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Divine Women in Santeria: Healing with a Gendered Self

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DIVINE WOMEN IN SANTERIA: HEALING WITH A GENDERED SELF

By

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Thanks to Eleggua for opening the door and to my parents.

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the formation of gender identity through the presence of female deities and related mythology. Using the theory developed by Luce Irigaray in “Divine Women”, it proposes that women need a religious mythology that includes complex females in order to create a whole self and to build a healthy society. In order to demonstrate an example of this theory, the paper examines the way that divine women are created in the stories of Santeria as well as how through ritual, female (and male) practitioners gain a better sense of self; they are able to become divine women through their human characteristics, are able to heal through an enhanced intimacy with the deities and through a deeper connection to their selves, their bodies and their environment.

INTRODUCTION

On the Virgin of Guadalupe, author and poet Sandra Cisneros writes, “She is not neuter like Barbie. She gave birth. She has a womb. *Blessed art thou and blessed is the fruit of thy womb...* Blessed art thou, Lupe, and, therefore, blessed am I.”¹

On a cold terrazzo floor in Miami, Florida, surrounded by three babalawos, in a formal ceremony, I was told through Ifa that the orisha which crowns my head is Oya, guardian of cemeteries, lightning and the spirit of the wind. This was not a huge surprise. I had been told this by a santero, almost two years earlier during a divination done by throwing the caracoles, or shells. However, this was a pivotal moment for me as a woman whose personality became justified and whose destiny became clearer. There is no Christian ceremony that allows women to understand a divine persona mirroring their female humanity. This clarity, which arises from the understanding of oneself in relation to an intricate and anthropomorphic divinity, serves as a strong orienting force in the cosmos.

This Santeria ritual and others serve as locations where women can access religious power as a gateway to discovering divine aspects of themselves. Luce Irigaray's theories in "Divine Women" serve as a theoretical background in addressing the role that gender plays in the development of a relationship between the self and the divine and the influence the divine/human relationship has on a gendered creation of self. This feminist interpretation of Santeria rituals proves that a divine female is necessary in the healing of the individual and of society. Santeria offers women divine female figures through which they may gain full self-awareness, discover self-love and create a gendered understanding of self that is not only self in submission to the other (man). Self-love is the starting point from which women can heal themselves. Females are able to recognize that love when society identifies the female gender in the divine. Healing of the ethical body of society is made possible through religious stories which define female relationships. Stories that represent realities give people a point of reference when creating an ethical self. These stories offer men and women healthier ways to love among themselves. This

¹ Cisneros, Sandra. “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess” In *Goddess of the Americas, Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe*, edited by Ana Castillo. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996: 51.

paper examines the way that gender is created in the Afro-Cuban religion Santeria, specifically using examples from the divination system Ifa and through rituals, both of which define a human/divine relationship. The presence of female divine figures offers women the opportunity to grow, prosper and heal themselves.

Luce Irigaray's essay "Divine Women," from her book *Sexes and Genealogies*, deals with the issue of identity and the role that divinity plays in creation of a gendered self. The recognition or construction of a divine being by society directly affects the identity of the individuals within that society. The function of the divine in the creation of gender identity is directly correlated to the fluid and proper functioning of a society. A society that ignores the identity of half of its members, namely women, is a community that is lacking; it is incomplete. Irigaray deconstructs and reconstructs Ludwig Feuerbach's notion of God in relation to man in *The Essence of Christianity*. Irigaray supports Feuerbach's religious argument which states that man's consciousness of God is a self-consciousness. For both philosophers, God is essential in creating a male identity. Irigaray expands upon the missing gender element in Feuerbach's argument because, for her, women also need a divine image to exist, thrive, to have a will of their own and to love within and outside of themselves. The Christian dilemma is that it ignores and sacrifices the identity of women to that of the male "God." Irigaray sees the answer to this ethical problem in the construction of a female "God" using recycled images from Western mythology. According to this formula, women would be given valid subjectivity and be allowed to have loving and productive relationships between women and between the genders, as well as creating a heightened social ethic.

