

# Religious Symbolism in Cuban Political Performance

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*The true history of Cuba is the history of its entangled transculturations.*  
—Fernando Ortiz ([1947] 1991b:86)<sup>1</sup>

In January of 1959, Fidel Castro commenced his regime with his first televised speech to the Cuban nation. While on the podium, a white dove landed on his shoulder, another perched upon his rostrum; both stayed there throughout his two-hour oration (plate 1). In Cuban Santería, a religion derived from the Yorùbá people brought to Cuba as slaves, a white dove represents the divinity Obatalá, a divine king who molds humans from clay in heaven. While the international press regarded the spectacle as a freak accident involving “doves of peace,” many Cubans read it as evidence of Castro’s selection by supernatural forces.

The spectacle of white doves in Castro’s speech is one in a long history of examples in which Caribbean leaders publicly use symbols from local religions.<sup>2</sup> Coded performances in the Caribbean political arena often have dual implications: One is geared to impress upon the international press and those with capital invested in the country that the speaker is popular and will maintain the status quo; another is geared to the local population by using icons from their religious practices. Because these symbols often derive from secret religions, their use dramatically implies that the leader is privy to local secrets and esoteric power.<sup>3</sup> By sharing a symbolic language created from the legacy of African bondage, their use demonstrates a leader’s ties to the local population. The intimacy of this discourse implies that a leader is 100 percent Cuban (to use a phrase from the Cuban Revolution) and not a puppet figure sent from Washington, DC. Analogous to Bakhtin’s “double-voiced word,” symbols are here used to speak “doubly”—one message to the leaders of the First World, another to the general Cuban population.<sup>4</sup>

African-derived religions in Cuba are based on oral traditions. They are rich in symbols, and knowledgeable practitioners use colors, ritual objects, movement, music, and esoteric words to represent mythic events; in turn they can decode these symbols to interpret local social action. Many practitioners do not verbally announce their participation in secret religions, but demonstrate it through the use of elaborate symbolism. Several presidents of the Cuban Republic were widely rumored to be devotees of Santería and other Afro-Cuban religions.

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Cuban ethnographer Romulo Lachatañeré documented the interpretations of many *santeros* (Santería priests) regarding the alleged Santería practice of Gerardo Machado, President of Cuba from 1924 to 1933. Because of his impulsive and aggressive temperament, Machado was considered to be a “son” of Changó, the divinity of thunder and military strategy. As far as some *santeros* were concerned, this interpretation was confirmed by Machado’s public use of Santería symbolism.

On the occasion of the Sixth Pan-American Conference in Havana (1928), he wanted to celebrate the event with the inauguration of a newly reconstructed park, which [...] took the name of the Park of Pan-American Fraternity.

On the inauguration day, a Ceiba tree was planted in the center of an arena filled with earth taken from the 21 republics represented in the conference. In the same ornamentation of the park, palm trees had been utilized, which had clear symbolic meaning for Cubans, and especially *santeros*: the palm tree is where Changó found sanctuary for his anger. The Ceiba tree is one of the homes of Changó [...].

What could a *santero* deduce from this ceremony where with so many types of earth a Ceiba was planted, symbol of Changó, and precisely during the government of one of his “sons”? Again the deduction was logical. Changó had ordered the president to make this magic ceremony to protect him from his enemies, because at the time they were increasing in numbers. The truth is that five years later Machado was overthrown; but in the period of collecting this material, a stroller who passed by the Park of Fraternity in the light of dawn could find sacrifices for Changó deposited at the foot of the palms and at the now robust Ceiba. (Lachatañeré [1942] 1992:113–14)

Lachatañeré’s fieldwork in the 1940s documented Machado’s use of Santería symbolism. Did Machado’s public actions have dual implications: both to let the local population know of his esoteric power, as well as to acquire power through divine access? Only Machado and his *padrino* knew for sure.

Several elder *santeros* and *babalawos* (devotees of Ifá, the diviner of classical Yorùbá mythology) told me that Fulgencio Batista, the president of Cuba from 1940 to 1944 and again from 1952 to 1958, was a *santero* and an Ifá (a Yorùbá divination system) initiate. Lachatañeré described how Batista’s rise to power was viewed by some Santería practitioners:

Batista, before 1933, was a simple sergeant; after this date, with the violent toppling of President Machado, in the so-called revolution of September 4th, he rose to the position of colonel, and later [...] in search of a symbol to ensure the confidence of his troops, established the flag of September 4th, created from the representative colors of distinct insignias of the army regiments.

The coincidence that these colors correspond to the deities most resonant of the lucumí pantheon (green for Orúmbila, yellow for Ochún)



1. Two white doves perched on Castro’s shoulder and podium throughout his 1959 inaugural speech. (Photo from the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution [CDR], Calle Reina, Havana; courtesy of Ivor Miller)

and even more the coincidence of the flag of September 4th, made the *santeros*, observing the rapid and successful political career of Batista, recognize him as “son” of Orúmbila, owner of fate [Yorùbá mythology tells that Òrúnmìlà witnessed “creation,” and thus knows the personal destiny of every human being]. As to the question of the flag, it was reckoned that the guardian angel of the ruler recommended he make this *work* to guarantee his power. The flag was converted into a fetish. (Lachatañéré [1942] 1992:113)

If the anonymous rumors documented by Lachatañéré are based on firsthand evidence, he does not tell us. Their value lies in their revelation of how some Cuban practitioners read human temperament, colors, and fauna symbolically in order to explain the rise of an anonymous person to elite political power.

The use of Afro-Cuban symbolism in political spectacle tends to follow a cultural system identified by Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz as “transculturation” ([1947] 1991b). This could be defined as a dialogue between historically distinct cultures now coexisting. Although participating cultures have unequal power relations, all are actively engaged in this dialogue, through which new cultural practices are often created. Even when participating groups attempt to maintain their traditions, common denominators, or points of dialogue, are always sought between them. For example, during slavery Africans and black *creoles* often hid their ritual practices behind the images of Catholic saints. They didn’t stop their homeland practice, nor did they absolutely follow Catholicism, nor did they completely merge the two: they found points of dialogue between them, using the saints’ images publicly (in front of those who represent colonial powers) to refer to their own deities. Following suit, politicians have hidden their private Santería practice from public view, revealing it only at critical moments. When it is revealed publicly as spectacle, it is done rarely, nonverbally, and by using symbols easily interpreted in Western terms. Castro’s dove was to many Cubans Obatalá; to the West it was a dove of peace. Machado’s ceiba tree is a living divinity for Cuban practitioners, to the West it is a tree of fertility. His white clothes, a symbol of initiation for Cubans, were to the West an example of Caribbean flamboyance. In like fashion, as Batista was privately using Santería divination and animal sacrifice, his wife ordered the installment of a 100-foot white marble Christ, which stands today above the port town of Casablanca, overlooking the capital. The ways African symbols are hidden and mute, while European symbols are proclaimed publicly, exemplifies how conflicting mythologies have found a way to coexist in Cuba. Through the historical process of transculturation, one can be both a Marxist and a santero.<sup>5</sup>

Sub-Saharan African mythologies use cyclical time, where ancestors are either reborn or reactivated through trance states, and the living embody archetypes. Modernist European thought assumes the “backward” African practices will wither away as society “marches forward” in linear time.<sup>6</sup> Ideas that characterize Modernity presuppose that African worldviews will impede the future progress of the nation and its citizens. Like the proverbial black grandmother hidden from view in a family striving to “pass” for white, Afro-Cuban religions remain hidden from view in polite society.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, as we see from their use in the political arena (one could also cite their importance in literature, painting, symphonic music as well as the popular arts), elements of Afro-Cuban religious traditions are far from marginal. They have influenced all spheres of the society and become a core component to the nation’s cultural life. The tensions created by the juxtaposition of these mythologies in one society have created what W.E.B. Du Bois identified as a “double consciousness.”<sup>8</sup> In the context of Cuban political spectacle, “double consciousness” is the awareness by Cuban politicians that the Afro-Cuban religions integral to



2. Santero Andrés Flores in the barrio of Colón, Havana, 1994. (Photo by Ivor Miller)

3. Planted by President Gerardo Machado in Havana's Parques de la fraternidad, this ceiba tree is considered a conduit for supernatural forces. (Photo by Ivor Miller)



their national culture (the symbols of which they must use to communicate effectively with their populations) are viewed by leaders of the Christian West (with whom they must find approval to stay in power, receive funding, etc.) as either profoundly retrograde or even satanic.

