential to them, in spite of governments that would keep them separate. Hailed as musical royalty in Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, England and in Latin USA, Celina has, until very recently, been kept out of the U.S. market.<sup>2</sup>

Cuba has long been a mecca for African-derived religious and musical traditions, and Celina's music taps a deep source. It is at the same time popular and sacred, danceable and political. By using the ancient Spanish *décima* song form to sing about the Yoruba deities (*orichas*), she has become a symbol of Cuban creole (*criollo*) traditions. A pantheon of *orichas* are worshipped in the *Santería* religion, which is used by practitioners to protect humans from sickness and death, and to open the way for peace, stability, and success.

During the 14 month period that I spent in Cuba from 1991–1994, I had often heard Celina's music on the radio, TV, and even at a concert/rally for the Young Communist League (UJC), where the chorus of "Long live *Changó!*" ("*¡Qué viva Changó!*") was chanted by thousands of socialist Cuba's "New Men" at the Plaza of the Revolution.<sup>3</sup>

Celina is a major figure in Cuban music and cultural identity. Her 1948 song "*Santa Bárbara*" was a groundbreaking event in modern Cuban music, reviving Cuban rural music

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(*música guajira, el "punto cubano"*) for a national and international audience, and infusing it with Afro-Cuban creole spirituality. Celina is herself a "guajira," (country girl) and is fiercely proud of it. She grew up near the Sierra Maestra, the mountainous region in eastern Cuba where many slave rebellions, the War of Independence, and the Cuban Revolution were fomented. She has been an ardent supporter of the Revolution, and also of the *guajira* culture in which she grew up. During the early years of the Cuban Revolution, the public performance of religious songs was prohibited, and Celina withdrew from singing "*Santa Bárbara*" for over twenty years.

It was the 1987 publication of the famous Castro interview, *Fidel and Religion*,<sup>4</sup> that prompted her to sing for *Changó* again, and soon after this began the current explosion in *Santería* initiations. She is an important figure in today's religious revival.

I first met Celina González and her son Reutilio Jr. at an intimate concert they gave at the old Spanish Castilla de la Fuerza at the port in Havana Vieja. She had just finished singing "*Santa Bárbara*" without microphones, accompanied by acoustic stringed and percussive instruments. I was astonished at the strength of her inspired voice and charged from the energy she manifested. Reutilio Jr., also charged from the music, eagerly signed and gave me a poster of himself and his mother. After a long conversation in which we exchanged ritual status and lineage information (he a son of *Ogún* and I of *Changó*), he gave me his home phone number and asked me to call in four days. His mother was to receive *Babalú-Ayé* the following day, and would be occupied for the three-day interim.

In Havana, December is a busy month for parties and ceremonies. December 3–4 is the celebration of *Santa Bárbara/Changó*, with thousands journeying to the church in Párraga, or making their own ceremonies at home. December 16–17 is the pilgrimage to El Rincón, the church of *San Lázaro/Babalú-Ayé*. I arrived at Celina's home in the morning of December 14, accompanied by Idania and Michel Diaz, aficionados of Celina's music and fellow Guantanameros. Celina graciously welcomed us, and we ended up talking for over four hours and made a 90-minute taped interview.

Behind the front door of her simple house sits *Eleguá*. In the other corner is a huge *Ogún prenda*, above which hangs a long machete, and next to this a portrait of Fidel (the warrior) in uniform. Celina had just received *Babalú-Ayé*, whose altar is next to *Ogún*. On a Soviet-made TV to the left of *Babalú* sits a framed gold record she received as an award. At the far side of the room stands a wooden painted statue of *Santa Bárbara*, four feet tall, and framed with Xmas lights. On the bureau next to her is a small statue of *el Niño de Atocha*. It is here that Celina holds court. We distributed ourselves onto the hard wood rocking chairs in the room, and a young male godchild (*ahijado*) served us coffee. A female godchild came in, a doctor, and talked about green medicine (herbology directly related to the curative practices of *Santería*). After two hours, all visitors but ourselves left, and we sat with the Queen of the *punto cubano* as she talked about her music and her religion.

When we arrived, Celina made it clear that she never lets anyone photograph her *Santa Bárbara*, because it might make the *oricha* angry. But by the time we left, she invited us to take group photos in front of *Santa Bárbara*. She is a lively and generous woman of 65, god-mother (*madrina*) to a large spiritual family, and has earned the respect of many in her *barrio*, her island, and abroad.

**IM:** Was your family religious?

**CG:** Both my mother and grandmother were devout Catholics; they weren't *santeras*. They had what all the rural people in Cuba have: an altar with *Santa Bárbara, la Caridad del Cobre, la Virgen de Regla* and *San Lázaro*. The only thing my mother worshipped was this

altar. I respected her very much because she was very saintly, if she saw a sick person she'd cure them, and never asked anything for her work.

My father was also Catholic. I often go to church and give masses for my dear ones and my spiritual guides.

I've been a poet since I was ten years old. It is a gift. Words come easily to me, I don't know if it could be some poet that accompanies me as a spirit. I work a lot in octosyllable (a type of *décima*), and when the feeling comes to write, words often come in this form.

I've been a seer since I was a little girl. I developed my vision alone, because my saints and my ancestral spirits wouldn't let anyone near me. Above all it was *Santa Bárbara* who said, "Nobody can touch you until I say so. I am the one who has to choose." It is for this that I respect her so, and for this that I waited so long to *make saint*.