"Divine Women" begins by examining two different prevailing images of women in Western society: Melusine –the monster, and the Virgin Mary –mother to a son (Jesus). The myth of Melusine is one that defines women as limited, deformed –one that does not offer much opportunity for becoming divine, nor filled with self-love. However, we look to stories, "in search of our images and secrets," and because "they perform a symbolic and social function."² Irigaray is fascinated by our relationship to the elements since they are what form our universe and our selves and yet our relationship to them is currently unclear, making our own identity unclear. Although poetry and science explore

² Irigaray, Luce. *Sexes and Genealogies*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993: 58, 59.

the elements in different ways, there is a general disconnect between the actual elements and our everyday language. Our present western myths only illustrate a distorted vision of the elements. She describes *touch* as the most essential and enduring of the senses and that we “have to return to touch... (e)verything is given to us by means of touch,” although “man favors the visual” which symbolizes his victory over the mother, the womb, an amorphous pit.³ Irigaray’s discourse on the elements and touch, as essential parts of our humanity with which we need to reconnect, is especially poignant with regard to the earth-based religious practices and myths of Santeria. Earth-based religions use touch as part of the religious practice because practitioners are physically involved in the religious rituals. Christianity is more visual in that there is less ritual that involves physical participation. Christian ceremonies are usually performed by holy men and are attended by the faithful. Visual is passive for the participant, making them almost an observer, and touch is more active. An essential connection to touch and the elements enacts healing through the rituals.

Irigaray is critical of the current religious system which allows men to have a gender connect with the divine and makes the female reliant upon the male gender for definition.

Man is able to exist because God helps him to define his gender (*genre*), helps him orient his finiteness by reference to infinity.⁴

In contrast, the female is not oriented in her finiteness; she has no goal of the infinite by which to become a whole woman; her horizon is limited, not limitless. She cannot be free when her only path of becoming is to become a man. Female beauty is stunted and only used to attract the other. Women are cut off from our selves and from each other because we lack a divinity through which we can become women and understand our humanity and our human relationships. Irigaray understands that:

“God is the mirror of man” (Feuerbach p. 63). Woman has no mirror wherewith to become woman. Having a God and becoming one’s gender go hand in hand. God is the other that we absolutely cannot be without. In order to *become*, we need some shadowy perception of achievement; not a fixed objective, not a One

³ Ibid. 59.

⁴ Ibid. 61.

postulated to be immutable but rather a cohesion and a horizon that assures us the passage between past and future, the bridge of a present *that remembers*, that is not sheer oblivion and loss, not a crumbling away of existence, a failure, simply to take note.⁵

Men also suffer for this lack of female God. Men do not know how to relate to women because their only example of a male/female divine relationship is that of Mary and Jesus'. Women are only women when they are mothers to sons. Feuerbach criticizes Protestantism which rejects the mother completely, and declares that there is no Father without a Mother. Hence God is sick and therefore we are sick. Irigaray believes that God is sick because he never got married, so "the joy, the splendor, the fulfillment that lies in the alliance of the sexes" remains undisclosed.⁶ We need to have both men and women become divine together in order to heal together. A healthy society has a religious ethic that displays relationships between different personality types and genders so that its constituents are able to act properly. People are then able to make appropriate social decisions that understand and respect the sexual difference.

Female divinities are active elements in the lives of practitioners of Santeria. The religion also known as la Regla de Ocha or the Rule of the Orishas, evolved from the Yoruban religious system. When African slaves were brought to Cuba from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the religious beliefs arrived ashore as well. Santeria is an authentic Cuban religion and an amalgamation of various religious beliefs. In Santeria, Yoruban religious beliefs have taken on Catholic symbolism, indigenous beliefs and Kardecian Spiritism (Espiritismo)⁷. Santeria practitioners will also often refer to paleros⁸ when in need of certain types of spiritual protection. The flexibility of the faith has allowed the religion to flourish and maintain existence.

This paper shows that healing through ritual for women in Santeria is made possible by gender based mythology, through the presence of powerful and complex female deities. These deities are described in the extensive Afro-Cuban mythology

⁵ Ibid. 67.

⁶ Ibid. 70.

