

Article

Writing Orisha Music: Text, Tradition, and Creativity in Afro-Cuban Liturgy

David Font-Navarrete

Department of Music, Multimedia, Theatre, and Dance, Lehman College, City University of New York, New York, NY 10468, USA; david.font@lehman.cuny.edu

Abstract: This essay examines the flow of music associated with *orisha*—anthropomorphic deities—across networks defined variously by art, scholarship, folklore, and religion, all of which overlap and nourish each other. Transmitted via oral tradition, written texts, and multimedia technologies, a handful of *orisha*-themed songs are analyzed as case studies in the subtle nexus of liturgy and cultural authenticity. Taken together, the songs shed light on a broader phenomenon in which creatively-minded, ostensibly-secular iterations of culture play a significant role in the dissemination and ongoing codification of ritual orthodoxy. *Orisha* music traditions are analyzed as a fertile ground for a multitude of devotional and/or artistic expressions, many of which have a particularly ambiguous relationship to the concept of religion. In this context, the fluid movements of *orisha* music between ostensibly sacred and secular contexts can be usefully understood as not only common, but as a conspicuous and characteristic aspect of the tradition. The essay’s structure and rhetorical strategies offer distinct layers of cultural and historical commentary, reflecting a multi-vocal tradition of exchanges among *orisha* music scholars, artists, and ritual experts. The essay’s historical analysis of *orisha* music further suggests that a host of subtle, seldom-discussed phenomena—multilingualism, liturgical ambiguity, and transmission via multimedia technologies—are not necessarily aberrant or irregular, but rather vital themes which have resonated clearly across the Afro-Atlantic for at least a century. By obligating us to attend to both musical meaning and cultural context, the essay’s case studies of *orisha* music shed light on the mingling and synthesis of elements from varied historical sources, languages, and cultural idioms, each of which represent distinct notions of tradition, creativity, religiosity, and secularism.



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1. Introduction

Multiple generations of scholars and artists have studied Afro-Cuban cultural traditions as a quintessential example of the transnational network known variously as the Afro-Atlantic, the Black Atlantic, or the African diaspora.¹ Depending on one’s perspective, historical narratives of Afro-Cuban traditions might illustrate African retentions and survivals in the Americas, cultural adaptation and mixing, and/or transnational identities which resist the ruptures of slavery and modernity. More narrowly, Afro-Cuban traditions associated with *orisha*—anthropomorphic deities—have attained a singular prominence, effectively representing the entirety of African heritage, not only in Cuba, but throughout the Americas.²

This essay examines a few lesser-known aspects of music associated with *orisha* as it flows—via oral tradition, written texts, and/or multimedia—across networks variously defined by art, scholarship, folklore, and religion, all of which overlap and nourish each other. While *orisha* music traditions are generally regarded in terms of the historical preservation of African tradition, what follows engages an extensive interdisciplinary body of literature on the roles of artistic creativity and professional scholarship in *orisha* traditions and the Afro-Atlantic more broadly.³ Rather than invariably representing heritage directly tied to

an African past, *orisha* songs are continually adapted and transformed from one generation to the next.

The heart of the essay lies in a relatively obscure historical narrative: the story of a single *orisha* song becoming liturgy, from its composition—in the vein of art at the edge of tradition—for a secular folkloric setting, then quickly making its way into ritual settings, its origins obscured in various ways in the process. Using a single song as its nucleus, the essay extends its analysis to numerous other case studies. In this sense, the essay invites readers to discern ways *orisha* liturgy moves within a composite network of people and ideas, all of which are liable to appear artificially suspended in time and space—as if fixed in stasis—by means of inorganic multimedia like books, photographs, audio recordings, or moving images. *Orisha* songs are also sometimes (if somewhat rarely) composed by various means, and (also rarely, but with increasing frequency) transfigured from creative work to ritual liturgy.

Similarly, the essay revolves around a relatively modest bit of data: a brief fragment of an interview—an excerpt from a much more extensive set of ethnographic conversations “on the record”—with Juan García Fernández (aka Odufora).⁴ According to the AfroCubaWeb database:

Juan García is a choreographer and an ethnologist.⁵ His work is based in a life spent as an artist working with the major folkloric groups. He was director of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba (CFN), Cuba’s premier national dance and music group, from 2000 to 2004. Prior to that he was the Asesor Folklórico of the Conjunto, the person who verifies the authenticity of the folkloric material.⁶

García is also—significantly, in the context of my analysis—not only an official arbiter of Cuban folklore, but also an actor, dancer, and an *orisha* priest (*olorisha* and *oriate*). Like many Afro-Cuban artist-priests, he is a polymath who engages *orisha* traditions as a cultural triumvirate—art, scholarship, and religion.

While it may seem like a truism that artists and/or priests often function as scholars (and vice versa), García’s account offers an extraordinarily fine-grained iteration of the ways the “translocal” dimensions of Afro-Atlantic religious traditions are “exemplary rather than unique” (Matory 2009, p. 232).⁷ Taken together, the following case studies—small bits of *orisha* music history—offer novel insights into the dynamic synthesis of intra- and international liturgical traditions. More importantly, they also exemplify a seldom-discussed confluence of ritual orthodoxy, critical scholarship, and artistic experimentation in *orisha* music. I argue that this confluence exemplifies a broader phenomenon in which creatively-minded, ostensibly-secular iterations of culture play a significant role in the dissemination and ongoing codification of ritual orthodoxy. These confluences, which I describe here and elsewhere as art at the edge of tradition, suggest that *orisha* music traditions provide fertile ground for a multitude of devotional and/or artistic expressions, many of which have a particularly ambiguous relationship to the concept of religion.

In this context, the flow of *orisha* music between ostensibly sacred and secular contexts can be understood as not only common, but conspicuous and characteristic. A historical view of *orisha* music further suggests that liturgical ambiguity, multilingualism, and transmission of liturgy via multimedia are not necessarily aberrant or irregular phenomena, but rather vital themes which resonate clearly across the Afro-Atlantic. Liturgical ambiguity in *orisha* music thereby obligates scholars, artists, and devotees alike to adopt a layered, critical approach to history. By forcing us to attend to both meaning and context, the essay’s case studies of *orisha* music trace the mingling and synthesis of elements from varied historical sources, languages, and cultural idioms, each of which represent distinct notions of tradition, creativity, religiosity, and secularism. The essay’s structure and rhetorical strategies offer distinct layers of cultural and historical commentary, reflecting a multi-vocal tradition of exchanges among *orisha* music scholars, artists, and ritual experts.

In light of Cuba’s complex relationship to religiosity and secularism, it is worth considering *orisha* music in the dual contexts of Afro-Latin music as a form of “secular devo-

tion” (Brennan 2008). On a related note, Schmidt suggests that Afro-Cuban traditions can be understood as an “ethno-business” steeped in paradox:

Afro-Cuban popular religions—long admired by the nation’s intellectual and artistic avant-garde as subaltern cultural rebuttals of dominant Cuban bourgeois opinion and U.S. economic pressures alike—are now promoted and consumed in a manner that conforms to neoliberal logic. The Cuban state confronts the challenges of late socialism with the methods of late capitalism. To some extent, the commodification of Afro-Cuban religions acts to fortify and extend revolutionary cultural policy. (Schmidt 2016, p. 163)

Broadening our historical scope beyond late 20th- and early 21st-century Cuba, then, *orisha* music can be regarded variously as: ritual liturgy; royal or imperial music; folk music; a cultural relic; and/or fine art. Therefore—historically, in Cuba, Nigeria, or elsewhere—*orisha* music is often only ostensibly “religious” in nature.⁸

2. Orisha Music as Art at the Edge of Tradition

Orisha are spiritual beings or deities with origins in West Africa (present-day “Yorubaland” in the nation-states of Nigeria, Benin, and Togo). For devotees, they are understood as mediators between humans, an ancestral spiritual realm, the forces of nature, and—often—a more abstract supreme God.⁹ Each *orisha* is identified by a variety of idiosyncratic qualities (personalities, domains, virtues, imperfections, and so on) and relationships among themselves, amounting to a pantheon of deities and archetypes which is akin to Hindu cosmology. Often associated with forces of nature, places, colors, and symbolism, *orisha* possess both human and divine qualities, and they are simultaneously ancestral and primordial. For example, the quintessentially male Eshu (aka ‘Eṣù, Elegbara, Elegua, etc.) can be anthropomorphized as a child, an old man, or a phallic stone. Likewise, the feminine aquatic *orisha* Yemaya (aka Yemoja, Yemanjá, etc.) can be embodied as a river, a lagoon, the shining surface or dark depths of the ocean, or a shoreline.