**IM:** Where were you and your husband born?

**CG:** My husband Reutilio<sup>5</sup> was from Guantánamo Province. He was born in San Antonio Redo, known today as El Central Manuel Tames. I was born in Jovellanos, la Nueva Lisa, in Matanzas Province. My parents moved east to Santiago de Cuba when I was a young girl. Four years ago when they paid me homage in Jovellanos, I met my family that stayed there.

Reutilio and I met in Santiago de Cuba. Without any formal schooling, he played the guitar more wonderfully than anyone I've ever heard. His music brought people to their feet. In that time one had to be an artist! If you weren't, the audience would throw tomatoes at you in a minute. But our two voices made an impact, he was the second and I the lead. And we dedicated ourselves to working together. We were inseparable as lovers, as a married couple, and as partners in art.

We began to work the Oriente radio network in 1947. We arrived in Havana on November 2, and were hired for one week by the radio station *Suaritos*. By the end of the week we had composed the number "*Santa Bárbara*."

Before composing the song, *Santa Bárbara* had appeared to me twice in dreams. She asked me to sing for her, she said if I didn't I would not succeed, and if I did I would travel the world. When I made the song, it became a hit in Cuba, and from there we became famous around the world.

She also told me that I was going to enter into *Santería*. But many years passed until I was initiated in 1959. I was initiated as a daughter of the holy *Virgen de Regla, Yemayá*.

**IM:** Did Reutilio influence the themes of your music?

**CG:** In the first song of *Santa Bárbara* no, but in the others yes. When we saw that "*Santa Bárbara*" was a hit, and that she conceded to me all that she promised, he and I began to co-author songs. He made the music, and I made the words.

I don't know why, but the first song for *Santa Bárbara*, I had to make in *décima*, except for the Yoruba phrase "*Que viva Changó*" (Long live *Changó*) in the chorus. Thanks to her, to God, for all that I have, also *maferefun Yemayá*.

**IM:** Who is your godfather in *Ocha*?

**CG:** My godfather in *Ocha* is Jaunelo Ortega, "*Changó Dina*."<sup>6</sup> He lives in Miami. I always ask *Changó* to help him and give him health, he was very good to me. He initiated me at a young age, 34 years ago. He made me an initiate of *Yemayá*, and *Changó* is my father. He belongs to the lineage of Nicolas Angarica.<sup>7</sup> The first godchild of Nicolas was my representative at my *Ocha* ceremony. She is a beautiful lady, an initiate of *Yemayá*, and sings beautifully to the *Oricha* and ancestors.

**IM:** How does your training as an *espiritista* and *santera* influence your performance style?

**CG:** I never look at the audience. I concentrate so much that at times I feel afraid, because

I have lost my senses at times, especially when I sing for *Santa Bárbara*.

When I am on the stage I am not me, and I feel it. I am uprooted, I feel that it's not normal, that it's supernatural, because I don't look at the audience. I have dancers, above all one that dances for *Yemayá*, and at times I distance myself from her. One day, during the performance I was dancing and dancing and I said "Ay, *Yemayá* is going to come." I told the dancer, "Girl, go on over there," and I went to the other side of the stage, and began to look at the audience because if I didn't, *Yemayá* would have mounted me for sure.

**IM:** Has your religious practice ever affected your ability to work in Cuba?

**CG:** Nobody has ever given me problems, because these are private matters. For example, if you wanted to make a religious ceremony, it was your own business. The Revolution was never opposed to the religion of Yoruba origin.

I light a candle every year to la *Virgen de Regla*, *Santa Bárbara*, *San Lázaro*, and to *las Mercedes*. I have a church right here in my house. Nobody has come to say, "Listen, don't do this," and my door has always been open and many visitors come.

However, when you would try to sing for the saints on TV they would tell you, "No." Be careful, because I don't mean to say that the government was opposed to this. Fidel came out with the book *Fidel and Religion*,<sup>8</sup> and has never been against Yoruba religion. Those were other people who said, "No, you cannot do this." I know a lot of people who threw away their saints. But when I began to sing again for *Santa Bárbara*, all the other musicians began to sing for the saints. Now everybody sings to *Changó*. Although before many people hid their saints, now everyone is a *santero*. Never in my life have I seen so many *santeros* as now. Why is it that now everyone is making saint? And this is when it costs more, before it was almost free.

I never threw away my saints, or denied that I was religious. *Santa Bárbara* has always been in front of my door, and will be here until I die. I have never denied to anybody that I am a *spiritist*, a *santera*, and that I go to church. I respect God over everything, because my religion is clean, it doesn't harm anybody. As my mother said, "Don't harm anybody, and nobody will harm you."

**IM:** Did you have to develop as a *spiritist*?

**CG:** I've had many proofs. One of them is my granddaughter who's been in the States for 22 years. She left as a young girl, and she made saint over there. Her mother, my daughter, was trying to call me by telephone so I could give my blessing to her ceremony, but she couldn't get through. The day that we communicated, I asked her, "Did your daughter Cecilita make saint?" And she said, "Yes, how did you know?" And I told her "I dreamed that I came to a throne."<sup>9</sup> The throne was that of *Obatalá*, and when I saluted it I said "*maferefun Obatalá, maferefun Obba*." And she told me, "May God bless you! This is the saint that my daughter made, *Obatalá* is her father and *Obba* is her mother." Although they have made saint, and are far away, my children contact me when they're going to take a new step in the religion.

**IM:** Of all your children, has Lázaro Reutilio been the only one to carry on your art as well as your religion?

**CG:** No, my other son is a *babalao*; he has an orchestra, and is a professional musician. He has lived for many years in Miami.

**IM:** How is your religion expressed in your songs?

**CG:** We don't sing in the Yoruba language, but in Spanish so all the Spanish speaking people will understand. For example, *Santa Bárbara* is in octosyllable. *La Caridad del Cobre* is in *décima*. The song of *la Virgen de Regla* isn't in *décima*. I composed it with a little bit of Yoruba.