From 1991 to 1998 I spent more than 40 months in Cuba documenting oral histories with elder leaders of the Santería, Palo Monte, and Abakuá religions.<sup>9</sup> Palo Monte is a Cuban religion of Bantu/Kongo origins derived from the



4. Olga More and Ivor Miller in the barrio of the Pilar, Havana, 1993. Olga holds a portrait of Vicente Goitisolo, her Lukumí grandfather, a “son” of Changó who founded a *cabildo* (association) for Changó in Cruces, Cuba, in the 19th century. (Photo by Guillermo Pazos)



practices of BaKongo slaves (from Central Africa) brought to Cuba from the 16th to 19th centuries. Abakuá is a male mutual aid society of Éfik origin (from the Cross River region in southeastern Nigeria) that developed among the dock workers of Havana and Matanzas in the early 19th century. The interpretations of social events by practitioners are important not because they are “factual” accounts (they may or may not be), but because they demonstrate how deeply Afro-Cuban symbolism resonates in the society.

I did not begin by inquiring about intimate links between the nations’ leaders and the Cuban religions; they were brought to my attention by numerous practitioners in Havana. For example, Enrique Sosa, a santero for 26 years, told me, “President Machado was always dressed in white; it was said that he had ‘saint made’” (1993).<sup>10</sup> The Cuban white suits made famous in movies of the 1930s and 40s derive from the white clothes of Santería, which are associated with Obatalá, the divinity of wisdom and purity. Initiates of Santería must dress in white clothes for one year, and Machado’s use of this color marks him as a practitioner.

Santeros interpret Machado’s participation in Santería based on their observations of his public actions; they were not privy to his private ritual actions. Yet the power of this legend is witnessed by its longevity. Several elder practitioners retold Machado legends to me. One of them, named Andrés Flores, told me that ceremonies for Machado’s ceiba tree were conducted by “his padrino [in Palo Monte], a Kongo named Santiago” (1993; plate 2).<sup>11</sup>

Santería and Palo Monte practitioners continue to use the ceiba tree described by Lachatañeré in the Parque de la fraternidad (Park of Pan-American Fraternity) for its ritual efficacy not only is earth taken from the tree’s base for use in spiritual work, but as I witnessed, *ebo* (sacrifice) is placed around it. This divine tree is seen as a conduit for supernatural forces (plate 3).

The interpretation of divine influence on local politics is common in Santería communities. Olga More, a santera for over 30 years, told me what she had heard about former President Batista and his brother Panchín, who was mayor of Havana (plate 4):

Batista and Panchín Batista went often to the house of the *mulata* Amparo, who lived in the street Monte and Figura (in Olga’s *barrio*). She



5. President Batista dressed in white during a public civic ceremony in the 1950s. (Photo from Castro 1975; courtesy of Ivor Miller)

had Changó made, and people commented that she was Batista's *madrina* and that they both had Changó made. (1993)<sup>12</sup>

Santero Enrique Sosa added: "President Batista definitely had Changó made, and I knew his padrino, who was from Mantilla" (1993). Like Machado, Batista often wore white in public, marking him as a practitioner (plate 5).

In addition, Carlos Prio Socarrás (President from 1948 to 1952) was known to be a devotee of Ifá who was advised by one of the most agile babalawo of his day (Pazos 1998).<sup>13</sup> Aracelio Iglesias (1902–1948), leader and organizer of Havana's dock workers, was a member of the Popular Socialist Party (Peres 1988:288) as well as a babalawo.<sup>14</sup> Lázaro Peña, Secretary General of the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC) (see *Hijo* 1980) was also an Ifá devotee.<sup>15</sup>

The 1959 Revolution that radically transformed Cuba's government and economic systems did not alter the use of religious symbolism by politicians. The use of religious symbolism early in the Cuban Revolution clearly demonstrates that deeply rooted cultural practices are more resistant to change than are bureaucracies. In the international arena from the early 1960s to 1991, Castro's regime downplayed the existence of these religions, partially to conform to Soviet-style communism in order to receive its benefits.

The government's control of the national media since 1959 has made it difficult to know what decisions were being made by that government, and how Cubans were responding to these changes. Word-of-mouth has been one of the few channels available to Cubans for the dissemination of information. Cuban writer Natalia Bolívar told me:

In Cuba there is little information in the press, one learns about events through *radio bamba*, which is "word of mouth" through the people. Everyone knows what's happening because it's transmitted through radio bamba. (1993a; plate 6)

In Cuba, as well as in other countries with nationalized communication media, rumors actively contest discrepancies between news reports and lived experience.<sup>16</sup> Radio bamba is an effective vehicle to express perspectives on current events not found in the official media. The testimonies of participants in the Cuban Revolution demonstrate the power of radio bamba in shaping the information Cubans received. Like much of Cuban popular culture, even the word "bamba," meaning "lip," is of African derivation.<sup>17</sup>

While there are many types of rumors expressed through radio bamba, those I documented in the course of my field work are statements by members of the Santería, Palo Monte, and Abakuá religions, or by Cuban scholars knowledgeable of their oral traditions and symbolic systems. These statements are privileged information about the initiations of political leaders that the speakers either witnessed or heard about from their elders, and interpretations of their use of symbols related to this religion. The Santería religion is nonproselytizing and noninstitutional. It is practiced in communities organized by *ilé* (houses) where elder priests initiate members and divine for both initiates and noninitiates. Practices performed in these houses are concealed from the public and not usually discussed outside the membership of a house. Some of the reports I present here were collected from members of a house in Havana of which I am a member. Other reports are from informed elders of other houses I met during my fieldwork.

#### *Legends about Castro as a Religious Practitioner*

"Panchita," an elder santera from a well-known Ifá lineage, knew a babalawo who she claims initiated Castro into Ifá in the 1950s. She told me:

I knew the babalawo who gave Fidel la Mano de Orula [a three-day ceremony where the "client" is ritually linked to Ifá, god of divination]. The babalawo was called Félix "el Negro." It was during

6. Cuban writer Natalia Bolívar in Miramar, Havana, 1994. (Photo by Ivor Miller)



the government of Batista, and Fidel was very young. My Ifá padrino was in the same lineage as Félix “el Negro,” and I met him at his house. (Lopez 1993; plate 7)<sup>18</sup>

Félix “el Negro” died several years ago, and I was unable to find other babalawo who could confirm this story. After asking around, I realized stories of Castro have huge variations. Lukumí descendant Tere Ortiz, an initiate of Eleguá through her family line, told me this story about Castro’s relationship to Santería:

In April of 1961 I “made Ocha” [initiated into Santería] to a cousin of mine who was in the military, and who belonged to Fidel’s convoy. While sitting on the throne he told us: “Life is incredible! Me, hiding my religion, and in the middle of combat [during the Playa Giron, or Bay of Pigs invasion], two steps from me was Comandante Fidel. When he jumped over a fence to change position, a bundle fell from his pocket. I picked it up and told him: ‘Look Comandante, you dropped this.’ He told me: ‘Oh boy, give it to me, because I can’t be without this.’ In the bundle was a *collare de maso* [large necklace] of Obatalá.”