Orisha liturgy is a perennial wellspring of inspiration for devotees, scholars, and artists alike. In practice, instances of *orisha*-themed cultural expression might be celebrated (as respectful, “*orisha*-inspired” creativity) or critiqued (as unorthodox, insipid, disrespectful, or even blasphemous). In a tradition which prioritizes collective the critical expertise (and judgment) of ritual elders, the fact that theological and political discourses on *orisha* are generally decentralized is significant to my argument: in a social-cum-religious network with no dominant central authority, the cultural ecosystem for *orisha*-themed religious liturgy tends to be both diverse and local. In this context, the increasingly ubiquitous role of multimedia technology in *orisha* liturgy plays a paradoxical role, simultaneously reinforcing conservatism and encouraging innovation.

Now, in the early-21st century, *orisha* traditions have become an Afro-centric *lingua franca*.¹⁰ The word *ashe* (*aché/axe/àṣe*) is analogous to *amen*, a generic affirmation whose every nuance in pronunciation might suggest both exquisitely complex lineages and an additive, unitary, Afro-centric identity. Paradoxically (again), *orisha* traditions have become increasingly prominent emblems of national identity in Cuba, yet they have also been transplanted from Cuba to the United States, Mexico, Venezuela, and elsewhere, making Cuba—in cultural, historical, and musical terms—a central hub in the Afro-Atlantic. (See Delgado 2009; Daniel 2010; Schmidt 2016, among others.) In this global context, *orisha* liturgy has played a particular, significant role in the Afro-Atlantic throughout the late-20th and early-21st centuries. As a result, multilingual and transnational Afro-Cuban *orisha* traditions abound in absurdly ornate paradoxes. For example: devotees drumming and singing the praises of a deified African emperor (Shango) in an aggressively secular nation (Cuba) throughout a half-century-long “anti-imperialist” war. Or: beseeching “Black gods” in gatherings, which may or may not include anyone born in Cuba, or even a single Black person, in an Afro-Cuban idiom, thousands of miles from either Africa or Cuba, and singing songs whose literal meanings are often profoundly—if, perhaps, also tantalizingly—obscure to their singers.

In Cuba, *orisha* music has become a pan-ethnic, pan-African liturgical tradition while also, paradoxically, reinforcing much more narrowly-bounded—arguably, tribal—identities based on religious affiliation, ethnicity, or family ancestry. The relationship between *orisha* traditions and Cuban national identity is dynamic, and Afro-Cuban music and religion have played a particularly complicated role in the post-Soviet era of austerity and tourism on the island, constituting what Anastasios Panagiotopoulos calls “a secular religion within an atheist state” (Panagiotopoulos 2017). Since the mid-1990s, previously stigmatized *orisha* traditions have become an increasingly prominent facet of the Cuban nation-state’s international “brand,” which, in some cases, has constituted a significant (if relatively modest) source of income for ritual experts and artists alike.¹¹ In this historical context, Cuban *orisha* liturgy has proliferated in both discrete ritual spaces and public popular culture, becoming an increasingly prominent and multifaceted symbol of both African-ness and Cuban-ness. While “capital-B” Blackness and organized religions are both political categories the Cuban state often prefers to avoid, *orisha* traditions function as both official and unofficial cultural symbols, occupying niches for Black and religious identities.

In one emblematic example, the Cuban government issued a series of postage stamps to commemorate its premiere folkloric ensemble—the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional (CFN), which García directed between 2001 and 2004—on the occasion of its 50th anniversary in 2012 (see Figure 1). Each stamp in the series depicted a different *orisha*, as they might be costumed and/or embodied in the course of ritual possession trance or staged folkloric performance. In a similarly ecumenical space for popular music (and public culture) in Cuba, the group Orishas (whose name speaks for itself) became the best-known exponents of Cuban rap in the 1990s. More recently, a 2016 music video by El Chacal (aka Ramón Lavado Martínez)—likewise, unambiguously titled “Shangó,” in honor of the virile *orisha* of thunder, drumming, and dancing—includes a montage of the artist performing devotional rituals, filmed and edited in the glossy, polished style of a documentary reenactment.



Figure 1. *Orisha*-themed postage stamps published by the Cuban government in 2012 to honor the 50th anniversary of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba (aka the National Folkloric Ensemble of Cuba, or CFN).

Outside of Cuba, visible references to *orisha* are often encoded more subtly or ambiguously. For example: In a vivid cinematic portrait, the artist-scholar Milford Graves gestures to his father’s metal tools, arranged as an altar-memorial-sculpture in the lush

monte (igbo) behind his Brooklyn home, as he says, “That’s Ogun . . . You’ve got to have the spirits, man” (Graves 2018). Caricatures of Afro-Atlantic identity and ritual tradition like the 1987 feature film *The Believers* amount to refractions of the Afro-Atlantic in popular culture, often saturated by racial and religious stigma. More recently, Beyoncé’s “Lemonade” practically overflows with references to *orisha* (Tsang 2019), and we might add a great many other examples of *orisha* in creative popular music, from Celia Cruz to Ibeyi.¹² In short, while references to *orisha* are generally inseparable from Afro-Atlantic religious ritual, *orisha* music moves in a cultural feedback circuit which extends well beyond discreet ritual spaces. The remainder of this essay offers a case study of ways *orisha* music sometimes oscillates between public, artistic, and secular settings.

3. Juan García, Afro-Cuban Cosmopolitan

In Cuba, *orisha* music traditions are often divided into two regional branches or lineages: Havana and Matanzas. As the nation’s capital and its largest metropole, Havana is generally considered the epitome of modern urbanity, and its *orisha* music traditions are—likewise—often characterized as sophisticated and virtuosic.¹³ Meanwhile, *orisha* music in Matanzas—immediately east of Havana along the island’s northern coast—often connotes a more provincial, rural sensibility. The contrast suggests a narrative in which Matanzas’ *orisha* traditions are particularly old-fashioned, African, and—therefore—authentic. Matanzas’ mystique as a “cradle” (*cuna*) or “source” (*fuentes*) of Afro-Cuban tradition has been continually inscribed and re-inscribed by insiders and outsiders alike, including English-language writers. In 1941, Harold Courlander referred to “Matanzas Province, where the Lucumi [i.e., *orisha*] and Abakwa [cults] are particularly strong” (461). Likewise, Lydia Cabrera reportedly wrote that traveling from metropolitan Havana to provincial Matanzas in the mid-1950s “was like passing back to the 19th century” (Marks 2001, p. 7).¹⁴

Within a historical network of regional Afro-Cuban *orisha* traditions, Juan García is a rare sort of cosmopolitan. He has lived and worked in both Havana and Matanzas for many years, moving back and forth between the two locations constantly, just as he has moved within and between diverse cultural networks, mediating between secular folklore and religious ritual. His work within Cuba’s official cultural apparatus, in particular, has afforded García unusual cultural authority and mobility, including the relatively rare privilege of traveling in and out of the country.¹⁵ He is a cosmopolitan in a philosophical sense: “a citizen of the cosmos” who is both familiar and strange, regardless of locale (Appiah 2006). The composite effect of these roles makes García a frequent interlocutor for foreign visitors, ethnographic and otherwise. Indeed, he offers a uniquely valuable perspective on a nearly century-long process by which Matanzas has become a mecca for Afro-Atlantic arts and ritual. Both the text and context of our conversations are grounded firmly in García’s scholarly role as a consultant for numerous other visiting scholars and documentarians, which—as he makes clear—is inseparable from his ritual and creative work.¹⁶ García’s mobility and cosmopolitan identity—as a quasi-*matancero* priest-scholar working at the heart of Cuba’s official cultural-political apparatus—inform his first-hand account of the composition of an *orisha* song, written on the road, literally, in transit between Havana and Matanzas.

4. “Here Comes the Storm”: Composing Orisha Songs

The following sections revolve around fragments of a long interview with Juan García, framed and annotated by commentary. The interview was conducted in April 2008, at García’s home in the Lawton neighborhood of Havana, in collaboration with my friend and researcher partner Kenneth Schweitzer.

In this section, García narrates the process by which he composed an *orisha* song and responds to subtle questions regarding cultural authenticity. Specifically, he was asked to discuss the nature of musical *fundamento* (i.e., “foundational” or legitimate liturgical repertoire) and *inventos* (i.e., creative “inventions” whose dubious provenance typically precludes them from liturgical legitimacy). Having explored numerous bits and pieces of

“invented” *orisha* liturgy (both vocal and instrumental), I asked García about a particular song, associated with Oya, feminine *orisha* of wind and storms (Gleason [1987] 1992, 2000). I had heard the song in question regularly since at least the late 1990s, in ritual settings, and in both Cuba and the United States, when several colleagues intimated that García had composed it song for the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional (CFN) in the 1990s. In other words, it was rumored García had codified a novel *orisha*-themed song by an act of creative composition—writing—for a secular theatrical production. Remarkably, the song was then quickly absorbed into religious practice, effectively becoming canonical Afro-Atlantic liturgy.