Sometimes I put in a few Yoruba words. For example, in the Church she is known as *Santa Bárbara*, but in *Santería* she is *Changó*. I have a song to *Obatalá*, who is the blessed *Virgen*

*de las Mercedes* in Catholicism. Also we made a song to *Eleguá* that's been recorded throughout the world. The Church knows him as *Saint Niño de Atocha*, others call him *San Roque*. Thus *Eleguá* is represented in the initiation room as either a child or as a man.<sup>10</sup> *Ogún* is known as *San Pedro*, but he has many avatars, such as *San Juan el Bautista* (St. John the Baptist) or *Santiago Apóstol*. And *Ochoosi*, who is the great hunter, is known as *San Norberto*. Because where he points his arrow, it hits the mark. We have songs for all of them, including *Yemayá*, who is my guardian angel, *My Yemayá* is called *Asesu*. Also the holy *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, who is *Ochún*.

Reutilio and I also dedicated a song to *San Lázaro*, and apart from this, I have my own song for *San Lázaro*. The latest song I wrote, that I'm going to record, is a prayer to *Oyá*, *Jecua-Je Yansa*. For her, I made a beautiful song.

We have songs for all the saints, but in our own style so that everyone can interpret them. Because you can speak a Yoruba word to a *santero*, and he'll understand you. But an *aleyo*, no. An *aleyo* is someone who doesn't have *Ocha*. And then if *aleyos* don't understand what you're saying, why are you singing to them? I sing not only so they'll dance, but also so they'll understand what I am manifesting. I want my songs to communicate, to move the public.

**IM:** Have you had success outside of the country?

**CG:** In Colombia, they named me "The Goddess of Colombia." When I come on stage, everyone asks for the song "*Santa Bárbara*," "*San Lázaro*," "*El Hijo de Eleguá*," (The Son of *Eleguá*) "*A Francisco*" (To Francisco). Francisco is a *Congo* (a guardian spirit) of my godfather *Changó-Dina*, who initiated me, and to this spirit I made a song that is called "*A Francisco*."

In England they call me "Queen of Country Music." The group that went to England with me is *Campo Alegre*, and they were well received. There was a lot of excitement, with lines and lines to see our show. The newspapers said that people there are saturated with electric music. They became very excited with our music. They came to the stage to see the *bongos*, the drums, the *marimba* of Mario Oropesa (may God keep him in glory, *Ibayen bayen tonu*). The music of the lute<sup>11</sup> was emotional to the audience. The *tres* also called a lot of attention.

**IM:** Which group are you working with now?

**CG:** I have a group that's called *Piquete Cubano*. It's traditional creole music, and the musicians are young, something that makes me happy. It's directed by Bárbaro Torres, who is considered at this time to be the best lutist in Cuba, because Raúl Lima died, master of country music on the lute. The second master was José Manuel Rodríguez, who we also had the misfortune to lose.

We present a show that is primarily country, my son Lázaro Reutilio is presented as a songwriter and soloist. Afterwards we perform the music of Celina and Reutilio. Then we sing some Yoruba based songs and close with popular music where Reutilio Jr. sings *boleros* and *guaracha*.

We interpret country music like it is. I don't argue with the younger people, because everything evolves, and logically young people want to be creative. For example Liuba María and María Victoria have wonderful voices, María Victoria sings country music beautifully. But I continue interpreting my music in the manner of Celina and Reutilio, accompanied by my two sons and my group *Piquete Cubano*.

Our music comes from the *Mambises* that struggled for Cuban independence. Because of this Reutilio and I made the song "*Yo Soy el Punto Cubano*" (I am the Punto Cubano), that says "I lived in the hills, when the *Mambi* battled, with a machete in hand." They took the *tres*, the lute, and they sang on the savannas or in the hills where they fought for Cuba. Why has this tradition died?

Why don't they teach young children in elementary schools, who have such good voices, how to work with country music without deforming it? One can put in new things. Logically everything must evolve, respecting the origins. They should know in what way "el son" is not "el son montuno," because the latter is country.

IM: Has there been a festival of country music in Cuba?

CG: There has never been a festival of country music in Cuba. A short while ago there was a festival in Varadero where Pablo Milanés<sup>12</sup> was the only one to remember to bring country music. He invited my group and me. My respect to master Pablo Milanés, and for this I love him like a son. Also I admire Silvio<sup>13</sup>, because he respects my music, and composed a very elegant song entitled "Guajirito Soy" ("I am a Guajiro"). Our roots must be respected. We have roots in China, Spain and Africa, but our own country music must be celebrated. Why is there no festival of country music?

Every region in Cuba has its own music. For example, in Oriente one has *la guajira de salon*, *el son montuno*, and *el punto campesino*, that have many tunes. In the central part of the country including Santa Clara and Santi Spíritu they play *las espirituanas*; in Camagüey, *las tonadas camagüeyanas*; in Matanzas, *las tonadas matanceras y los puntos cruzados*; in Pinar del Río *las tonadas carbajal*, that are the same as the original tunes from Spain. In la Isla de Juventud (the Isle of Youth), *el sucu-sucu*. Why aren't these roots celebrated in a festival of country music?

Today cooperatives exist, new houses made of stonemasonry, but one mustn't forget *el bohío* (the palm thatched houses), nor the country serenades that the rural people have for entertaining themselves.

(Ivor Miller's interview with Merceditas Valdés follows.)



Merceditas Valdés, left.  
Photo by Ernesto Javier.