We santeros only give the *collare de maso* when we pledge a person to initiate them. From this moment began the idea that Fidel was committed to be initiated. (1993; plate 8)

The fact that Santería practitioners believe Castro uses the Orichá to protect his own life is not unusual. Many in Cuba are initiated to stave off death, disease, curses, and other supernatural powers. Politicians, who have many rivals, would need divine power to remain one step ahead of their enemies. It is logical that the leader of a small country in conflict with a superpower would require multiple sources of defense.

Another reason a politician would participate in the local folk religions is to build alliances with these communities. In the early 1960s, Castro became linked with the Abakuá, a mutual aid society for men. Because of their extraordinary unity, the Abakuá were an important force in the Wars of Independence against Spain. From the late 19th century until the Revolution, Abakuá societies controlled much of the labor force in the Matanzas and Havana ports. Because of their fierce independence and their hermetic secrecy, Abakuá are one of the most revered and feared forces in Cuban popular culture. I collected the oral testimonies of several high-ranking Abakuá elders in Cuba, one of whom told me how Castro became an honorary Abakuá member in 1959:

At the triumph of the Revolution, Victor Herrera, the Ekueñón [ritual leader] of the group Isun Efó made Fidel Castro “honorary Obonékue” [honorary initiate]. They ritually cleansed his body with herbs and a rooster, and gave him the title “Éfik Ayawarémo,” the Abakuá name for the barrio Las Yaguas here in Havana. It was an elegant gesture, that of Fidel to allow us to name him as an honorary brother, and one of great joy for the members of this group. Fidel is the only president to whom the people have given their confidence. The Abakuá taught him and made him an honorary member because he came to defend the Blacks, who had always been discriminated against. (Flores 1993)

Abakuá uphold strict requirements for entry into their society, and some groups refuse to admit white members.<sup>19</sup> For Abakuá to select Castro as a member was a tremendous coup for his political career, and these ceremonies were broadcast on Cuban television in 1959.<sup>20</sup> His public manipulation of the symbols of Cuban religions indicates that he didn’t dismiss them.





7. Santera “Panchita”  
(Francisca Lopez Zaldivar)  
is dressed in white for  
Obatalá. (Photo by Ivor  
Miller)

### *Castro’s Public Use of Religious Symbolism*

The vacuum left by Batista’s flight from Cuba allowed Castro and his army to emerge from the Sierra Maestra on the 1st of January 1959. Those Cubans who interpreted Castro’s triumph as part of his god-given destiny observed that he acquired a position of great power on the most important Cuban ritual date. The first day of the year belongs to two distinct Catholic saints, both of whom are associated with Santería divinities (Orichá). One is el Niño de Atocha, associated with Eleguá, who opens the way for all endeavors (Bolívar 1993b:144); the other is San Manuel, associated with Oddúa, a powerful Orichá known in Cuba as “king of the dead.”<sup>21</sup> The 1st of January is also a day of prophecy, when Cuban

babalawo gather to divine the Odù, or letter of the year, which forecasts the spiritual forces governing the year.

When Castro gave his first televised speech to the nation a week later, a white dove landed on his body, and stayed there throughout his oration. The symbol of a white dove permeates all religions in Cuba. In the Roman Catholic Church, doves sometimes represent the Holy Spirit; in Santería doves represent Obatalá, one of the creator divinities.<sup>22</sup> Lydia Cabrera writes:

Symbol of the Holy Spirit, the dove has passed not only among the ñañigos [Abakuá], but in all African cults of Cuba, to be one of the great divinities that they adore. Of Obatalá [Lukumí], of Nsámbi (Mamá Kéngue) [Kongo], of Abasí [Abakuá]. “It belongs to God.” Thus the *despojos* [ritual cleansings] performed with doves, “with the Holy Spirit,” are of incontestable efficacy. ([1958] 1970:211)

In all Cuban religions a white dove represents a divine force of positivity, purity, and leadership. Wayne S. Smith, former Chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, writes of the Castro speech:

[O]ne of the doves released as a symbol of peace suddenly returned from the sky and landed on his shoulder. It remained perched there during the entire speech, its eyes fixed on the mystified crowd. Shivers went up the spines of those watching. Who could now doubt it? Fidel was the anointed one. To the millions of Cubans who practiced or at least had a healthy respect for Santería [...] the sign was unmistakable. Doves are the messengers of Obatalá [...]. When the dove landed on Fidel’s shoulder, it meant he had been chosen [...] by the gods. He was *El Elegido* (the Chosen One) [...]. There was a collective gasp from the crowd, many falling to their knees. Even to those who ignored Santería, the dove was taken as a sign that Fidel had been chosen to lead the nation to its rendezvous with destiny. (1991:87)

Whether or not these were trained pigeons or divine messengers, this event became part of the Castro legend which holds that mystical powers protect him. “Enriquito” is a renowned Abakuá, *ngangulero* (initiate of the Palo Monte religion), santero (as such, he is a “son” of Eleguá) and babalawo from Guanabacoa, outside of Havana.<sup>23</sup>

In a 1991 TV program made in collaboration with the Cuban State, Enriquito stated:

The supernatural exists, and one must pay attention to it, because where there are hundreds of people, and a dove, on two different occasions, lands on the same person, it is supernatural. It means [...] he is the chosen one. That dove [...] will protect him, so he could have the power to be able to fight for that which he was fighting. It was a benediction of Olofi or Sambia [Sambia (or Nsambi) is the Supreme God of Palo Monte (Cabrera 1984:63)]. Olofi in the Yorubá dialect is God. So it means it was a benediction of God. All beings are believers; some demonstrate it, and some keep it inside [...]. I think Fidel is a believer. (Turner 1991)



8. Lukumí descendant Tere Ortiz (right) photographed in the barrio of Vedado, Havana, 1993. (Photo by Ivor Miller)

Enriqueto's testimony encourages the idea of Castro as a messiah. It also confirms Castro's public use of religious symbolism through the doves, as well as through the public interpretations of a renowned religious leader.

Another religious symbol used by Castro in his public representations are the black and red colors of his 26th of July movement (*26 de julio*). The official explanation is that red symbolizes the blood of those killed by Batista, and black the gowns of their widows. However, santeros and many other Cubans know that these are the colors of Eleguá, the trickster divinity who resides at the crossroads. Santera and practicing lawyer Caridad Riaño says:

We can never say that Fidel is a santero because we don't know. What we can say that because of his characteristics, he is guided by Eleguá or Changó or even all the saints. When we see the red and black flag of the 26th of July we associate it with the colors of Eleguá, and because of this we say Fidel is a child of Eleguá. (Riaño 1993)<sup>24</sup>

For the past 37 years Castro's government has created slogans to advertise the Revolution. A billboard I photographed is meant to read "Yo amo," or "I love the July 26th movement," yet it seems to be intentionally ambiguous (plate 9). For practitioners, it just as clearly reads "I love Eleguá."