⁷ Spiritism or Espiritismo "became influential in Cuba beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and developed there as a healing system based on mediumistic contact with the dead during spiritualist masses." Wexler, Anna. "Dolls and Healing in a Santeria House" In *Healing Cultures: Art and Religion as Curative Practices in the Caribbean and Its Diaspora*, edited by Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gerbert. New York: Palgrave, 2001: 90.

⁸ Practitioners of Palo, a Congolese based Cuban religion, similar to Santeria.

modeled on real female practitioners, giving them an opportunity to create a sense of self and for the community to create a social ethic based on these stories and the rituals which offer them a greater sense of control over their lives and well being. This sense of control is achieved through the understanding and creation of self through an empowered female godhead and also through the rituals which help orient the practitioner within their surroundings, own body and gender.

CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL FEMINIST APPROACH TO SANTERIA

The Santeria religion grew out of the necessity for African culture to endure and thrive in Cuba. It was in *cabildos*, clubs or fraternal organizations,⁹ that Santeria really formed its roots and grew its bark. Cabildos were separated by *naciones*, meaning African groups of the same origin belonged to the same cabildos; the members asserted their cultural identity by playing drum rhythms distinct to their African nation and practicing their own group's religious practices.¹⁰ Cabildos helped Africans regain their culture which had been stripped in their voyage to the New World. Ironically, the white Cubans saw cabildos as an opportunity to incorporate Africans into Cuban society and used cabildos as locations to proselytize to Africans.¹¹ Many missions encouraged the syncretism of African and Catholic religious practices in hope that the Catholic would overcome the African. Eventually though, many harsh laws were enacted to restrict the liberties of the cabildos, especially to limit the religious acceptance they once encouraged.

Through African cabildos in Cuba, Chango became associated with Santa Barbara and Oshun found a Catholic face in the Virgen de Caridad del Cobre. Religious ceremonies intermingled and African Cubans, on some level, accepted Catholic holidays as times to celebrate. Another way Santeria evolved into the religious practice it is today is through the home. Joseph Murphy comments that many white Cubans were raised by black nannies, introducing African ideas into the mainstream.¹² Domestic servants may have also witnessed Catholic practices while in the service of their mistresses. The practice and power of praying to saints became integral to Santeria. The interest practitioners have demonstrated over time in exploring and accepting different religious

⁹ Brandon, George. *Santeria from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997: 69.

¹⁰ Ibid. 57.

¹¹ Scott, Rebecca. *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: the Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985: 266.

¹² Murphy, Joseph. *Santeria: African Spirits in America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993: 34.

systems does not negatively affect nor challenge Yoruban beliefs, but demonstrates a religious desire for growth, healing and maintenance. Religious adaptation, while maintaining integrity, defines Santeria as a practiced faith.

All things animate and inanimate have ashe in differing degrees. Ashe is the life force, the vital cosmic energy, a concept that informs all other rituals and philosophies that exist in the religion. Every ritual in Santeria is enacted “to acquire ashe from the orishas.”¹³ Ebbos are sacrifices that are used to acquire ashe by offering it to the orishas. “without the ashe of sacrifice, the orishas would wither and die...(i)t is their (human) worship makes them strong, and without the blood of sacrifice, they cannot fight for their children.”¹⁴ What is necessary to use for an ebbo, a chicken, a vegetable, etc., is determined through divination. When a practitioner or believer is ill or has had a curse placed upon them, they are in need of the orishas’ help to restore order. Divination will determine the problem, the orisha needed to help people with their dilemma and the appropriate tools will be determined by the santero/a or babalawo’s knowledge of the particular orisha’s elements, tools, colors, herbs and prayers. According to Lydia Cabrera, one of the most thorough documenters of the religion in Cuba, in comparison with Western science, “(t)heir cures are of body and soul.”¹⁵ It is important also to note that *words* have ashe also.¹⁶ They breathe with the breath of the universe; they are spiritually powerful.

Religious Resources

Santeria is a topic that has not been widely explored among English speaking scholars. However, a few people have devoted their study to la Regla de Ocha. The books written in English mostly describe Cuban religious practices transplanted to the United States. These books explore the cultural and religious shifts that have taken place upon the arrival of Cuban immigrants to North America. What makes these texts so

¹³ Gonzalez Wippler, Migene. *Santeia: the Religion*. Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 1999: 5.