*Merceditas Valdés.*  
*Photo by Ernesto Javier.*

***Merceditas Valdés:***  
***“the Little Aché”***

Merceditas Valdés<sup>14</sup> was the first singer of popular music to bring Yoruba-derived music and liturgy to Cuban radio and television.\* She sang with Obdulio Morales, whose orchestra is reputed as the first to utilize *batá*, the family of three drums used in Yorubaland and in Cuba for ceremonial music. Valdés worked for many years with Fernando Ortiz, a scholar whose writings were devoted, among other topics, to the African-derived music and ritual practice of Cuba.

Beginning in the 1960s, governmental pressure kept Valdés from singing *oricha* songs for over twenty years. Yet when she was allowed to sing again, she recorded five albums, called *¡Aché!*, numbers 1–5. These records have helped create a revival of Yoruba content in all genres of Cuban popular music. Initiates of *Santería* use her records in ceremonies when drums are not available, and even to warm up the atmosphere before the drummers arrive.

Both Merceditas and Celina claim to be ardent revolutionaries and openly religious, and both have lived for years with the pressure not to sing sacred songs. However, each has been received differently by the listening and dancing public. This may have to do with their life styles, their skin colors, and the content of their music. Castro and other Cuban leaders have from the beginning put the Cuban peasant (*guajiro*) in the forefront of the interests and values of the Revolution. Celina is from the rural part of Oriente, where the Revolution started, and sings about peasant revolts. Her music, no matter what the theme, is danceable to a wide public. Merceditas is from the city of Havana, and sings mainly devotional music, not directly related to the Revolution. Her music is danceable only to those who know the specialized movements of the *orichas*. Merceditas had no children, while Celina, who had five children, was seen as a stable person and a good mother. Merceditas, whose skin is dark, who sings in Yoruba accompanied by *batá* drums, was seen as belonging to a marginal part of Cuba that identified itself as part of an African Diaspora. According to some, the CCP (Cuban Communist Party) repressed the identities and activities of black Cubans as an interest group.<sup>15</sup> Celina, whose skin is light, who sings *guajiro décima* songs in Spanish, was seen as an authentic “creole” (*criollo*), the mixture that the Revolution upheld as “truly” Cuban (100% Cuban). Celina’s musical style fits well within the ideal image of Cuban nationalism, the *mulata*, often represented as a harmonious blending of African and Spanish peoples (ignoring the violence of slavery, rape and continued prejudice). Merceditas’s style, “pure” Yoruba and urban, seems to defy Spanish influence and ignore Cuban peasant music.

When Merceditas speaks of the musical aspirations of Gilberto Valdés, the research of Ortiz, and their celebrations of “Cuban culture” and its African roots, this must be seen in the context of a new nation, recently emerged from slavery and struggling to emerge from colonization. Performances of black Cuban music were courageous acts of cultural activism highly polemic in their day. Alejo Carpentier writes that in the 1920s “Rural music was held up [by racists] to counter the Afro-Cuban music, as a representative of a white music, more noble, more melodious, and cleaner [both acoustically and metaphorically].<sup>16</sup>

Putting aside their unequal reception in the political sphere, it is in their performance styles where Merceditas and Celina seem to share commonalities. Both women speak of their public performances as acts of private devotion. Although they use a proscenium setting, they concen-

\*Interviews with Merceditas Valdés in her house, Vedado, La Habana, July 30, August 4, and August 12, 1993. By Idania Diaz and Ivor Miller.

trate on the *orichas*, not on the audience, and Celina speaks directly of possession states during performance, while Merceditas hints at it. The West, infamous for its body/mind split, and Sub-Saharan Africa, famous for the union of body/mind/spirit through possession (the divine "mounting" a devotee), seem to meet and dissolve in the concerts of these two women. Like hot bitter coffee poured over white sugar, they fuse to create a potent Cuban brew. Using a proscenium stage, they infuse this given audience/performer split with the presence of the *orichas*.

When I heard Merceditas perform in Havana with the group Yoruba *Andábo*, she began by praising Fernando Ortiz, who remains a hero in Cuba. She said:

**MV:** As a Yoruba singer, I was born in the house of Don Fernando Ortiz, with guidance from the *batá* drummers Oru Batá, Jesús Pérez, and Trinidad Torregrosa, founders of the National Folklore Group. I am proud that he was my mentor—the third discoverer of Cuba, ethnologist and folklorist Don Fernando Ortiz.<sup>17</sup>

Merceditas invited us to her home several times to talk about her life and music. She spoke about her family heritage and her faith as a source for her music. She also spoke about Ortiz's relationship to Afro-Cuban ritual practice.

When we arrived at her apartment, I was held back by Idania Diaz, who was in front of me. She pointed to the white powder lying before the door. The dust was left by Merceditas as part of a *santería* style cleansing (*limpieza*) of her home. After the floors are cleaned with prepared water, a portion of it is cast out the front door with egg shell powder (*cascarilla*). This clears out the negative energy accumulated in the house, yet visitors must avoid the powder to avoid the negative power (*osorbo*) it contains. Stepping over the dust, we entered the doorway opened by Merceditas. She seated us in front of her altar for *Ochún*, goddess of sweet water, and generously shared with us her experiences.

**MV:** I am from Havana and am an initiate of *Ochún*. My Yoruba name is *Obi Numi*, which means "the union of two waters."<sup>18</sup> I'm grateful to all the *orichas*, and I live to adore them, yet the *oricha* I like to sing for most of all is *Ochún*.

I sing this music with sweetness, and this is what has kept my audiences coming. When I am performing a song I think that I am looking at the deity, at the *oricha* in front of me. Although it may be my own fantasy, I really cherish the idea that in the moment of performance I am singing for the *oricha*.