The story of the song illustrates two complex religious and musical processes: one by which *orisha* music was composed (rather than inherited from a literal African antecedent), and another by which a novel creation for a secular setting became canon fit for religious ritual. García confirmed the story, then—in the excerpts of the interview transcribed and annotated below—offered an exquisitely crafted thesis on the nature of Afro-Cuban liturgy (see Figure 2).

Inevitably, difficult questions arise. Is this a “song” or a “chant”? In everyday English, “chanting” might suggest primordial sacredness or heightened speech, or something primitive and simple, regardless of its cultural idiom. Even in a very simple call-and-response song, the paradox and ambiguity of liturgical forms invites us to think in terms that are simultaneously both poetic and literal, and any single “utterance” deserves multiple interpretations.¹⁷ In this sense, the Lukumi language, associated intimately and intrinsically with Afro-Cuban *orisha* traditions, is roughly analogous to Latin, Sanskrit, and other esoteric liturgical languages which are regularly spoken, chanted, or sung without necessarily conveying clear, consistent, literal meanings. For devotees, the poetic, social, and mystical power of the liturgy is intrinsic. However, the liturgy’s textual depth and ambiguity also lend themselves to the elaboration of consummately worldly issues such as identity, power, race, religion, and secularism. Because the authority to interpret liturgy—that is, to determine the meaning and significance of sacred and/or ritual sound—is intrinsically contested and constantly shifting, García’s dual role as an arbiter of folkloric authenticity and ritual orthodoxy is especially noteworthy.

The following transcribed, translated excerpts of García’s words are annotated in footnotes indicated by distinct typesetting and bracketed ellipses.¹⁸



Figure 2. Juan García Fernández (aka Odufora). Lawton, La Habana, Cuba. April 2008.

Asked to narrate and contextualize the story of the *orisha* song he had written, García began with a long pause, sitting very still for nearly a minute as he gathered his thoughts in silence.

[...]

Well ...

There's a song that I know, which could be similar. It says "waye waye akuko," and that is sung.¹⁹ But the song that's become so popular was [composed] for the theatrical production "Odebi, The Hunter" by Eugenio Hernández Espinosa. It premiered [in 1992] at the 30th anniversary celebration of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba (CFN), and it includes a scene in which Odebi did everything in his power to overcome the obstacles which *akuro*, destiny, tried to put in his way to stop him from defeating Eyigongo ...²⁰

Eugenio [Hernández Espinosa] gave us the freedom to create songs attending to the atmosphere of each scene. Because I was teaching classes in Matanzas, I used the hour and a half during the trip to study the bits of the script, while also searching among the Yoruba words we know, (or) which have come to us in the present by means of tradition, looking for the most logical connections.²¹

And that's how the song came about, for a scene. Looking for ... If I summoned the rain, I brought the wind, I attracted the storm, as a [natural] element, an obstacle, so Odebi would be unable to defeat him. To divert him, so he would be unable to achieve his goal. So, I started thinking: *wa* is to come, to enter; *aye* is world, life; *oyouro* is rain; and *afe* is wind.

And that's how I composed:²²

[solo]

waye waye oyo uro
waye waye afe
waye waye oyo uro
waye waye afe
oyo uro

[chorus/solo]

waye waye afe/oyo uro

Well, I sang that in Matanzas, in a class, and it was immediately accepted by all of the dancers, who thought it was a song sung here in Havana. But at 3 p.m. that same day, I sang that same song at a folklore class at the Conjunto [in Havana]. And Felipe Alfonso, one of the principal singers at that time, and Lázaro Ros, said to me, "Hey, you're really going to town in Matanzas ... That stuff you're bringing back from Matanzas is the last word (*es lo último*)."²³

Logically, I knew perfectly well that I couldn't say that I had made it up.²⁴ Because if they knew I had made it up, they wouldn't afford it the same merit, so I let them think so.

Until one day, it occurred to me to use it in a [theatrical] work. It was for a different scene. It was a scene that showed Odebi's stubbornness and capriciousness. I hadn't introduced that song in a class yet, but I had come up with it, the way I explained (see Figure 3).²⁵ And the song said:

Odebi leri ota, Odebi ota leri²⁶
Odebi leri ota, Odebi ota leri

*Omo lowo ochanigbwe*²⁷
Omo lowo obanigbwe
Omo lowo leri ota ...

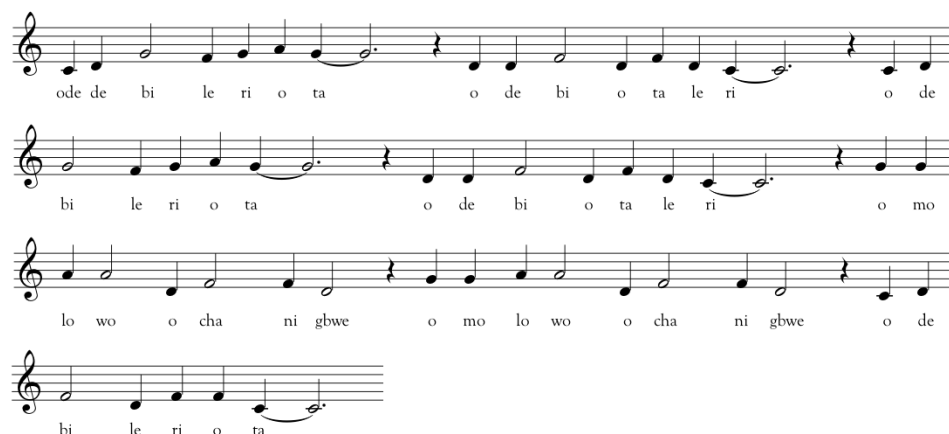


Figure 3. Sketch of the melody of García's composition for "Odebi, el cazador" (Odebi, The Hunter).

That is to say:

Odebi leri ota ...
 Odebi, your head is [made of] stone
 Odebi, the stone is your head
 With your own hands, *Odebi leri ota ...*

And I, in the scene, would be down on the floor, hitting the stage, saying:

Odebi leri ota, Odebi ota leri
Odebi leri ota, Odebi ota leri
Omo lowo obanigbwe
 [gestures, putting the palms of his hands on his head]
Omo lowo obanigbwe
Omo lowo leri ota ...

That is valid, so long as the collective accepts it.

[...]

Several years after conducting the interview with García, I was able to trace the song's movement between secular and sacred realms first-hand, during a funerary ritual in honor of a deceased *orisha* priest in Miami. In that consummately sacred musical setting, a very well-known Cuban *orisha* priest sang García's composition (*waye waye afefe*), word-for-word. During a break in the music, I asked the singer—discreetly, one-on-one—if he, too, had heard that García had composed the song for a CFN performance. In other words, I asked, was the song he had just intoned the very definition of a recent *invento*? He claimed to be aware of the song's backstory and suggested—casually and simply—that the song had become well-known and accepted. "*Sí, eso pasa,*" he said. ("Yes, that happens.")

The song has since been recorded and published various times, including on a track—"Oya"—from Roman Díaz's 2015 album *L'ó dá fún Bàtá*. As in many other published *orisha* music recordings, the track is designated simply by the name of the *orisha*. This generic naming convention for *orisha* music recordings, in which innumerable tracks from different albums and ensembles are titled generically according to the names of *orisha*, creates a strange effect in music databases. A search for "oya" in internet databases or discographies yields a flood of recordings, effectively obscuring a liturgical core (*fundamento*). The

particular iteration of the song (*waye waye afefe/oyo uro*) on *L'ó dá fún Bàtá* is followed by the very-similar-but-distinct song which García cites as a precedent for his composition (*waye waye akuko/omi o yansa*). Significantly, a single melody is shared between the chorus/refrain of both songs (see Figure 4).

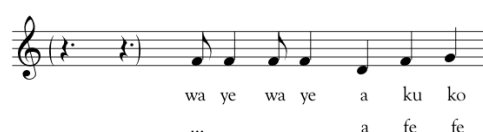


Figure 4. Sketch of a melody shared by both a novel *orisha* song composed by Juan García (*waye waye afefe*) and its anonymous antecedent (*waye waye akuko*). Liturgically, both songs are associated with Oya, fierce female *orisha* of wind and storms.

It remains to be seen how García’s account of another novel composition (*Odebi leri ota*) might be reiterated in other settings.

5. Writing Orisha Music: Transcriptions, Ritual Authority, and Dreams

[...]

I know people [who compose *orisha* songs]. For example, Osvaldo Villamil--one of the most famous *obases* from Matanzas, from the Villamil family--created a number of songs, and they are learned by his entire family collective, his *cabildo*.²⁸

[...]