On the one hand symbolic dates, doves, acronyms, and colors have been used by Castro to motivate Cuba's population. On the other, Santería practitioners actively read his actions and character in ways that associate Castro with Lukumí divinities. This type of dialogic is inescapable in the Caribbean, and is one reason politicians are able to use symbols to their advantage. Santera Tere Ortiz told me how she reads Castro's actions:

Among the population, one often hears that Fidel is a "son" of Eleguá. I can't confirm this, but he is devoted to children. The government programs many activities for children, especially when the Revolution is confronted with difficult situations.<sup>25</sup>

In one of his *patakin* (legends), Eleguá is represented as a child. In my way of seeing things as a santera, when children of Eleguá have problems, the first thing they do is make a party for children. After Fidel makes this type of party, he encounters a solution to his problem. This is called an *ebo* [sacrifice, ritual cleansing]. (1993)

As a Santería practitioner, Ortiz is an observant "reader" of human actions and their symbolic implications. As earlier santeros linked Machado and Batista to the religion based on their behavior and relationship to symbolic



9. A black and red billboard advertises the Revolution. It is meant to read “Yo amo,” or “I love the July 26th movement,” yet seems to be intentionally ambiguous. (Photo by Ivor Miller)

colors and trees, Ortiz links Castro to Eleguá because of his interactions with children, among them the creation of international schools for children on the newly named “Isle of Youth.”<sup>26</sup> The education of children has been one of the main focuses of the Revolution. The Pioneers (*los pioneros*) are the “young elementary school children who pioneer in the political learning activities before applying for membership in the Union of Young Communists (UJC)” and the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) (Pino 1974:22). Many santeros are keenly aware of the Revolution’s special focus on children and link Castro’s actions to Eleguá because of this. It does not matter that many of Castro’s actions were conducted in a secular context; the concept of working with children is intrinsically linked to Eleguá.

Another reading of Castro’s actions links the charismatic fashion in which Castro salutes the martyrs of the Revolution with the Santería practice of ancestor commemoration. Tere Ortiz told me:

As a santera I reaffirm that he is a believer because every 13th of March he makes an act in the park in front of the University of Havana in commemoration of José Antonio Echeverría, a martyr of the Revolution.<sup>27</sup> He begins the act by mentioning all the martyrs and the public responds with, “Present!” as he mentions each name.

In our religion we santeros use a ceremonial stick to pound the floor in ritual. Before performing a rite we call upon our ancestors and the participants respond with “Ibaé” (I salute you); we call the dead so they know about and can authorize what we are going to do.

The Comandante makes the same rite when he calls the name of each martyr. This is called “*yumboniar* [from *moyuba*, ‘to pay homage’] the ancestors.” This is the observation that the people of Cuba have had, and because of this that they say he has “made Ocha.” (1993)

In his speeches, Castro often calls the names of Cuban martyrs to invoke their power in the present and to historicize the revolutionary struggle. The manner in which he does this is strikingly similar to the Lukumí Egun practice of evoking the ancestors before any important action is taken. The interpretations of santeros indicate the pervasive influence of Lukumí cultural styles in Castro's public persona.

In *Espiritismo* (Spiritism), clairvoyants evoke spirits of the ancestors. They create focal points for their ceremonies by putting a white cloth over a table, and placing on it objects that include a vase of flowers, a bottle of perfume, a candle, a cigar, and an image of a familiar spirit or a deceased loved one. At this *bóveda* (altar) practitioners invoke and communicate with the ancestors to receive their guidance. In similar fashion, busts of José Martí, called "the Apostle of Cuban Independence," are placed in city and town centers throughout Cuba. They are made altar-like by being painted white and by having flowers and trees planted around them. In fact the Plaza de la Revolución, the epicenter of the government's public activities, is an enormous civic *bóveda* to the spirit of José Martí. Its focal point is a huge white statue of Martí, flanked by royal palm trees which symbolize the Cuban nation (plates 10 and 11). During public speeches, the images of Martí and Ché are illuminated, and their memories evoked to inspire the present revolutionary struggle. Celebrating national martyrs in aesthetic arrangements and actions related to local religious practice is pervasive in contemporary Cuba. Art researcher and critic Gerardo Mosquera writes:

[O]n occasions revolutionary publicity is organized in the wall murals of some Revolutionary Defense Committees (CDR) through compositions that resemble the canons of domestic altars. (1983:236)

Tony Harrison, a British writer traveling in Cuba in 1969 noted:

[W]hen you go into any office of the UJC [Unión Juventud Cubana] [...] you'll find almost always the table pushed against a wall, and up there above the table, three photos, Fidel, Che, Camilo. There you are already, your altar [...]. It's usual socialist practice to name streets, factories, etc., after heroes of the revolution. When they do that here [...] they believe that guy's right there getting on with the work. Really there. It helps the revolution no end. (1970:19)

As a santera, Tere Ortiz interprets the aesthetic arrangements of civic memorials as extensions of her religious practice:

When a leader of any country comes to Cuba the first thing they do is place a floral adornment for José Martí and another for Antonio Maceo. In our religion this means that we are informing the Egun [the dead] that a visitor has arrived in our land to try to resolve a problem.

Many acts realized by Comandante Fidel Castro are implicated in mysticism and we santeros know them as rituals of Ocha. It's because of this we say that he has a religious base. (1993)

Ortiz is not privy to Castro's "inner circle." She has heard him speak often of Marxist-Leninism. Yet as an observant Lukumí practitioner, she knows that actions reveal what spoken words are sometimes meant to conceal. She interprets Castro's public use of *Espiritismo* and Lukumí ritual forms as evidence of his participation in Cuban religion.

Whether or not Castro is an initiate is irrelevant. The fact that many Cubans feel Castro is a santero underscores the popular belief that in a world filled





10. White flowers and palm trees adorn the José Martí memorial in Havana's Playa del Este. (Photo by Ivor Miller)

with enemies, only someone with extraordinary power can be protected (as Castro has been) for over 30 years. Since Cuban mythology teaches that supernatural powers are accessed through working with the Santería divinities, and Castro has publicly demonstrated his use of their symbols, he must therefore be working with them. This popular analysis sees an interdependence between the power of the Orichá and the Cuban Communist Party leadership.