I come from a religious family. My grandmother was a descendent of Africa. She was delirious in her affection for me, and taught me to handle herbs for their medicinal properties as well as for their use with the *orichas*.<sup>19</sup> She was called María Salomé, and was initiated in the African way.<sup>20</sup> My mother Pilar was an initiate of *Obatalá*, and was initiated while I was in her womb. Because of this I say that I was crowned before birth, and my later initiation for *Ochún* was actually only a confirmation of my original crowning. When she died, my mother had more than 40 years of experience as a *santera*.

Every Sunday in the house of my grandmother they made a *rumba* (*rumba de cajón*), and we all danced and sang. Her house was in el barrio de Cayo Hueso in Centro Habana.<sup>21</sup>

My birth as an artist was in a program called "the Supreme Court of Art" (*la Corte Suprema del Arte*), when I was twelve years old. I won first prize with "*Babalú-Ayé*." Later I began to sing popular music: *guaracha*, *son*, *guaguancó* and *rumba*.

When the maestro Obdulio Morales<sup>22</sup> was forming his orchestra, he was looking for a voice to sing Yoruba music. They tried me out and I began to work with him. It wasn't easy

for me to sing in another language. In 1943, we began to audition for work in various radio programs, and the only station interested in this music was a very small one owned by a Spaniard called Lauriano Suarez, they called him "*Suarito*" [thus the name *Radio Suaritos*].

When I began to sing this music, in the 1940s, there were many problems, because it was the first time that it was broadcast by radio. Many people, especially the *santeros*, thought that I was desecrating the music, but after a while everything calmed down.

Obdulio Morales was the first to bring *Lucumí* music to a symphonic orchestra. He was a musician of high caliber; he was the director and the arranger of his music—he prepared everything. His orchestra came to be a society of [Afro] Cuban folklore. He and his family were religious but he never was initiated into *Santería*. In the orchestra those that played drums were all *santeros*, the chorus members were not. Obdulio was advised by Jesús Pérez and Trinidad Torregrosa, who played drums in the orchestra.

Our first work was a success! At this time the only program listened to in peoples' homes on Sunday, from 7 to 8 PM, was mine: "What's up at home?, Merceditas with *Batá* Drums" (*¿Que pasa en casa?, Merceditas con los Batá*). The drummers (*bataleros*) were Trinidad Torregrosa, Jesús Pérez, and Raul Perez Nasaco, who all taught me to sing in Yoruba. They were my consultants and worked for many years with the Contemporary Dance company (*Danza Contemporanea*). Jesús Pérez played the great *Iya* (mother) drum; he was an excellent player. When the owner of the radio station Cadena Azul learned of our success, it was a great blow to him, because we had auditioned for his program and he didn't give us a contract!

Doctor Fernando Ortiz<sup>23</sup> listened to us and later contacted us. At the time, I was 17 years old, and I began to teach classes with him, along with many other drummers and musicians. During this period we presented many conferences in the grand auditorium of the University of Havana; we worked very closely for three days a week. I sang Yoruba songs habitually, but I also sang *Arará*, *Iyesá* and *Palo* in the conferences of Ortiz.

As Juan Marinello<sup>24</sup> has said, Dr. Fernando Ortiz was the third discoverer of Cuba, because he spent his life researching the African and folk Cuban roots of our music. He would go to Africa annually to be nourished by these roots; he often went to Nigeria, and it was with all this information that he gave his conferences.

When he realized the success he was achieving with us, he told me: 'Merceditas, from now on, I'm going to call you "my little *Aché*" ("*mi pequeña Aché*")'.

He was not an initiate into *Santería*; yet he had many presents from the different African kings that he had visited. In one room of his house he had a beautiful throne made with precious stones like malachite. He didn't show this room to everybody. He also had a lovely throne given him by the king of Ife.<sup>25</sup> In it were two pillars carved to depict the stages of a man from birth until death, with the body of the person studded in pearls, rubies and diamonds.

He had another throne with the *orichas* rudimentarily carved from wood. It was filled with gold-bordered cloth; he called this room his "little treasure."

He was from the middle class, and had a good upbringing because his parents were rich. He was an only child, he studied in the best schools, he founded a society dedicated to the research of Yoruba culture and called it the Society of Afro-Cuban Studies (*Sociedad de Estudios AfroCubanos*). He was its president and published a bimonthly journal that documented the history of the different *orichas* and their particular *patakines*.

I felt content at Ortiz's side. He supported my radio program, and appeared at the radio station to listen every date that a saint was celebrated.

As he was aging and getting sick, in 1957, he retired from the university and was interned at the rectory of doctor Clemente Inclán. At this time we gave the last memorable conference

in the university auditorium. Many important figures were there, like Alicia Alonso, Alberto Alonso, Wifredo Lam, and all the martyrs of Humbolt<sup>7</sup> who at that time were living underground [involved in clandestine activity against President Batista]. The house was packed, and this farewell to Don Fernando Ortiz was one to remember.

It was a day to remember because many of the students who today are martyrs came to the conference, and the police began to circle the auditorium in their cars. They came up to Fernando and I, and told us "if anything happens, don't run or leave for the streets," and we moved to a room at the side of the auditorium. They told us, "there is a person here we are trying to capture," but luckily nothing happened.

The Cuban Revolution triumphed in 1959, and I began to work in the program "*Palmas y cañas*" (Palm Trees and Sugar Cane), of which I am a co-founder with Celina González, to whom I give my respects. In this program we interpreted *guaracha* music, and the rural people gave me the name of "*la salsosa*" (the saucy one).