Here, García describes another way novel *orisha* repertoire might be introduced via ritual experts, citing the specific example of Osvaldo Villamil. To the best of my knowledge, the only other published account of the composition of an Afro-Cuban *orisha* song is found in María Teresa Velez’s *Drumming for the Gods* (Vélez 2000), an intimate portrait of the polymath virtuoso Felipe García-Villamil. NB, Felipe García-Villamil and Osvaldo Villamil are cousins and fellow members of the same family-based *cabildo* in Matanzas, an institution which is widely regarded as a paragon of Afro-Cuban tradition (Mason 1992).

In short, García and Vélez both describe the introduction of novel *orisha* liturgy as a more-or-less established tradition within the Villamil family *cabildo*. The text uses two different iterations of the term *orisha* (*oricha*, *ocha*) and, like this essay, shifts from Velez’s context (in roman text) to García-Villamil’s own account (in italics), and the transliteration of a song (in roman text).

[...]

Felipe [García-Villamil] made [a set of] *bembé* drum[s] and dedicated it to Osain [*orisha* of plants and herbalism]. When he finished the work, he had a dream in which the words and music of a chant to Osain were given to him. This was the chant that was used to dedicate the new drum to this oricha.

I was sleeping, you see? And this chant came to me in a dream. I woke up at around two o' clock in the morning: "Valeria, Valeria, write this down for me, the way I'm putting it"—and I had the music in my mind and everything. Look:

ewe ayé osain babamí
 ewe ayé osain babamí
 osain alámo finye 'ra ewe iyá mi
 tiwi tiwi
 kukurú kukurú
 tiwi tiwi
 kukurú kukurú
 tiwi tiwi alámo finye 'ra²⁹

Osain is my father, and without him, ocha cannot be made. The chant talks about ocha, you see? From seven plants on, there is already a spirituality. Osain is the spirit of the plants, that is why you say: Osain alámo finye 'ra, because you are calling the spirituality, the spirituality of the herbs, to come and accomplish something for you. Osain's personality is reflected in the chant—Osain is an oricha that is missing a foot, an eye, an ear, an arm. "Well, I'm an imperfect person but I come to do good to humanity. I have one eye, I have one nose, one ear only, one arm only, but I come to do good to humanity, so that the world may be perfect, so that it's not like me." (Vélez 2000, p. 128)

[...]

Taken together, the accounts of novel *orisha* songs introduced (i.e., created and/or dreamt, etc.) by Osvaldo Villamil and Felipe García-Villamil reflect a family tradition which functions primarily (if not exclusively) as liturgy for their specific, immediate ritual communities. These accounts contrast with the much more secular-minded process described by Juan García, who is neither a direct relative nor a member of the García-Villamil *cabildo*.

Notably, narratives of the introduction of novel songs by Osvaldo Villamil and Felipe García-Villamil (as told by Juan García and María Teresa Vélez, respectively) emphasize ritual authority—via reputation, seniority, and ancestral inheritance—as an implicit pre-condition for the introduction of novel *orisha* liturgy, while also identifying a creative impulse woven into the Villamil *cabildo*'s traditions.

6. "Eshu baba e . . .": Orisha Songs, Transnational Networks, and Multimedia

[...]

That's what keeps folklore alive. Not just songs maintained as tradition, but also the ones that arise. Now, these days, the young people have created a fair amount of songs.

And even adapting [African *orisha*] songs conserved in Brazil, adapting them here [in Cuba]. I'll give you an example. The song from Alfredo [Calvo]'s *cabildo*, Tina [Gallagher]'s godfather's house. I don't know the song, but it's on the first record, that song is on there. In Havana, today, a drumming ceremony where that song isn't sung two or three times

is [considered] middling, abridged. Because [songs] come into fashion, and when they're not sung, people seem to miss them.

One fine day, my son said to me, "Dad, you brought that. You brought that song [to Cuba] from Brazil." "Me? No." "Dad! Yes, you did! When you went to Brazil, you brought that song back." He played a cassette [tape recording], and sure enough, the song is in Brazil. I brought that in 1990.

[How did you find the cassette?]

My son found it. *Son cosas de ida y vuelta* ... ³⁰

Miguel did an interesting project, the *Bata Ketu* album. He uses [*orisha*] songs from Nigeria, Cuba, and Brazil. It gets to a point where you don't know [where the song is from].³¹ The same song, with light variations. I think sometimes the lyrics vary, but the melody is what most endures.

En esto hay de todo ... ³²

[...]

Without identifying any particular ensemble or individual by name ("the young people"), García acknowledges that the creation of *orisha* liturgy is an ongoing and increasingly common phenomenon. Axiomatically, within a larger framework of cultural tradition, any such creative impulse is necessarily evaluated collectively, according to creators' perceived depth of knowledge, authority, artistry, and/or inspiration. Implicitly, but clearly and more provocatively, García suggests the possibility that *orisha* repertoire might be introduced disingenuously: the sources of novel *orisha* repertoire—i.e., liturgy composed recently rather than inherited directly from Africa and/or time immemorial via elders—might be obscured or falsified. As a narrator and analyst, then, García acknowledges the inherent, organic messiness of the process he is narrating. He also offers a formula for liturgical authenticity: roughly speaking, the collective owners of the heritage are the arbiters of authentic repertoire, and the prerogative to approach *orisha* liturgy creatively (i.e., to compose and adapt ritual repertoire) correlates directly to ritual authority (including seniority and familial inheritance). García's story about the song he composed thereby becomes more meaningful than the song itself.

He then complements the story of the song he composed with another, which offers his historical analysis (and narrates his inadvertent role) in the movement of another *orisha* song between three nodes in the African diaspora: Cuba, Brazil, and West Africa. The movement, in this instance, is traced via written and multimedia technologies: notes and audio recordings on cassette tapes; and a recording by. Specifically, García refers to a song performed by the late *orisha* priest Alfredo Calvo on the 2007 CD *Batá y Bembé de Matanzas*. The CD was produced and published independently by Tina Gallagher via Kabiosile Productions ("afro cuban music from the source").³³

Feigning to not know the song (perhaps somewhat disingenuously or theatrically), García asserts, clearly-yet-implicitly, that Calvo incorporated the song into his liturgical repertoire via recordings of Brazilian (i.e., not Cuban) *orisha* music. In other words, García offers a parallel case study to the song he composed: another *orisha* song, adapted from Brazilian sources by Alfredo Calvo via a recording, which has indeed become liturgical canon far beyond Matanzas. As a footnote in the historical record of Afro-Cuban music, García asserts that the song was imported into Matanzas from Brazil in the late-20th century, not inherited and preserved in Matanzas from 19th-century Africa. More symbolically, the song's story represents another vivid example of *orisha* music as art at the edge of tradition—a confluence of ritual authority, multilingual transnational networks, artistic creativity, and multimedia technology.

The lyrics of the song can be transliterated as:

[solo]
 ero na ti awa na ni
 [chorus]
 Eshu baba e, e iye
 Eshu babawona

In fact, a recording of Calvo singing the same song had already been published several years earlier, via the 2003 video DVD *Vamos al tambor: Presentations in Matanzas, Cuba*.

While a fulsome comparison of Calvo's published iterations of the song and its Brazilian and/or African analogs remains beyond the scope of this essay, *Vamos al tambor* is particularly noteworthy as the first video depiction of *orisha* possession trance published commercially for a general public. In the video, a single, stationary video camera presents a continuous sequence without narration. The medium insists on a voyeuristic disposition, regardless of a viewer's attitude, but the document itself is framed—visibly, literally, and unambiguously—as a ritual, quite distinct from a staged folklore. Although filming *orisha* initiates, particularly in the throes of possession trance, has historically been regarded as a sort of desecration by many priests, *Vamos al tambor* was produced in close collaboration with Calvo (see Figure 5).

Beyond the fact that recording technology has become increasingly commonplace in *orisha* ritual, the publication of *Vamos al tambor* relied on Calvo's assertion of ritual authority: introductory text presents the film “with the blessings of our Elders and Orishas,” indicating that discussion within the religious community and divination were conducted in order to establish the project's legitimacy. Kabiosile Productions' multimedia publications—videos, audio recordings, written texts, (including musical transcriptions) published independently by Tina Gallagher—shift, rather clearly and categorically, between liturgical and didactic functions. Gallagher's long-term, intimate involvement with Calvo constitutes an exemplary collaborative approach (arguably in the spirit of applied ethnomusicology or participatory action research), as well as offering an important precedent for more recent Matanzas-based multimedia productions by the El Almacén collective.³⁴



Figure 5. Still from *Vamos al tambor* (2003). Courtesy of Kabiosile Productions.