¹⁴ Murphy, Joseph. *Santeria: African Spirits in America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993: 15.

¹⁵ Cabrera, Lydia. “Black Folk Healers” in *Healing Cultures: Art and Religion as Curative Practices in the Caribbean and Its Diaspora*, edited by Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gerbert. New York: Palgrave, 2001: 31.

¹⁶ Castellanos, Isabel. “From Ulkumi to Lukumi: A Historical Overview of Religious Acculturation in Cuba” In *Santeria Aesthetics In Contemporary Latin American Art*, edited by Arturo Lindsay. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996: 47.

important is that they often describe the authors' firsthand account and give detailed explanations of the ceremonies.

One author who is extremely informative, but may not be considered scholarly, is Migene Gonzalez-Wippler. Her books give the clearest, most unbiased interpretation of the religion even though she describes her own personal experiences with the religion from the time she was a child. Other books purchased from botanicas in Miami have offered similar information (i.e. patakis, description of the cosmology) without the personal information offered by Gonzalez-Wippler. These are mostly written by practitioners, so they do not describe ceremonies with the same detail.

In one of his books, *Santeria: African Spirits in America*, Joseph Murphy gives a comprehensive history of the religion, relates his own fieldwork and writes an analysis on the subject. George Brandon, author of *Santeria from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories*, writes a thorough history of Santeria from Africa to Cuba to the US, focusing on the African-American community's acceptance of the religion. Michael Atwood Mason offers a postmodern perspective to Santeria rituals in his book *Living Santeria: Rituals and Experiences in an Afro-Cuban Religion*; he deals with issues relevant to identity, power and society. Through fieldwork done in Cuba, Katherine J. Hagedorn explores the sacred and its role in dance and music in *Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santeria*. All of these texts weave the intricate beliefs and practices of the religion.

The book *Santeria Aesthetics In Contemporary Latin American Art*, edited by Arturo Lindsay, offers wonderful material for a solid understanding of the religion. Two essays in particular provide excellent and precise background information on Santeria. The first, "From Ulkumi to Lucumi: A Historical Overview of Religious Acculturation in Cuba," written by Isabel Castellanos uncovers the nature of the religion and describes differences between the specifically Yoruban religion and the Cuban religion. In his essay, "Afro-Cuban Orisha Worship," Miguel "Willie" Ramos, a practitioner of the religion, describes the religious cosmology, the orishas and the structure of the religion.

One author who specifically studies the issue of gender in relation to Santeria is Judith Gleason. Her studies specifically revolve around the orisha Oya and she does fieldwork and historical work to uncover the nature of this female orisha. Two scholars

who take different approaches to the subject of another female orisha, Oshun, are Miguel A. De La Torre and Thomas Tweed. De La Torre deals with the issue of race in Cuban identity in his article “Ochun: (N)Either the (M)Other of All Cubans (n)or the Bleached Virgin.” Thomas Tweed, however, employs historical and ethnographical methods in order to introduce the Catholic diasporic religion surrounding the shrine of the Virgin of Charity (Caridad del Cobre) and its political and spiritual symbols of Cuban exiles. He refers to Santeria and deals with the issue by looking at Catholic Cubans’ reaction to it. Tweed shows the transtemporal and translocative aspects of the shrine, exploring themes of national identity, location and exile. His study is significant to Santeria in that it shows Santeria as the other in the eyes of white Cuban culture, which dominates Miami’s politics and social realities.

Joseph Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford edited an anthology on Oshun entitled, *Osun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas*. The authors explore the dynamic nature of the orishas and her cultural significance on the two continents where she is most prevalent. Isabel Castellanos’ article describes the many *caminos*, or paths, of Oshun. She can be both a beautiful temptress and also a deaf old woman. Murphy’s article constructs the political and historical relevance of the orisha in Cuban history and society. The book constructs Oshun from many different angles and shows the goddess in Nigerian, Cuban, Brazilian and American societies.