I have never sang for *Santería* ceremonies, nor for other sacred parties in private homes. I don't like to go to ceremonies, because when I've arrived everybody is having a good time and singing, yet when they notice my presence, everything stops and people ask if I'll sing. When I go to a party, I want to enjoy myself like the rest. I want to be treated like anybody else, and for this reason I haven't been to a sacred party for years.

I passed a period where I couldn't sing Yoruba music because certain people said that this was backward, that the music would effect the children in a bad way. In this epoch, from the 1960s until recently, I was partially retired. Then the religious revolution began, and now everyone is a believer. Many people have the appearance of having just been initiated into *Santería*, but in reality they were hiding their beliefs until now. I have never negated my religion, because Afro-Cuban practices are our roots and are our music. Today, the majority of Cuban musicians sing for the *orichas*; even Pablo Milanés has incorporated *batá* drums into his group.

In this moment our music is flowering and making the world aware that our roots are integrated into Cuban popular music. One can already see how many groups are using *batá* drums, and this gives me much pleasure. Many people are interested in this phenomenon and value the introduction of *batá* drums into modern music groups. This [Afro-Cuban musical and religious] revolution will continue because there is no one who can stop it now.

I would like to have a successor, and when I see that young people today are interested in this music I am happy, because I've always been of the opinion that Yoruba music has the same value as any other musical genre. All the years that passed without my singing Yoruba music I spent quietly awaiting the moment when we could again publicly sing for the *orichas*.

### Conclusion

Due to changing government policies and a devastated economy, Cuba (and especially Havana) is currently undergoing what many Cubans have described to me as a religious explosion, where thousands are being initiated into *Santería*.

Among other sources, practitioners are getting inspiration for their faith from popular music, where many of the leading figures are *santeros* and *babalaos*. Along with Celina and Mercedes, there is Adalberto Alvarez, a *babalao* whose song "*Y que tu quieres que te den*" was a smash hit in 1992. Its chorus line stated: "*Voy a pedir pa' ti, lo mismo que tu pa' me*" (I'm going to ask [of the *orichas*] for you, the same that you ask for me). His 1993 music video ("*Que te pasa mami*") made a point to show him wearing a green and yellow beaded *Idé* (sacred bracelet) for *Orula*, the *oricha* who reveals human destiny through divination.

While *Santería* has existed for hundreds of years, practitioners have until recently kept their identities secret. Today one can see white-clad *Iyawos*, and hear ceremonial *batá* music in all parts of Havana, revealing the active African heritage of Cuba.

*Santería* is often used as a way to help practitioners succeed in their endeavors. At a time when the government can't provide basic foods for most Cuban people, many are turning to *Santería* with better results. As I witnessed in Celina's home, the religion helps build community, which often leads to the sharing of food, especially during ceremonies.

Artists help us make sense of the present, and sometimes give us the shape of things to come. In this extraordinary moment in Cuba's history, artists like Celina, and thousands of *Santería* practitioners are suggesting that Cuba's future lies in finding local solutions for its troubles, based on Cuban models, and not from those of its former colonizers: Spain, the United States, or Russia.

But above all, the experiences of Celina and Mercedes give us insight into the historical process of syncretism and the integration of creolized practices into Cuban popular culture.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Iván is a member of the Ayala family of Puerto Rico, who are famous as *bomba* and *plena* musicians.
- <sup>2</sup> See her 1993 release, Celina González, *¡Que Viva Changó!* (Qbadisc QB 9004), containing several of the songs mentioned here (although the original recordings from 1948 are much richer).
- <sup>3</sup> Ernesto "Ché" Guevara (d. 1967), hero of the Revolution, who was for a time Minister of Industries and the president of the National Bank of Cuba, hoped for the "appearance of the 'New Man,' the Cuban of the future, who would see his labors not as a dull, boring obligation but as a joyful contribution to the welfare of his society. Material incentives would soon become the debris of the past." In a 1965 publication (*Man and Socialism in Cuba*) he wrote: "One of our fundamental ideological tasks is to find the way to perpetuate heroic attitudes in everyday life.... To build communism it is necessary to change man at the same time as one changes the economic base." How ironic that the heroic attitudes of the "New Man" might be inspired not only by Marx, but also by *Changó*, the ancient Yoruba king turned "god of thunder." Quoted from Robert E. Quirk, *Fidel Castro*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993): pp. 520, 522.
- <sup>4</sup> Here Castro expressed his opinion that religious belief could be complementary to revolutionary struggle, as exemplified by Latin American Liberation Theology. Within a few months of publication in the Spanish original, *Fidel y la Religión* "had been bought by a million Cubans, one-tenth of the entire population." Harvey Cox, Introduction to *Fidel and Religion*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987): p. 17.
- <sup>5</sup> Reutilio Domínguez. Died 1972.
- <sup>6</sup> At the time of initiation, *santeros* receive a Yoruba name related to their *oricha*.
- <sup>7</sup> Nicolas Angarica (1901-76) from Perico, Matanzas, was an important figure in the development of *Santería* in Cuba. He played the sacred *batá* drums, and directed a *batá* group to play for *Ocha* ceremonies in Havana. In 1955, he wrote what is reputedly the first published instruction book of divination for *santeros*, which has been reprinted: Nicolas V. Angarica, *Manual del oriate (religión Lucumi)*, (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1979).
- <sup>8</sup> *Fidel and Religion: Castro Talks on Revolution and Religion with Frei Betto*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