Vamos al tambor documents a ritual in which three new initiates (*iyawo*) are presented to the community and consecrated drums. Calvo leads the singing, accompanied by a *batá* drum ensemble and large chorus of devotees. In a climactic sequence, Calvo's voice is

closer to speech than song, and he lights up the room with a clear vocabulary and theatrical intention. At one especially dramatic moment, Calvo proclaims—in rapid-fire Lukumi, which the anthropologist William Bascom might have described as “complete sentences” (see Appendix B)—that he has initiated these *iyawo* with words from his own mouth and the edge of his own knife, then proceeds to list the sacrifices offered to the *orisha* on their behalf. At one point he growls “*ekun!*” (“leopard!”) as he reaps the air like the fierce mascot of Shango. In an interview, conducted by Gallagher and published in conjunction with *Vamos al tambor*, Calvo himself narrates the sequence in a way that combines translation and commentary on his own liturgical repertoire.³⁵

It is difficult to overstate the cultural influence and thorny implications of *Vamos al tambor* and other multimedia publications by Kabiosile Productions’ earnest, celebratory approach to authenticity and *orisha* possession trance in Matanzas. In the age of ubiquitous YouTube and Facebook videos, *Vamos al tambor*’s use of multimedia technologies to document discreet and intrinsically intimate moments of *orisha* initiation and possession trance straddles a historical divide between analog and digital eras. In the mid- and late-20th century (the analog era), for example, two of Lydia Cabrera’s classic books included photographs of *iyawos* (Cabrera [1954] 2022, first published in 1954) and possession trance (Cabrera [1973] 1993, first published in 1973). Now, in the 21st century (the digital era), possession trance and all manner of *orisha* ritual are documented—and effectively published, like this essay—via the internet.

7. Conclusions

The rhetoric and discourses surrounding sacred music in Cuba abound in paradox and ambiguity. Here, there, and elsewhere, it is hard to know where lines might be drawn around religion, musically or otherwise. Regardless of whether it is regarded as sacred and secular, the high stakes of the matter can rightly be described as cultural memory, or—perhaps more simply—reverence. Certainly, in the combustible mix of Afro-diasporic heritage and religiosity, the stakes of desecration are potentially, always, incalculably high.

Clearly, numerous profound questions remain, just under the surface of García’s testimony and beyond the scope of this essay. How have *orisha* music specialists—members of “African cults in Cuba”—navigated the vagaries of religious repression and stigmatization under various regimes? Or the hyper-connected, internet-based, 21st-century multimedia ecosystem?³⁶ Historically, the deeply transnational nature of *orisha* traditions and their fluid relationship to political power both suggest a flexible, adaptable relationship to the notion of religion, arguably as a protective measure against colonial, Jim Crow-style, and communist iterations of state authority. This flexibility—which amounts to a quasi-religious approach to cultural tradition, including music—is often in tension with more conservative schemes and notions of authenticity, as a well as a tendency toward hierarchical orthodoxy. In this context, *orisha* traditions offer an alternative to bounded, mutually-exclusive identities based on nation or religion.

As this essay makes clear, the cultural significance of García’s contribution is best understood within a vast multilingual body of *orisha*-related liturgy—that is, as a religious-artistic-scholarly tradition which overflows the boundaries of nation-states, historical eras, and genres. More narrowly, this essay ascribes a significant historical role to a few seldom-discussed dimensions of Afro-Cuban *orisha* liturgy, namely: creativity (i.e., writing as composition, rather than reproduction) and multimedia technology (e.g., writing as transcription and recording). García’s account clearly illustrates not only how an *orisha* song might be composed, but also how a book or a sound recording might transmit an *orisha* song across time and space. Meanwhile, as bits of linguistic and historical data (and regardless of whether it is understood as being folkloric and/or religious in nature), Afro-Cuban *orisha* music—like Afro-diasporic cultural tradition generally, and human DNA mapping—represents a bridge across an abysmal historical divide.

How might we account for the largely-implicit role of creativity in Afro-Cuban *orisha* liturgy? Or, much more broadly, Afro-Atlantic cultural traditions? García’s reflections

offer a rich set of antecedents to a much more recent explosion of published recordings of Cuban *orisha* music—a massive corpus, any or all of which is liable to flow in and out of liturgical settings. Our conversation identified several ways *orisha* music might become liturgical canon, including:

- historical inheritance from an African antecedent via the transatlantic slave trade (i.e., oral tradition)
- adoption (and/or adaptation) from distinct lineages of *orisha* tradition outside of Cuba (e.g., Brazil, Nigeria, the U.S., etc.)
- adoption (and/or adaptation) from distinct regional lineages of Cuban *orisha* tradition (e.g., Matanzas to Havana, Villa Clara to Miami, vice versa, etc.)
- adoption (and/or adaptation) from other distinct lineages of African tradition in Cuba (e.g., Arará, Palo, etc.)
- creation (and/or adaptation) by novel juxtapositions of antecedent repertoire (e.g., combining songs and rhythms in unprecedented ways, setting spoken or written texts to music, etc.)
- creation by mystical and/or discreet processes (e.g., dreams, possession trance, etc.)
- creation by conscious composition (in ritual and/or secular settings)

In practice, all of these processes of canonization can involve multimedia technologies, and the dynamic relationships between the various processes make detailed analyses of the provenance of Afro-Cuban *orisha* liturgy forbiddingly complex. As Marcuzzi notes, “Most Yoruba religious texts traverse numerous sacrosocial precincts, appearing in various forms and contexts, which makes the establishment of origins very problematic” (Marcuzzi 2008, p. 113). Even a priest’s musical dreams of new liturgy—however consciously or not—are presumably informed by an encyclopedic corpus of antecedent and deeply-ingrained liturgical canon. New songs—regardless of whether they are “received” mystically and/or “composed” consciously—are relatively rare within the massive corpus of Cuban *orisha* liturgy, yet they constitute an important and meaningful dimension of the tradition. Not only are novel and esoteric *orisha* liturgy continually more intertwined (and less easily distinguished from one another), but they offer insight into the manifold processes by which Afro-Atlantic tradition is transmitted, transformed, and created.

Bearer of *orisha* tradition like García are acutely aware of the subtleties of inheriting, reiterating, and transmitting spoken and musical liturgy, and García’s account provides especially nuanced insights on the relationship between cultural authenticity and liturgy, and—more ambiguously and implicitly—on the nature of sacred and secular modes of culture. Paradoxically, García’s testimony might delegitimize the song he composed and chronicled; given its demonstrably recent and secular provenance, the “collective” might now consider the song unfit for ritual, effectively demoting it from its recently-acquired liturgical status.³⁷ As a case study, the conversation with García offers broader insights into ways liturgy moves in the historical Afro-Atlantic: between various communities, languages, times, and places, and—recently and increasingly—via multimedia technologies. Ideally, exchanges like those written into this essay will extend beyond narrow notions of orthodoxy, nourishing a deeper, increasingly nuanced, and critically-minded conversation which both includes and extends beyond *orisha* traditions.

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Appendix A. Spanish Transcript of Interview Excerpt with Juan García Fernández

Conducted by David Font-Navarrete and Ken Schweitzer³⁸.
Lawton, La Habana, Cuba. April 2008.

Bueno ...

Hay un canto que se pudiera ser similar que dice “*waye waye akuko*,” que se canta. Pero el canto esta que ha tomado una popularidad tremenda fue para la obra “Odebí, el Cazador” de Eugenio Hernández Espinosa, que se estrenó para el 30 aniversario del Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba, en que hay una escena en que Odebi trataba por todos los medios de vencer todos los obstáculos que el akuro, que es el destino, trataba de ponerle para que no venciera a Elligongo, precisamente porque ...

Eugenio [Hernández Espinosa] nos dio la libertad de crear cantos de crear cantos atendiendo a la atmosfera de cada una de las escenas en que se pudiera hacer. Y dando yo clases para Matanzas, la hora y media de viaje, pues yo la empleaba para estudiar los bocadillos de la obra, y a su vez para ir buscando dentro de las palabras yorubas que conocemos, o que han llegado a nuestro día por la tradición, buscar las que más lógica tuvieran.

Y llegó este canto para la escena, buscando la manera de que ... si yo atraía la lluvia, atraía el viento, atraía la tormenta, como elemento de obstáculo para que Odebí no lograra vencerlo y desviarlo, para que no consiguiera su fin, pues yo me puse a pensar: *wa* es venir, es entrar; *aye* es mundo, es vida; *oyouro* es la lluvia; y *afefe* es el viento. Y en eso compuse:

[solo]
waye waye oyo uro
waye waye afefe
waye waye oyo uro
waye waye afefe
oyo uro

[coro/solo]
waye waye afefe/oyo uro

Bueno, eso yo lo canté en Matanzas, en una clase, y en seguida tuvo la aceptación de los bailarines, que pensaron que era un canto que se cantaba aquí en La Habana. Pero a las tres de la tarde de ese mismo día, yo ese canto lo canté en una clase de folclore del Conjunto [en La Habana]. Y Felipe Alfonso, uno de los principales cantantes de ese momento, y Lázaro Ros, me dijeron, “Oye, estás acabando con Matanzas. Lo que estás trayendo de Matanzas es lo último.”