### *Tacit Religion under Communism*

If Castro did become a member of any Afro-Cuban religion, he certainly did not publicize the fact. Although educated in the Jesuit tradition, his relationship with the Church, as reflected in his early speeches, was antagonistic. In public discourse, Castro often singled out Catholicism, but members of the PCC understood him to mean all religious practice in Cuba. Even though they saw Castro use religious symbolism in public discourses, Party members knew they could not display their religious beliefs openly.<sup>28</sup> In fact, many believers refused to give up their religious practices in order to enter the Party, thereby marginalizing themselves. Ifá diviner Reinaldo Blayó worked as the director of artisan workshops until his retirement. He told me his story:

I was a founder of the Cuban Communist Party and in 1963 I had to decide between the Party and my religion. I decided for my religion. I was honest and didn't falter at the final hour, because I was about to be initiated as son of Yemayá and Changó. There were many people who discarded their Orichá [Santería divinities] or put them under the care of family members, but I didn't permit myself to do this. (1993; plate 12)

Sr. Blayó appears to be an exception to the many Cubans who hid their beliefs in order to become integrated into their society. He continues:

If you enter the houses of many Cubans and see altars, they will tell you: "No, these are not mine, they belong to my mother," or to their grandmother. One can be sure that in Cuba everyone is a believer. There is an old saying that goes: "Those without Congo ancestry have it from Calabar." (1993)

Many Cubans told me anecdotes of believers hiding their Orichá at a mother's house in order to worship secretly and join the Party publicly. Writer Antonio Benítez-Rojo went to a ceremony in the house of the late Arcadio, perhaps the most famous santero, ngangulero, and *espiritista* of Guanabacoa, a region famous for its knowledgeable diviners.<sup>29</sup> There he saw a Revolutionary soldier "mounted" by an Orichá:

Arcadio's house was always filled with people because he had many *ahijados* [godchildren]. He was an initiate of Eleguá and danced well. Lázaro Ross was always singing at his parties.<sup>30</sup> In 1966 I went to an initiation ceremony and when they began to drum and chant for Changó, a member of the FAR [Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias], possibly a Party militant passed close to the house. After hearing the drums, he entered the house "mounted" by Changó. At the time, this was incredible and the participants were left flabbergasted. (1994)

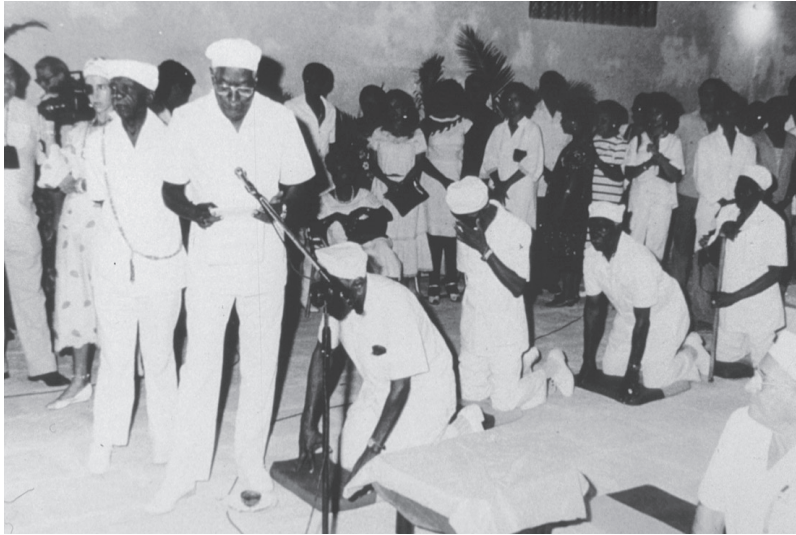
Stories like this reveal the strength of Santería in the Havana region, and the thin veneer that covers it. Whether the repression of religious expression was official government policy or the self-censoring actions of people who feared they were at risk, these issues had complex ramifications in Cuban society.

One ramification was that some Cubans began to interpret the actions of Fidel Castro and the symbols used by his regime in ways completely divergent from his spoken discourses. Based on observations of their public actions, many Cubans regarded several of Castro's closest confidants as religious practitioners, including Celia Sánchez, Comandante René Vallejo, Comandante Juan Almeida, and President Sékou Touré of Guinea Conakry.



11. A statue of José Martí, in Havana's Plaza de la Revolución, is flanked by royal palm trees which symbolize the Cuban nation. (Photo by Ivor Miller)

12. Sr. Blayó, standing at microphone (left center with glasses) speaks on behalf of Cuban babalawos at a reception for the Oòni of Ifè, a spiritual leader of the Yorùbá people, during the Oòni's 1987 visit to Cuba. (Photo courtesy of Marina Regla)



### *Celia Sánchez*

Celia Sánchez Manduley was one of the people closest to Castro from the struggle in the Sierra Maestra till her death in 1980. While she is one of the most famous women of the Revolution, little has been written about her. She is a near-taboo subject in Cuba because of her participation in Castro's intimate life. Yet many Santería practitioners told me legends of Celia Sánchez's participation in this religion. For example, "Panchita" López, an 82-year-old santera, told me:

Celia Sánchez was an initiate of Yemayá. They invited me to assist in an Ocha ceremony in her house but I didn't want to leave my house or husband unattended for the seven-day period. My ahijada Rita ("Irofan Dei" in Lukumí) went. Celia, if I'm not mistaken, was called "Omí Tawalde" in Yorùbá.<sup>31</sup>

The babalawo who gave Kofa de Orula [an Ifá ceremony] to Celia was from Párraga [in Havana]. He was called Mario Mendoza. (1993)

Paloma Vissot, an initiate of Yemayá who worked closely with Celia Sánchez, recalls an anecdote her Ocha madrina, Josefina, related to her:

Josefina had made saint in 1959. Dressed in whites as an Iyawo [a new initiate], she passed by the house of Celia and at this moment Celia walked out to the door and told her "santo" [which is the santeros' greeting to an Iyawo]. She was flabbergasted and always told this anecdote, because they were neighbors, and whenever they had an Orichá ceremony they were never bothered by the police. (1993)

The message here is that Celia acted in a way that only an elder santera could do to a younger initiate. Because of Celia's authority, the police never interfered with Josefina's religious activities.

Since 1952 Father Várela has been director of the church of the Virgen de Regla (the saint associated with Yemayá). He claims to have met Celia Sánchez and to know intimate details about her Ocha funerary rites:

Celia Sánchez was from the town of Media Luna near Manzanillo, and since childhood was a practicing Catholic. As an adult she "made saint"

and struggled with the Comandante [Castro] until she died. She loved humanity, and helped all who came to her. She often sent messengers to the Church of Regla to give masses for her family members who had died. She never came herself, but I knew she sent them because I knew the names of her family. Her two sisters, who are also religious, often came to the church. When she died, santeros came to give her funerary rites, and after that her Catholic rites were performed.

I met her only once, at the beginning of the Revolution. Castro entered Havana on January 8th, 1959, and we performed a religious act in this church because the July 26th Movement ordered a gold medal to be offered to the Virgen de Regla. We invited Fidel to the ceremony, but he couldn't be located, and when I went to his house in Cojimar, Celia received us at the door. (1995)

The Church of Regla is associated with Yemayá. Father Várela's testimony that Celia ordered masses to be performed in the Church of Regla gives more credence to popular rumors about her ritual ties to Yemayá. Yemayá is the Orichá of the ocean. She can be matronly and nurturing, qualities associated with Celia Sánchez, who adopted many children. Eduardo Sánchez, an adopted son of Celia Sánchez and a santero, participated in her funeral in 1980:

I had the honor to be at her funeral the entire time, and I saw pass by her body all social classes in this country. There were even santeros dressed in white with their collares [necklaces consecrated to the Orichá] and at that time this was not permitted, but they went anyway. (1993)

The fact that santeros would wear publicly ceremonial attire at the funeral of Celia Sánchez in a period of religious repression, implies that she was indeed an initiate.