- <sup>9</sup> The *Santería* altars constructed for special ceremonies, like the week-long initiation period, the anniversary of an initiation, or a drum ceremony, are called "thrones."
- <sup>10</sup> *Elegúa* is represented as such during the *Itá* divination.
- <sup>11</sup> The Cuban lute (called *laúd*) is an offspring of the lute, with as many as twelve double strings.
- <sup>12</sup> Pablo Milanés. Composer, singer and guitarist, born 1943.
- <sup>13</sup> Silvio Rodríguez. Composer, singer and guitarist, born 1946. One of the creators of the Latin-American "new song" (*nueva canción*) movement.
- <sup>14</sup> Merceditas Valdés, born October 14, 1928.
- <sup>15</sup> See Carlos Moore, *Castro, Blacks and Africa*. (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, UCLA, 1988).
- <sup>16</sup> "A lo afrocubano [los adversarios de lo negro] se puso entonces lo guajiro, como representativo de una música blanca, más noble, más melódica, más limpia." Alejo Carpentier, *La Música en Cuba*. (La Habana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 1989): 274.
- <sup>17</sup> "Merceditas Valdés nació como cantante folklorista de la casa de Don Fernando Ortiz, que ya Uds. lo saben, que lo han leído mucho y se ha hablado mucho, con asesores de los batalleros Oru Batá, Jesús Pérez, Trinidad Torregrosa, fundadores del Conjunto Folklórico Nacional. Yo me siento orgullosa de que haya sido mi mentor—el tercer descubridor de Cuba, etnólogo, folklorista que fue Don Fernando Ortiz." August 7, 1993, at El Convento de Santa Clara, Habana Vieja.
- <sup>18</sup> "Union of two waters" is not a literal translation from Yoruba. One translation is "Born inside water," or "we give birth to one inside water," which follows Merceditas' story of being crowned while inside her mother's womb (see below). Translation by Professor Frank Arasanyin of Yale University. ["*Abi Numi*": "A" is "we"; "Bi" is "to give birth to, to bear something;" "*Ninu*" is "inside;" and "*Omi*" is "water." Many Yoruba names are full sentences condensed into short phrases.
- <sup>19</sup> *Santería* is first and foremost a system for healing, and most of the herbs used in its practices are for healing purposes.
- <sup>20</sup> Merceditas is referring to a practice brought by Yoruba slaves that has been transformed in the development of modern *Santería*. An initiate today will be "crowned" with their *oricha* protector (*angel guardiano*), and "receive" several others in the ceremony. In the tradition practiced by her grandmother, the initiate was "crowned" by one *oricha* and received only *Elegúa*, the messenger.
- <sup>21</sup> Cayo Hueso was a working class neighborhood famous for its *rumba* musicians and *Santería* practitioners.
- <sup>22</sup> Obdulio Morales. Orchestra director and composer, born 1910. Director of the National Folklore Group (*el Conjunto Folklórico Nacional*).
- <sup>23</sup> Fernando Ortiz. Ethnographer, lawyer, archeologist, linguist and historian (1881-1969).
- <sup>24</sup> Juan Marinello Vidaurreta, (1898—1977). Professor emeritus at the University of Havana. One of the most award-winning Cuban writers of the century. See Juan Marinello, *Ensayos* (La Habana: Editorial Arte y Literatura), 1977.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ife*, or *Ilé-Ife* in Nigeria, is the sacred city for Yoruba peoples.

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### Glossary

- Aché* Authority—the power to make things happen.
- Ahijado* Godchild. A person guided through the many rituals of *Santería* by a godparent, or *padrino/madrina*.
- Aleyo* "Unconsecrated," someone not initiated into *la Santería*. Literally "stranger", or "visitor."
- Apetebi de Orula* A woman who has received *La Cofa de Orula*. An *apetebi* may assist *babalaos* in ceremony.
- Arará* A Yoruba-derived ritual practice originating from the Yoruba of present-day Benin.
- Asesu* One of the avatars of *Yemayá*.
- Babalao* An *Ifá* diviner, a male priest initiated into the branch of *Santería* called *Ifá*. (*Babaláwo* in Yoruba).



- Babalú-Ayé* *Babalú-Ayé* is the *oricha* of pestilence, which he can spread or cure.
- Asujano Asollí* *Asujano Asollí* is a praise name. In Yorubaland known as *Soponnón*, the deity of small pox. Syncretized with *San Lázaro*.
- Bembé* A large ceremonial drum, and also a ceremony where this drum is played. A Yoruba term.
- Bohio, el* A palm thatched hut. *Bohio* is a Taino Indian name for house or mansion; it was their name for Santo Domingo, the center of their civilization before the Spanish invasion. (from Juan José Arrom, personal communication, 1994).
- Caridad del Cobre, la* The patron saint of Cuba. See *Ochún*.
- Changó* *Oricha* of lightning, truth and sex. Master of strategy and tactics. Syncretized with *Santa Bárbara*. In *Yoruba*, *Sangó* is deity of lightning.
- Cofá de Orula, el* A three-day ceremony performed by *babalaos* where a female "client" is ritually linked with *Orula*, the *oricha* of divination. This ceremony conclusively determines which *oricha* is the "owner" of the "clients's" head. There is a corresponding ceremony for males called *La Mano de Orula* (Hand of Orula).
- Congo Décima* A spirit of an African ancestor from the Congo River Basin. Poetic form used in various Cuban and Puerto Rican genres, originating in 17th-century Spain. The *décima* consists of ten-line verses in rhymed octosyllables. The rhyme scheme of the *décima* is as follows: first line with the fourth and fifth; the second line with the third; the sixth line with the seventh and tenth; the eighth with the ninth. (From Gerard, *Salsa!*, p.124).
- Ebo de Entrada* A divination performed by *babalao* to determine a "clients" spiritual preparedness to become an initiate of *Ocha*. *Ebo* means offering or sacrifice.
- Eleguá* *Oricha* of beginnings, of the crossroads, of chance and indeterminacy, and of endings. *Elégbara/Esu* in *Yoruba*. Syncretized with *el Niño de Atocha* and *San Roque*.
- Espiritista* See *spiritist*.
- Guaguancó* A form of *rumba* in a mid to fast tempo. Danced by a male and female couple and involves the man's efforts to seduce a woman. See *Rumba*.
- Ibayen bayen tonu* Part of a Yoruba prayer for the ancestors.
- Ifá* The *oricha* of divination, also the name of the classical Yoruba divination system. *Ifá* is also known as *Orula* or *Orunmila* in Cuba.
- Itá* The divination component of an initiation ceremony.
- Iyesá* In Cuba, *Iyesá* is a Yoruba-derived ritual practice with distinct drums, song, and dance. In Nigeria, the *Ijesha* are a Yoruba sub-group.
- Maferefun* Yoruba word meaning "give thanks to."
- Make saint* See *Ocha*.
- Mambises* Cuban fighters that included many Africans, freed and enslaved, and their descendants who fought in the War of Independence from Spain (1895–1898). The word has origins in the Congo River basin of West-Central Africa [*KiKongo*] (see Ortiz, *Nuevo Catauro de Cubanismos*,