Lógicamente, yo sabía perfectamente que yo no podía decir de que yo lo había inventado. Porque si ellos saben que yo lo inventé, pues no le daban el mismo crédito que si seguían pensando lo mismo. Hasta un día que se me ocurrió hacerlo en una obra. La escena era otra. Una escena donde se mostraba la tozudez, lo caprichoso que era Odebí. Ese canto no lo había probado en clase, pero yo ya lo había sacado, de la misma forma en que te señalaba. Y decía:

Odebi leri ota, Odebi ota leri
Odebi leri ota, Odebi ota leri
Omo lowo obanigbwe
Omo lowo obanigbwe
Omo lowo leri ota ...

Es decir:

Odebi leri ota ...
Odebi, tienes la cabeza de piedra
Odebi, la piedra es tu cabeza
Con tus manos, Odebi leri ota ...

Entonces yo, en escena, tirado en el piso, daba un golpe y decía:

Odebi leri ota, Odebi ota leri
Odebi leri ota, Odebi ota leri
Omo lowo obanigbwe
 [hace un gesto, poniendo sus manos encima de su cabeza]
Omo lowo obanigbwe
Omo lowo leri ota ...

Eso es válido, siempre y cuando te lo acepte la colectividad. Conozco personas... Osvaldo Villamil, uno de los obases famosos de Matanzas, de la familia Villamil... tiene una cantidad de cantos, creados por él, y aprendidos por el colectivo de toda su familia, de su cabildo. Es lo que mantiene vivo el folklore. No solo con los cantos que tradicionalmente se mantienen, sino aquellos que van surgiendo.

Hoy, en la actualidad, la juventud ha ido creando una buena cantidad de cantos. Y adaptando, inclusive, cantos que se conservan en Brasil, se han adaptado acá [en Cuba]. Para ponerte un ejemplo, el canto del cabildo de casa del padrino de Tina, Alfredo Calvo. Yo no me sé el canto, pero en el primer disco, sale ese canto. En La Habana, hoy, un tambor en que no se cante ese canto dos o tres veces, es un [promedio], es una media. Ese canto se canta dos o tres veces. Porque [los cantos] se van poniendo de moda, y cuando no se cantan, la gente, como que lo extrañan.

Un buen día mi hijo me dijo, “Papá, tu trajiste eso. Ese canto tú lo trajiste de Brasil.” “¿Yo? No.” “Papá, ¡sí! Cuando tú estuviste en Brasil, tú trajiste ese canto.” Me puso el cassette, y efectivamente, el canto está en Brasil. En el año 1990, yo traje eso. Pero ...

[Donde encontraron el cassette?]

Mi hijo lo encontró. Son cosas de ida y vuelta.

Miguel hizo un trabajo muy interesante. El disco “Bata Ketu.” El va utilizando Nigeria, cantos de Cuba, cantos de Brasil. Hay un momento en que tú no sabes...con el mismo canto, con unas ligeras variantes. Yo pienso que la letra a veces varía, pero la melodía es lo que más perdura.

En esto hay de todo ...

Appendix B. Notes on Tonal Speech and Music in Cuban Orisha Liturgy

During the transatlantic slave trade, the historical African “heritage” languages and dialects which formed the basis of Cuban *orisha* liturgy were tonal—i.e., along with consonant and vowel sounds, the melodic contours of speech determined its meaning. In this sense, Cuban *orisha* music constitutes a reservoir of linguistic data—i.e., with varying degrees of precision and continuity, the melodic content of Cuban *orisha* music contains the kinds of tonal contours which are genetic to the modern Standard Yorùbá language and its antecedents.

By the late 20th century, African languages in Cuba—including *orisha* liturgy—appeared to have gradually lost their specific tonal qualities, *except* in the musical context of song melodies. The issue of tonality in Cuban *orisha* liturgy is a constant concern of scholars, often framed in terms of loss, corruption, and the like. According to Morton Marks, for example,

Lydia Cabrera had commented that going from Havana to Matanzas was like passing *back to the 19th century*, so it is not surprising that the area would be linguistically *conservative* as well. These prayers may be another example of that conservatism . . . Under the influence of Cuban Spanish, the sound system of Nigerian Yoruba changed somewhat in its transition to Lukumi, and the tonal features were lost. But here, in what may be a more archaic variety of Lukumi and hence closer to its Nigerian *sources*, the intonation pattern of the prayers suggests the rise and fall of a tone language. It would be interesting to compare this passage to Nigerian Yoruba: perhaps prayers, like songs and batá drumming patterns have *preserved* the speech melody or tone patterns of Nigerian Yoruba. (Marks 2001, p. 11, emphasis added)

In this predominant historical and cultural formulation, Cuban Lukumi and Nigerian Yorùbá languages are framed in terms of conservatism, parentage, and preservation. At least implicitly, the oscillation between “loss” and “survival” of African heritage reverberates through studies of Cuban *orisha* liturgy, often revolving around tonal language and linguistic fluency. This is why García makes a point of speaking (rather than singing) the song he composed: to self-consciously foreground an absence of grammatical and tonal specificity.

In this vein, in 1951, William Bascom and Berta Bascom (nee Berta Montero-Sánchez y López)³⁹ recorded hours of *orisha* divination liturgy as recited by Maranoro Salako, which formed the basis for William Bascom’s seminal book *Sixteen Cowries: Yoruba Divination from Africa to the New World* (Bascom [1980] 1993). For scholars and devotees alike, the recordings of Salako’s voice—time-based sounds, rather than written texts—are presumably much more useful as documents of aural (sonic) and/or oral (verbal) tradition than Bascom’s transcriptions and translations. The recordings produced by the Bascoms are archived at the University of California’s William and Berta Bascom Collection of Yoruba Sound Recordings. With support from a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the recordings—originally on magnetic tape—have now been digitized and made available online⁴⁰.

In 1948—three years before they produced recordings of Salako in West Africa—the Bascoms visited Cuba to conduct fieldwork intended to correlate the Cuban analogs of Yorùbá traditions they had already been studying in West Africa. William Bascom’s field notes document numerous exchanges which highlight a continuity between then-contemporary West African and Cuban language. For example, on 24 June in Havana, Bascom met a priest of Ogun—virile, industrious *orisha* of iron, war, and technology—named María. After his encounter with María, Bascom wrote,

She really spoke Yoruba. That is not just a few words, but complete sentences and was not just rattling ritual phrases but was talking. She went a little to [sic] fast for me to understand, and could not hear me very well, being deaf. She was not patient enough to try to talk Yoruba with me, and I don’t think she felt I knew much. (1).

Several days later, he described a discussion of Cuban remnants of African dialects:

P⁴¹ said he came from Agbado or Agwado and his language varied somewhat from Ijesha which he said I was. He said Oyo Ijesha spoke the same . . . (10).

The dialects Bascom mentions are distinct from modern Standard Yoruba, meaning that his linguistic correlations imply pre-slavery, regional origins of Cuban *orisha* liturgical language. Throughout, tonal characteristics of African language (and/or their absence) represented vital primary data for Bascom’s transatlantic research. Likewise,

28 June. Holguin. Trujillo is 71 years old. Identifications: Elegwa is San Roque. He is “el dueño de los cuatro caminos”. They pronounce it Elegwa instead of Elegba in order to make it more refined, by making it more like Castillian . . . He says my pronunciation is Ijesha. Blood is ojo in Ijesha, “but not in Oyo.” . . . Understood ilé house; ilẹ ground, and said the same. (6)

In Bascom's judgment, Trujillo's ability to distinguish between two Yorùbá words—"ilé" (house, home, etc.) and "il'e" (ground, earth, etc.)—amounts to explicit linguistic evidence of African-ness in the form of distinct (1) tonal contours (e.g., mid-to-high versus mid-to-low melodies) and (2) vowel sounds (e.g., e versus ẹ vowel sounds). In another telling exchange, Bascom recalls:

30 June . . . An argument arose about vocabulary, between Perez and [sic] kind of a quiet youngish man, who was the hostesses "padrino" (babalorisha). What do you say when you come into a room? Perez insisted agbó. The argument went on to other words, as a sort of contest to see who knew the most, and into phrases. Perez shouted the other man down (who was younger, but who was closer to my Yoruba on several words—canoe ọkọ and another). I was tested on my Yoruba by a young man who was studying English. He and P got into an argument about what kept Lucumi together. He insisted religion; P insisted language. (10)

Bascom's exchanges with Afro-Cuban informants like "María" and "P" exemplify a predominant, forensic approach to Afro-Cuban *orisha* liturgy, which has been reiterated continually by both academic scholars and ritual "insiders" for more than a century, which seeks to corroborate African antecedents in Cuba.