### *Comandante Vallejo*

Comandante René Vallejo was chief medical officer to the army and Castro's personal doctor as well as chief of his escorts. He was famous as an espiritista. Like Castro and Celia Sánchez, Vallejo was also from Oriente, noted for its Espiritismo. A British writer quotes an unidentified Cuban as saying:

He was a famous surgeon, a lung specialist, but some days [...] he just wouldn't operate if the spirits said that it wasn't a good day for it. It was he, well, Vallejo and the orishas who told Fidel to move the army from Oriente to nearer the centre of the island where the imperialist attack would come. That was at the time of the Bay of Pigs. The orishas advised it. (Harrison 1970:19)

Santera Tere Ortiz reported to me that:

Comandante Vallejo lived around the corner from my parent's house, and everyone knew that he was an espiritista and a santero. At the door of his house was a huge Santa Bárbara. Fidel would visit the house every Tuesday and Thursday and everyone deduced that he also participated in the spiritual works that they made, because it was seen that many other people entered the house. (1993)

Ortiz's interpretation of Castro's intimate relationships with known religious practitioners like Vallejo, implies that Castro too was a practitioner.



Benítez-Rojo told me of his experiences with Vallejo:

Celia Sánchez had an espiritista sister. I visited her, and Comandante Vallejo was there with three military personnel and they prepared everything for a *misa* they were going to have. This *misa* was different than the ones they make in Havana, it was like those in Oriente which are filled with African influences. There were many fragrant white flowers on the floor, and they sang and danced over them. I was a little surprised because I had never seen this kind of ritual practice. I was also surprised to see Comandante Vallejo, Fidel's right hand man, singing and dancing for the spirits. (1994)

In their assessments of Castro's and Vallejo's relationship, santeros often emphasize Vallejo's role as Castro's barber and as one of the few people allowed to touch his head. In Santería, most rituals focus on the crown of an initiate's head, considered the seat of destiny (see Drewal 1977:43–49). For a 12-month period after the initiation, only a padrino may touch the initiate's head. The implications are that Vallejo could touch Castro's head and attend to his health because he was a ritual specialist, capable of protecting Castro spiritually. Santero Eduardo Sánchez reports that:

Comandante Vallejo had Changó made, and he was an espiritista. He had a Santa Barbara the height of a person in his house. He was Fidel's doctor and had Fidel's life in his hands. He was his man of maximum confidence. Vallejo's brother Antonio, also a great espiritista, is devoted to San Lázaro. (1993)

So renowned were the spiritual powers of Vallejo, and his devotion to Castro, that many believe Vallejo, who died in 1969 (Karol 1970), sacrificed his own life to protect Castro. The ceremony Vallejo allegedly conducted is called a "life change" (*cambia vida*), which would transfer all of the evil racing towards Castro onto Vallejo.<sup>32</sup> Sánchez continues:

It is well known among the eldest santeros and espiritistas in Vallejo's lineage that he made a spiritual work to capture and be rid of some "evil" that was being sent to Fidel. Vallejo himself caught this and he died. This is a ceremony called "change of life" (*cambia vida*), and with his own being he changed his life for that of Fidel. (1993)

For Cuban revolutionaries the thought of Vallejo sacrificing his life for that of Castro is not far-fetched, considering the myriad assassination attempts by the CIA and certain Cuban exile groups.<sup>33</sup> Many Cubans sacrificed their lives for societal change; during the Bay of Pigs attack and the Cuban Missile Crisis the entire country was mobilized for defense.

### *Juan Almeida*

Juan Almeida Bosque was a bricklayer who joined the 1953 attack on the Moncada Garrison against Batista. He is currently "Comandante of the Revolution, President of the National Committee of Control and Revision, and Vice President of the State Consul" (Partido 1992:365). Tere Ortiz told me that:

Juan Almeida was initiated to Changó. His mother Charo was initiated to Oyá, and held drum ceremonies twice a year. Juan's sisters are called Charito, Reglita, and Juanita. They lived in front of my parents' house

and spent a lot of time with my parents. Juan's sister Charito, the composer, is preparing for her Ocha; my father is her godfather. They are all espiritistas; Reglita and Juanita are very good mediums. (1993)

Elder santera "Panchita" López confirmed this:

Comandante Juan Almeida Bosque and all of his family belong to Santería. He made Changó long before the Revolution. His sisters are espiritistas; I'm not sure if they've made saint yet, but I know that they were recently preparing for initiation. (1993)

And according to Santero Eduardo Sánchez:

The mother of Juan Almeida was an initiate of Yemayá. They lived in Los Sitios [Havana] and at the entrance of the house sat a black doll with a blue gingham dress. (1993)

Los Sitios is a Havana barrio famous for its Lukumí practitioners. Dolls in Cuba are often not playthings, but receptacles for spirits. This black doll, dressed in blue, was color coded for Yemayá. The testimonies of these three santeros testify to the religious practice of a Revolutionary leader.

### *Castro's Mystic Ties to Africa*

Discussion of Castro's alleged ritual practice resurfaced when he visited West Africa for the first time in May 1972. Castro's voyage began in Guinea Conakry, where he visited President Sékou Touré (*West Africa* 1972:640). Photos of Castro and Touré embracing and dressed in white appeared in official PCC publications of the time, including *Granma* (see Partido Comunista de Cuba 1927a). It was unprecedented for Castro to be photographed in clothes other than his military uniform, and the use of white is symbolic of initiation. Since then rumors of his initiation into African practices have circulated in Havana (plates 13 and 14). Some Cubans told me that the late Touré was Castro's padrino, and that every time the Revolution was in crisis, Touré came to the island to perform ritual sacrifice with Castro. Writer Tomás Fernández reported that:

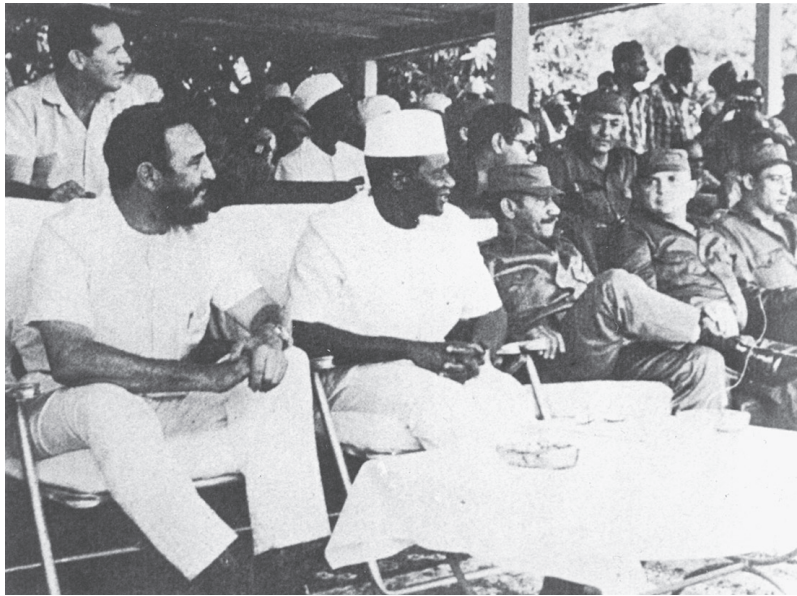
When Fidel dressed in white with Touré, the Cuban population began to comment that he had "made saint" and that he had buried a *prenda* [a ritual vessel] in the José Martí National Airport [to protect him in his travels]. In truth no one knows for sure. (1993)

Ifá diviner Sr. Blayó relayed to me that:

There is commentary about Fidel, and it doesn't seem strange because he was raised among Haitians, and I don't doubt that they made something [a ritual protection] for him. Neither do I doubt that they made something for him in Guinea, because he did what he had never done before, he took off his military uniform. He said that he wore white as a courtesy to the customs of the country. (1993)

In March 1976 Castro returned to Guinea to see Sékou Touré (Moore 1986:34). Observers of the political terrain acknowledge the strong ties between Guinea and Cuba. Nelson Valdés writes:

13. Castro (left) with Touré and members of the Cuban delegation in Guinea. (Photo from *Partido Comunista de Cuba* 1972:13; courtesy of Ivor Miller)



14. Castro and Touré embrace in the Lukumí shoulder-to-shoulder style. (Photo from *Partido Comunista de Cuba* 1972:22; courtesy of Ivor Miller)



Guinea [...] was the first African nation to show consistent friendship toward Cuba after 1960. Sékou Touré was the first African dignitary to visit the island, and from 1967 on, the two countries moved unostentatiously closer. [...] Over the years Cuba has reaffirmed its moral and material aid to Guinea under any circumstances. (Valdés 1979:89–90)

Meanwhile, rumor in Guinea and other West African countries suggests that Touré was indeed a practitioner both of Islam and of his traditional family religion. Senegalese scholar Ibrahima Thioub writes:

There were many coups against Sékou Touré, which were all abortive. In West Africa many people thought that he was protected by God and his relation with the king of Morocco Hassan II who, people believe, descended from Mohammed, the prophet of Islam. [...] People are sure that these “big men” are strong in mystic affairs. (1995)

Associations between political leadership and mystical power are made in many societies. What is unusual about this case is that both Touré and Castro are leaders of declared atheist governments. Cuba had become directly involved in African anticolonial struggles since 1963, when Cuban soldiers fought in Algeria against the French (Moore 1986:31). When Cuba entered the war in Angola against the Republic of South Africa, they named their involvement “Operation Carlotta” after Black Carlotta, a Cuban slave who led a rebellion in 1843 against slave holders in Matanzas, Cuba (García Marquez 1977:8). In his dialogue with Cubans, Castro has repeatedly used symbols from Cuba’s African heritage because Cubans would respond to them at a deep level.

#### *The Fourth Congress of 1991 and Beyond*

Dramatic changes occurred in the Cuban economy in anticipation of the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991, and Castro declared the start of the “Special Period” (Franklin 1992:251–52). In an attempt to gain needed support amongst disaffected Cubans, the PCC ended the prohibition on religious believers in its ranks (Reed 1992:14). Announced in October 1991, this policy was a government concession to the masses of Cubans “voting with their feet” by filling church services and joining the Cuban religions en masse since 1986. To many people outside of the Party the Fourth Congress announcement was a relief; they could practice their beliefs with greater freedom. Yet for the Party members who hid their beliefs, this created a weird dilemma; they could still not admit their beliefs, because they would run the risk of admitting that they had been camouflaging them for 30 years! Rogelio Martínez-Furé, director of the National Folklore Ensemble (Conjunto Folklórico Nacional), articulated the perspective of many Santería elders when he responded:

The state does not create culture, it is created by the people, the masses. If the officials, the intellectuals, want to [...] accept Changó [...] as part of Cuban culture, well, illumination has struck. But Changó has been and will continue to be a Cuban orisha [...] for a long time to come. (1991:28)

When the Fourth Congress ended the official and self-censoring repression of religious expression in Cuba, it seemed as if a lid had been lifted off of a steaming pressure cooker. For the first time, many could publicly speak, dress, and act in ways they had previously concealed.

As religious symbols became acceptable for use in popular dance music, plastic arts, and even tourist shows, the government responded by using them in political spectacle. In one example, the popular dance band NG La Banda (New Generation Band) premiered “Papa Changó” on 1 January 1996, during the 37th anniversary of the Revolution at the Plaza de la Revolución (plate 15). An almost operatic drama with song, dance, costumes, and eulogy where Changó devotees evoke him for protection against their enemies, the performance clearly alluded to Cuba’s isolation in the international arena. After praying to Changó, the singer guided the audience through a mock cleansing ritual using symbolic movement, herbs, and other magical ingredients. They were then instructed to take out and wave a red handkerchief (the color of Changó)



15. NG La Banda premieres “Papa Changó” during the celebration for the 37th anniversary of the Revolution. The sign at the upper left reads “37 y no paramos” (37 and we’re not stopping). (Video grab courtesy of Ivor Miller)



to wave evil away. The thousands of youth dancing on the Plaza responded ecstatically. The official repression of intimate religious sentiment in a public arena creates a social tension that is exacerbated during an economic crisis. Events like the NG La Banda concert, which encourage the public to express these feelings openly, release tensions in an emotional, highly charged atmosphere. Conforming to earlier patterns, religious symbolism is displayed in the political arena in ways easily interpreted in Western terms: a dance concert!

The importance of a papal visit is also easily understood in Western terms. Unofficially, Castro may well be a santero. Officially, his antireligious stance was strong for many years. In spite of this, Castro was very comfortable using religious symbols during the Pope’s visit in January 1998. A month beforehand, the Virgen of Charity (la Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre), Cuba’s patron saint, was carried in procession to Catholic churches throughout the island. Among the population, this Virgen is directly associated with Ochún, a Yorùbá riverine divinity.<sup>34</sup> In her sanctuary in El Cobre near Santiago, the skin tone of la Virgen is mulatto (a child of miscegeny), her cape is glittering yellow (the color of Ochún). Santeros initiated to Ochún (as well as many other Cubans) commonly make pilgrimages to El Cobre. Aspects of Catholic ritual are important to practitioners of all Afro-Cuban religions. Before initiation into them, children are customarily baptized in the Church (which is considered a protective and positive influence). Hence expressions of Cuban Catholicism hold meaning for santeros, nganguleros, and Abakuá. Appropriately, during the Mass led by the Pope at the Revolutionary Plaza, Cuban music with pulsing *clave* rhythms<sup>35</sup> was played for the Virgen (Ochún loves to dance), and citizens waved yellow and white flags (banners that move in the wind symbolize spiritual force in Afro-Cuban traditions) in her honor.

Castro’s success in hosting the Pope’s visit was another example of his mastery of political spectacle. Posters of Castro face-to-face with the Pope were hung throughout the island—Castro was pictured in a neutral dark business suit, no Santería reference here. Given the resurgence of the public expression of both Catholicism and Santería, hopeful successors to Castro might do well to observe the traditions documented in this study.