- pp. 336–337).
- Mano de Orula, la* See *Cofa de Orula*.
- Mo dupué dupué* I give thanks. In Yoruba, *mo dúpé dúpé*.
- Moyumbo* *Moyumbar* = to pray. Daily prayer of *santera/os* asking for the health and blessing of all ritual lineage members. In Yoruba, *mo júba* = I give homage, I respect.
- Niño de Atocha, el* See *Eleguá*.
- Obara* Number six in cowry shell divination (*diloggún*), where *Changó* speaks.
- Obatalá* *Oricha* of purity, longevity, and creation *Obatalá* is believed to be owner of the head (or destiny) of all humans inhabiting the planet. For this reason having one's head ritually consecrated to *Obatalá* can never be harmful.
- Obba* *Oricha* symbolizing marital fidelity. She is the eternal love of *Changó*, and inhabits the cemetery.
- Ocha* The main initiation ceremony for *santera/os*. *Ocha* is a shortened Yoruba term for *Oricha*. In the *O[ri]cha* ceremony, the *oricha* is "made," or "crowned" on the head of the devotee. Thus the term "make *Ocha*" or "make saint." The guardian angel is said to be "made," while the other *orichas* are "received."
- Ochoosi* *Oricha* of intelligence, of the hunt. Syncretized with *San Norberto*.
- Ochún* *Oricha* of sweet water, love, beauty, wealth and lavishness.
- Ogún* *Oricha* of iron and war. Syncretized with *San Pedro*, *San Juan el Bautista*, and *Santiago Apóstol*.
- Oluo Oni Oni* An elder *babalao*.
- Oricha* Deity.
- Oriente* The eastern-most province in Cuba, from where Celina and Reutilio derived their musical inspiration.
- Orula* *Oricha* of divination. See *Ifá*.
- Orúnmila* See *Ifá*.
- Oyá* *Oyá* is *oricha* of wind, tornadoes, transformation and the *Jecua-Je Yansa* cemetery. *Jecua Je Yansa* is another of her names. In Yoruba, *Yansa* means mother of nine.
- Palo (Palo Monte)* A Cuban religion of Bantu/BaKongo origins with dance and drum ceremonies.
- Patakines* Stories. Legends of the Yoruba *orichas* recited in divination.
- Prenda* A consecrated iron cauldron used to house *Ogún*.
- Punto Cubano* Traditional country music that includes distinct regional genres found throughout Cuba. A *Punto* group is composed of a guitar, the *tres*, the *triple*, the lute, the *clave* and a *guiro*.
- Rumba* Afro-Cuban party music that includes percussion, dancing and commentary on everyday life. Performed by an ensemble of three *conga* drums, *palitos* and *claves* with a lead singer and chorus. Three forms of *rumba* are the *guaguancó*, *columbia* and *yambú*. (from Gerard, *Salsa!*, p. 127).
- San Juan el Bautista* See *Ogún*.
- San Lázaro* See *Babalú Ayé*.
- San Norberto* See *Ochoosi*.

- San Pedro* See *Ogún*.
- San Roque* See *Eleguá*.
- Santa Bárbara* See *Changó*.
- Santera/o* An initiate of *Ocha*, a branch of the *Santería* faith.
- Santería* A Cuban religion based in Matanzas and Havana that has origins in Yorubaland (today know as Benin and Nigeria).
- Santiago Apóstol* See *Ogún*.
- Santo* *Oricha*, see also *Ocha*.
- Spiritist* One who can “see,” “receive,” and work with spirits of the dead.
- Tres* A nine-string Cuban guitar crucial to *guajiro* music. It is made up of three groups of doubled or tripled strings, and played with a plectrum.
- Virgen de Regla, la* See *Yemayá*.
- Yemayá* *Oricha* of the ocean, of nurturing, the bringer of all life on the planet.
- Yoruba* While there are distinct groups of Yoruba peoples, they comprise one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa. Their homeland is in Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. Yoruba is one of the “major” languages of Nigeria.
- Zapateo* Danceable country music based on the same principals as the *Punto Guajiro (Punto Cubano)*. The *Zapateo* is of Andalusian origins and spread widely throughout Latin America in the 18th century. It is still played and danced in rural Cuba.

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