Decades later, John Mason's *Orin Òrìṣà: Songs for Selected Heads*—an encyclopedic translation of Cuban *orisha* songs and prayers into English—articulated some of the subtleties and complexities of translating liturgy with exquisite clarity. In particular, Mason seems to acknowledge the inadequacy of definitive translations which fix singular meaning:

Beside drama, the placement of certain words creates poetic ambiguity. There is a kaleidoscopic effect, a radiant cluster of ideas all circling a central root . . . By considering the contextual needs, one word is judged to be the most appropriate at this time in this space. But that word comes accompanied by revelational, monochromatic word shadows which in the mind help to extend and alter the implied meaning, much like the way we see multiple images when we look at a double-exposed photo. Where we place emphasis has much to do with determining meaning. (Mason 1992, pp. 44–45)

It is an abstract, theoretical idea which underlies this essay: words always mean more than one thing, and their meanings are not necessarily literal. However, in practice, Mason wrote down Cuban *orisha* liturgy from oral sources, interpreted it as if it were equivalent to modern Yoruba, then rendered the process (and data) down to singular iterations (i.e., translations) of songs in Yoruba and English. Mason's singular translations—e.g., the prominent use of "selected heads" as a gloss for òrìṣà—amount to a theological and historical intervention (ibid).

Indeed, Mason published his formidable bibliography independently, under his own New York City-based imprint, whose name—Yoruba Theological Archministry—is grounded squarely in religious rhetoric and leveraged unambiguously in service of sacralizing Black cultural tradition. A much more modest article—"The Incomplete Yorùbá Guide to Lukumí," published in 2016 by Austria-based artist Moussa Kone on his personal website—offered an accessible primer on the overwhelmingly complex linguistic tangles of *orisha* language (Kone 2016). Underscoring the ephemeral nature of this sort of quasi-scholarly, quasi-religious, *orisha*-related digital multimedia, the article was recently deleted from the internet by its author.

As we move further into the 21st century, Kone's "Incomplete Guide" (and its disappearance) compels us to reflect on ways self-published and internet-based research on *orisha* liturgy might be archived or lost. More broadly, Mason's and Kone's publications form part of an idiosyncratic, genre-bending tradition of independent *orisha*-related publishing which blurs boundaries between sacred and secular texts.⁴² Who can say, for ex-

ample, that Mason's work is not scholarly (Mason 1992)? Or that Bascom's transcription and annotation of Salako's divination verses are not sacred (Bascom [1980] 1993)?

Notes

- ¹ The term Afro-Cuban is used here, in a generic sense, to refer African heritage in Cuba, while Afro-Atlantic refers to a transnational, historical network which connects Africa to the rest of the Atlantic world (particularly Europe and the Americas) and ascribes a primary role to African people and cultures. According to Thompson:
 That African visual presence in the Americas often links up with the spirit prepares us for today's ever widening horizons of influence. Spirit does not date. Spirit needs no visa. Herskovits published a map in the late fifties showing the western marches of what we call Afro-Atlantis. Afro-Atlantis is a world of migrations. The first two were forced—the Atlantic Trade and the repatriation of captive Africans to Sierra Leone and Halifax and elsewhere—but the rest were independent acts of initiative, hence Caribbean London, hence Caribbean Paris, hence Caribbean Amsterdam. As John Szwed has pointed out, the erstwhile colonized now colonize the capitals of their former masters. (Thompson 1999, p. 6)
- ² See also Diouf and Nwanko (2010), Gilroy (1993), Otero (2020), and Whitmore (2020), among others.
- ³ Depending on the historical moment and language(s) involved, *orisha*-related terminology might be written according to a variety of conventions. Here, I employ a generic English-language transliteration of the term. *Orisha* (which can be both singular and plural) are also known as *òrìṣà* (in modern Standard Yorùbá), *oricha* (in Spanish), and *orixa* (in Portuguese), along with numerous other variations and associated terms such as *ocha*, *santos*, etc. With a few exceptions identified in footnotes, I employ spelling based on English orthography. On *òrìṣà* traditions as a “world religion,” see Olupona and Rey (2008).
- ⁴ For other English-language studies in this vein, see also Akiwowo and Font-Navarrete (2015), Drewal (1992), García (2018), Hagedorn (2000, 2001, 2006), Klein (2007), Meadows (2021), Moore (1997, 2006), Olupona (2021), Ortiz (2018), Skinkus (2003), and Vaughan (2012), among many others. See also Rauhut (2011) and Pavez Ojeda (2016).
- ⁵ Odufora is the ritual name given to García during his initiation as a priest of the *orisha* Obatala. An excerpt of the interview, including the portions cited here, is available at [. . .]
- ⁶ García studied at the Cuban Academy of Science's Institute of Ethnology and Folklore. In terms of cultural and intellectual lineages, the designation of his scholarly discipline as “ethnology” suggests a Soviet-inflected, pan-American, post-1959 Revolutionary tradition of scholarship.
- ⁷ See <https://www.afrocubaweb.com/juangarcia.htm> (accessed on 19 October 2021).
- ⁸ See also Brennan (2008), Clarke (2004), and Matory (1999). For recent studies of Afro-Cuban music as a transnational and translocal phenomenon, see also Frías (2019), García (2018), Meadows (2021), Vincent (2006), and Whitmore (2020), among others.
- ⁹ On the porous, diverse relationships between Afro-Cuban *orisha* music traditions, religious identification, and ostensibly secular folklore, see Hagedorn (2000, 2001, 2006) and García (2018). More recently, Frías correlates Hagedorn's theoretical distinction between “folklorization” and “folkloricization” with the reflections of another CFN veteran, dancer-choreographer Ramiro Guerra (Frías 2019, pp. 89–92). See also Schmidt (2016), Daniel (2010), Delgado (2009), Klein (2007), Palmié (2013), Pavez Ojeda (2016), and Torres and Crosby (2018), among others.
- ¹⁰ On the notion of a “supreme” or “high” God in Yorùbá tradition, see Manfredi (2021).
- ¹¹ In Afro-centric narratives of history and culture, Yorùbá traditions' international prominence and prestige make them roughly analogous to the “classical” legacies of Rome, Mali, Egypt, and a host of other putatively noble empires across time and space.
- ¹² On the search for African “roots” in/of Cuban culture, see Duany (1988).
- ¹³ Ibeyi is the musical duo of Naomi Díaz and Lisa-Kaindé Díaz, twin daughters of the great percussionist “Angá”—aka Miguel Aurelio Díaz Zayas, aka Echu Mingua (his *orisha* initiation name). Transatlantic orature associated with the mythical Ibeyi (aka Ibeji) describe an especially close relationship between twins, drumming, and dancing. On the formidable, mystical nature of twins in Cuban and West African *orisha* traditions, see Kreher (1987), Marcuzzi (2005), Mobolade (1971), Olupona (1993), [et al.]. The special status of twins is expressed in a subtle ritual gesture observed in Afro-Cuban *orisha* musical tradition. Normally, when *orisha* initiates salute consecrated ritual drums during ritual celebrations, they are obligated to offer a token sum for the privilege; drummers and singers accept money as an offering for their work and the mystical power of their office. In *orisha* traditions on both sides of the Atlantic, the gesture of offering money to musicians can become an ostentatious display of wealth and status. By contrast, twins are *given* a token offering by the musical ensemble when they salute sacred drums: twins—intrinsically paradoxical as singular/plural—receive rather than offer tribute.
- ¹⁴ In reality, a more fundamental binary characterizes both Havana and Matanzas: Afro-Cuban traditions are closely associated with a Black socioeconomic underclass, and the Cuban neighborhoods and towns considered citadels of tradition (La Marina, Pogolotti, etc.) are—still, in the 21st century—literally and metaphorically “marginal.” On subtle stylistic differences between Havana and Matanzas traditions of *orisha* music, see Eisenstadt (2017).
- ¹⁵ On modernity and “the logic of Black music's African origins,” see García (2018).