## Notes

1. All translations by the author unless otherwise indicated.
2. The key role of Ogún—divinity of war—during the Haitian Revolution, the references of Jamaica’s Prime Minister Michael Manley to Rastafarianism, and Haiti’s “President for life” Papa Doc’s use of Vodou symbolism are prominent examples. See Campbell ([1987] 1994:137) and Nicholls (1996:234).
3. The element of secrecy surrounding Cuban religions has its roots in slavery, when ideas of the Spanish Inquisition lived on in Spanish Catholicism, condemning those who practiced African traditions.
4. In typical scenarios the performance of Bakhtin’s “double-voiced word” is bipartite, directed from the speaker to a uniform audience. So too is the performance of African American Signifyin(g), where blacks speak obliquely to power. And in Barthes’s reading of bourgeois signs, the powerful seek to enthrone the masses in their mythology of eternal power. My research reveals tripartite dialogues in the Caribbean, where creole elites speak “doubly” in one semiotic effort. The first reading is directed to the masses, where signs are used to maintain State power (as in Barthes’s analysis). The second reading is directed to First World leaders to suggest “peace” or “fertility.” However, this reading simultaneously parodies these tropes because of their alternative meanings for the Cuban masses. Hence, the third reading, where the use of these signs also serves to demonstrate a national politician’s intelligence and bravado before global power, much like the Monkey outwits the powerful Lion in black Signifyin(g) (Gates 1988; Barthes [1957] 1977; Bakhtin 1971:176–96).
5. I am indebted to Antonio Benítez-Rojo for his description of the way premodern, modern, and postmodern thought systems operate simultaneously in Cuba and the Caribbean region. See his book *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (1992).
6. “The Enlightenment, the basic impulse of modern thought and culture” has been defined as “the project of distinguishing and freeing the individual consciousness from the embeddedness in and determination by natural forces that was characteristic of the mythological phases of human history and culture” (Cahoone 1988:4).
7. Here I refer to the popular poem “¿Y tú agüela, a ‘onde etá?” (And Your Grandmother, Where Is She?), written by Puerto Rican Fortunato Vizcarrondo and performed by Cuban Luis Carbonell (see Vizcarrondo n.d. [c.1950]).
8. “One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois [1903] 1965:215).
9. I gratefully acknowledge support from the H.H. Rice Foreign Residence Fellowship at Yale University, from the Breen Memorial award for academic excellence at Northwestern University and from Jill Cutler for partial support of this research.
10. Enrique Sosa Johnson is “crowned” with Eleguá. He is also an *ngangulero* and an *espiritista*. All those who granted me interviews for this article later verified the accuracy of my transcriptions.
11. Andres Flores Casanova. Through his family lineages, Mr. Flores has been a member of both the Palo Monte and Abakuá since 1918. “Kongo” here means either a descendent of peoples brought from the Kongo River Basin, or a black practitioner of their religious traditions.
12. Olga More Goitisolo comes from a familial Lukumí lineage, and was “crowned” with Oyá in 1961. She became famous in Havana as Olga “la tamalera,” in the 1950s when a popular composition by this name was written about her and performed by the Orchestra Aragón; “Olga ‘la tamalera” is now a Cuban standard.
13. Gerardo Pazos “El Chino,” is a *Mokóngo* (leader) of the Abakuá group Kamaroró and a *babalawo*. The *babalawo* “Tin” was known to be Prio’s *padrino*. “Tin” is famous in Cuban Ifá history as the last *babalawo* to dance with the masks of the divinity Olokún during ceremonies concurrent with the annual *cabildo* (association) processions of Regla (the saint associated with Yemayá).
14. Because of his deep ties with dock workers, the majority of whom were Abakuá, Iglesias is assumed to have been Abakuá (Fernández 1990:171). According to my research, he was never initiated into the Abakuá society, but was indeed a *babalawo*.
15. “Cubans of color emerged among the most prominent leaders of organized labor and the PSP during the 1940s and 1950s: Lázaro Peña of the CTC, Aracelio Iglesias Díaz,

- who represented dock workers, and Jesús Menéndez, sugar workers” (Pérez 1988:307). Peña was a godchild of Manolo Ibañez “Manolito,” a babalawo from the Pueblo Nuevo *barrio* in Havana (Pazos 1998).
16. In his study of rumor in contemporary Zaire, Dieudonné-Christophe Mbala Nkanga examines the relationship between “long-standing oral traditions in Central Africa” and “the rumor machine [...] known as *radio-trottoir*, the news broadcast on the streets.” He shows that “non-members of the one-party system [in Zaire] turn toward *radio-trottoir* [...] and] through rumor, the public engages in social-political critique and counter-attack” (1995: 49, 50, 52).
  17. In Cuba, “bemba” means “thick lipped.” Ortiz traces its possible origins to Sierra Leone, where “abombo” means “lips,” as well as to the Cameroons ([1947] 1991b:51).
  18. “Panchita” (Francisca López Zaldivar), “crowned” with Obatalá, was *ahijada* (godchild) of Bernardo Rojas Torres, a well-known babalawo called “Irete Tebí” in Ifá (d. 1957). Sr. Rojas was an *ahijado* of Adechina, accredited with co-establishing Ifá in Cuba.
  19. While the majority of Abakuá groups are integrated and do not consider skin tone as a barrier or an aid to admittance, some groups have a differing policy and admit only blacks and mulattos.
  20. According to the testimony of “El Chino” Pazos, the Mokóngo of one Abakuá group, this ceremony took place in Marianao, in “el campamento de Columbia” (1933) (today called la ciudad de libertad, a former residence of President Batista).
  21. In Yorubaland, West Africa, Odùduwà is regarded as the founder of the Yorùbá race, and Yorùbá kings trace their ancestry to him (see Abimbola 1997a:179).
  22. A 10th-century carved ivory book cover depicts Pope Gregory the Great receiving information from the Holy Spirit, an early representation of the Holy Spirit as a dove (from the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; see *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* 1998, 26:879).
  23. I attended a Palo Monte ceremony at the home of Enrique Hernández Armenteros “Enriquito,” on 24 June 1991, the day of San Juan Bautista/Sarabanda (Ogún in Lukumí). Hundreds of his godchildren were present, many of them professionals, actresses, and musicians. Enriquito is the founder and leader of the Religious Afro-Cuban Association of Sons of San Lázaro (Asociación Religiosa Afro-cubana Hijos de San Lázaro) (see Rodríguez and Ferral 1991:14).
  24. This idea is also found in Cuban literature. In a recent popular novel by Christina García, a character says, “El Líder [Fidel] is initiated [...] he’s the son of Elleguá” (1992:188).
  25. Castro’s naming of 8 July as National Children’s Day circa 1968 is an example. He also built “La ciudad de los pioneros de José Martí,” in Playa del Este where children from all over the world were brought to be educated. The Villa was dedicated to the son of José Martí. In this same city a hospital was created for the children of Chernobyl to receive free treatment.
  26. Formerly the “Isle of Pines,” it was renamed “The Isle of Youth and Students” (Isla de la juventud y los estudiantes).
  27. José Antonio Echeverría (d. 1957). A Catholic student leader and early *fidelist*, he was killed leading the attack on Batista’s palace.
  28. Carlos Franqui, Castro’s long-time associate, writes, “the Cuban population today less than 20 years old is not baptized, and if someone is baptized or becomes Christian, Protestant, Espiritista, Jehovah’s Witness, or enters any African religion, they know that they will have a difficult life, that they can’t become a Party member, nor have an official post” (1988:103–04).
  29. Arcadio Calvo Espinosa (1914–1984). *Santero*, ngangulero, and founder of the *sociedad* “Hijos de San Antonio” in 1949.
  30. Lázaro Ross, lead singer of Lukumí music at the Cuban National Folklore Ensemble for several years, has also recorded several albums of Cuban Lukumí music. He is “crowned” with Ogún.
  31. The name “Omi Tawalde” in standard Yorùbá is Omitawede, meaning “water from the cool sacred pot” (of Yemayá) (Abimbola 1997b).
  32. For an example of this ceremony, see Lydia Cabrera (1977:6).
  33. For examples of these assassination attempts and the U.S. officials involved, see Jane Franklin (1992:31, 40).
  34. In a broader sense, la Caridad de Cobre represents indigenous Caribbean, African, and Spanish ethnicities. For an in-depth study of her significance, see José Juan Arrom (1971:184–214).

35. *Clave* rhythms came from West Africa to Cuba in the form of ritual music, where they have become the rhythmic structure for all forms of popular music. Ochún, associated with la Virgen de la Caridad, is legendary for her love of dance and rhythm. Therefore this *clave* music for the Virgin was directly associated with Ochún, the dancing divinity who is a symbol of the Cuban nation and the national culture.

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