- 15 On the peculiar status of Cuban artists in early-21st century Cuba, see [Duany \(2019\)](#) and [Henken \(n.d.\)](#), among others.
- 16 García is introduced in Rebecca Bodenheimer's *Geographies of Cubanidad*, which offers keen insights on local and regional discourses on identity in Afro-Cuban musical traditions, including the notion that "blackness and ... more broadly Africa are emplaced discursively in Matanzas" ([Bodenheimer 2015](#)).
- 17 See [Hagedorn \(2001\)](#) and [Wirtz \(2014, 2016\)](#), whose studies of Cuban *orisha* liturgy employ [Bakhtin's \(\[1975\] 1983\)](#) theoretical-poetic theme of "utterance."
- 18 See Appendix A for a transcript of the interview excerpts in the original Spanish.
- 19 García establishes a clear point of departure: an antecedent song which is both employed normally or often in ritual, which defines liturgy as both ancestral and communal.
- 20 I have elided the story of Odebi (the hunter) and Eyigongo (the peacock) for the sake of clarity. On the ornate complexity of Afro-Cuban myths, Cabrera writes:
- "For everything in life, we need acceptance." And if we want to know, for example, why the goddess Naná "wants" a bamboo knife, not a metal knife? We must accept that they will respond with a story about how the worm made it rain and the spider burned all the hair on its chest. Two or three months later, or perhaps a year later, if we repeat the same question point-blank, we will be told, "Because of what happened to her with the Iron." With a few fragments of the story, we will be told the rest later. These black elders exasperate our own bad habits as *blancos*—our mental tendencies, our need for precision, and, most of all, our impatience ("the deer and the turtle can never walk together")—which, in the long run, fail to reward us. ([Cabrera \[1954\] 2022](#))
- For a musical counterpart to Cabrera's reference ("the goddess Naná" and "a bamboo knife"), cf. a historical recording of Matanzas-based *orisha* song performed by Alberto "Yin" Jenkins. The recording was originally produced and published independently by Cabrera and her collaborator Josefina Tarafa, then reproduced on track 9 ("Obé ré obé ...") of the *Havana & Matanzas, circa 1957* CD anthology, curated and annotated by Morton Marks and published by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings in 2003. As sung by Jenkins and company, the song can be transliterated as:
- obe rere
obe rere
ayanaku
nana lewa.
- 21 The point of entry—from the secular setting of the CFN to a religious ritual—is not specified, leaving a provocative question open (and beyond the scope of this essay): Who sang the song in ritual the first time (thereby establishing a liturgical precedent)?
- 22 García does not sing the words of the song, but rather recites them in a monotone, deliberately obscuring the song's melodic content. See Appendix B for notes on tonal speech and music in Cuban *orisha* liturgy.
- 23 The phrase *lo último* carries several potential meanings: the latest (ostensibly greatest) thing and/or something new and (merely) fashionable. The idiomatic phrase is enshrined in the opening line—*esto es lo último* ("here's the latest")—of the now-classic *rumba* song "Los Muñequitos," composed by Esteban Lantri (aka Saldiguera) and recorded by Conjunto Guaguancó Matancero in 1956. Based on the popularity of the recording, the ensemble changed its name from Guaguancó Matancero to Los Muñequitos de Matanzas, arguably the most iconic Afro-Cuban *rumba* ensemble of all time. See also [Bodenheimer \(2015\)](#), and [Sublette \(2004\)](#), among others.
- 24 García describes his intervention with the Spanish verb *inventar*, whose noun form (*invento*) is discussed below in a liturgical context. As a Cuban idiom, *inventar* represents a complex set of cultural values, potentially evoking a virtue (resourcefulness or inventiveness) and/or a lament (making do with scarcity).
- 25 The compositional process García describes constitutes a conscious, deliberate move from scholarly interpretation to artistic creativity. Although it remains beyond the scope of this essay, his work as a diviner—intrinsically connected to liturgy—informs his approach as an artist and scholar, and presumably vice versa. The CFN's *orisha*-themed theatrical productions like "Odebi" had notable West African counterparts, perhaps most notably in the 1964 theatrical production "Qba Kòso" (The King Did Not Hang) in the newly-constituted nation of Nigeria. Both productions synthesized tradition and avant-garde-style experimentation in an Afro-centric, post-colonial vein. See [Ladipo \(1964\)](#) and [Glassie \(2010\)](#). Although a detailed account remains beyond the scope of this essay, according to García and others, the published soundtrack recording from "Qba Kòso" on LP ([Ladipo 1966](#)) had a direct and discernible influence on the CFN's approach to *orisha*-themed productions in Cuba.
- 26 In contrast to his rendering of the previous song (*waye waye afe*), García sings the song about Odebi with a clear melody. See Appendix B. For a critical approach to the intersection of Afro-Cuban traditions and Western European music theory, see [Fiol and Manuel \(2007\)](#).
- 27 García does not translate the third line, which includes the conspicuously African-sounding "gbw" sound.
- 28 The term *obases* (plural, as in *los obases*) is a Spanish-inflected plural form of *oba*, a word which literally means "king" or "sovereign." In this context, *oba* refers to *orisha* priests who function as masters of ceremonies and diviners for initiations, a ritual role is also referred as *oriate*. A *cabildo* is a Afro-Cuban mutual aid society, usually based on religious and/or ethnic

identity. Organized according to antecedent Catholic and African models, cabildos were most active in the late 19th century, generally organizing according to a shared African ethnicity and devotion to a Catholic saint. For example, the Cabildo Iyesá Moddué in Ciudad Matanzas—reportedly founded in 1830—is dedicated to San Juan Bautista (Saint John the Baptist and the *orisha* Ogún). Although cabildos were most prominent during the Spanish colonial era, often relying on an official status conferred by the Catholic church and the state, several have remained continuously active, while others have been established more recently or reconstructed from earlier models. See Brown (2003), Lovejoy (2018, 2019), and Ramos (2003), among others. On the Villamil family *cabildo*, which is associated with Santa Teresa (aka Teresa de Ávila, born Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada, b. 1515, d. 1592), see Vélez (2000) and <https://www.afrocubaweb.com/villa.htm> (accessed on 19 October 2021).

Vélez's transcription lacks any sense of the song's melody. See Appendix B.

Roughly, "These things happen when you go out and come back." In other words, the cassette tape of Brazilian *orisha* liturgy García brought back to Cuba was a by-product of his travel, moving from one place to another and returning home.

Bata Ketu is a percussion and vocal suite which combines Cuban and Brazilian *orisha* repertoire. Arranged and produced by Michael ("Miguel") Spiro and Mark Lamson, it was released on CD in 2000. Along similar lines, see *Orishas Across the Oceans*, a 1998 anthology of historical recording which juxtaposes and correlates music from various lineages of diasporic *orisha* tradition in Cuba, Brazil, and Trinidad. In these correlations of *orisha* traditions (and others), Africa and its diasporic nodes—before, during, and after the Middle Passage—can be traced in various iterations of a single song, simultaneously enshrining and propelling tradition.

The phrase *en esto hay de todo* resists singular translation. Various: "there's a little bit of everything in this" and/or "there's all sorts of stuff (t)here," etcetera.

See <http://kabiosile.org> (accessed on 19 October 2021).

On applied ethnomusicology, see Pettan and Titon (2015). On El Almacén collective, see Eisenstadt (2018).

See <https://youtu.be/2xq3yxf0HvY> (accessed on 19 October 2021).

Recent English-language scholarship along these lines includes Beliso-De Jesús (2013, 2015), Bodenheimer (2015), Christopher (2013), Delgado (2009), Dianteill and Swearingen (2003), Frías (2019), Meadows (2021), Ramos (2008), Tsang (2021), and Whitmore (2020), among others.

Other notable examples of putatively novel *orisha* repertoire can be found on Papo Angarica's two-volume *Fundamento Yoruba* and *Osun Lozun* album, various multi-volume series (Lázaro Ros and Orisha Ayé, Abbilona, Adé Olá, et al.), and albums by various iterations of the CFN. Beyond a massive archive of formal publications, the now-ubiquitous mediation of *orisha* liturgy via internet-based social media remains a ripe, potential subject of critical analysis.

An excerpt of the interview, including the portions cited here, is available at <https://youtu.be/n02K3DFbuTo> (accessed on 19 October 2021).

On Berta Bascom, see <https://hearstmuseum.berkeley.edu/berta-bascom/> (accessed on 19 October 2021).

See <https://cla.berkeley.edu/list.php?collid=10158> (accessed on 19 October 2021).

Elsewhere, P (aka Perez) is identified as "Reineiro Perez. Address: Perez Andres #55 near Callejuela, Santiago" (11).

For other examples of *orisha*-related publications at the margins of academic scholarship, see also Abimbola (1997), Bascom [1980] (Bascom [1980] 1993), Betancourt (2018), Cabrera [1954] (Cabrera [1954] 2022), FAMA (1993, 2001), and Fernandes Portugal (1998a, 1998b), Pedroso (2013), and Wenger and Chesi (1983), among many others.

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