A major anthropological work surrounding the subject of African religious practices in the West is Karen McCarthy Brown’s *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Brown approached her study of Vodou through process anthropology, participating in the religion in order to study it.¹⁷ Her work is not only revolutionary because of her intense participation in the religion, but she also blurs the lines between what is considered myth and what is seen as fact. She integrates oral histories with her anthropological findings. Brown’s work reflects a strong light upon the healing nature of African based religions: “Healing is at the heart of the religions that African slaves bequeathed to their descendants...”¹⁸ Santeria is similar to Vodou in that most of the

¹⁷ Reference Edith Turner. *The Hands Feel It: Healing and Spirit Presence among a Northern Alaskan People*. Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996, xxvi.

¹⁸ Brown, Karen McCarthy. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. California: University of California Press, 1991: 5.

rituals are used to maintain order, heal or restore order. Her exploration of Vodou supports an understanding of Santeria as a religion which heals people with the help of and through myth.

In *Healing Cultures: Art and Religion as Curative Practices in the Caribbean and Its Diaspora*, the beneficial aspects of Santeria and its influence in holistic healing practices are explored. This book looks at the way that Caribbean religions heal and why Caribbean people need religious healing to survive. They see religion as an alternative health care system.¹⁹ The authors highlight a necessary and significant aspect of religious healing and determine it as necessary for the health of Caribbean cultures and Caribbean people. These studies are hugely relevant to the study of religion in that they encourage scholars to look at the different types of religious healing sources that are commonly practiced, and allow us to get under the skin of the beliefs and practices and explore how and why the healing takes place.

One essay from *Healing Cultures*, “Santeria as a Healing Practice in Diaspora Communities: My Cuban Jewish Journey with Oshun” discusses how Santeria helped the author heal her pain from a broken marriage and the displacement she feels being a Cuban Jew in exile. Through the help of a santero using the divination system called diloggun, she discovers that Oshun, the seductress orisha, also known as Caridad del Cobre and the patron saint of Cuba, is the orisha that will help guide her through her struggle. Through the image of Oshun and the strength of Oya, as well as offerings to Elegua and Oshun and a ritual bath, all of which inform each other, she is able to gain a sense of control over her life and love. Ms. Rok describes the stages that a woman (or man) might undergo in order to attain a healing result from a santero/a. She has pain, which prompts her to get her destiny divined. Then the santero tells her about the orishas and what they need from her so that she may regain order in her life. Through this process she learns about the orishas and that empowers her because she can relate to the stories that are told to her. She performs the rituals that are prescribed to her, and subsequently, her situation is alleviated and, in this case, her husband who had left her

¹⁹ Mercedes C. Sandoval also examines the use of Santeria by *curanderos* (healers) by Cubans in Miami as a mental healthcare system in “Santeria as a Mental Health Care System an Historical Overview.”

now returned. She was also better able to reconcile her Jewish and Yoruban religious beliefs in order to understand her culture as a Cuban Jew in exile from her homeland.

When healing takes place in Santeria, there is a ritual involved which may be viewed as a performance. In the book *The Performance of Healing*, Carol Laderman writes, “sometimes only the performance of words and music, poetry and drama, comedy and dance can restore health where other forms have failed.”²⁰ The idea of restoring health through performance is demonstrated in Santeria through the poetry of Ifa, the sound of the sacred bata drums and the drama of the orishas. Performance is necessary in ritual and it is through ritual that women will begin to identify how and actually to heal themselves. Musicians are “responsible for ‘bridging the gap between heaven and earth’ (Cornelius 1989).”²¹ The success of ceremonies where orishas mount the initiated depends upon the focus of the drummers and it is necessary for the orishas to express themselves to practitioners through possession. Often orishas mount an initiate in order to heal others and to offer healing advice.²²

When writing a feminist interpretation of a subject, other feminists need to be recognized, as their ideas influence the way that gender in religion is studied. Two important feminist theologians who take an eco-feminist approach to the subject of religion are Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sallie McFague. They discern a symbolic and structural connection between the damage and mistreatment of women and the destruction of the natural world in patriarchal societies. They parallel the images of women and the earth while striving to heal both. Ruether and McFague attempt to heal women and the earth by changing or altering images and symbols of the divine.

Sallie McFague, in particular, believes that the Christian tradition and the “dominance of the patriarchal model...excluded the emergence of other models to express the relationship between God and the world, and so the model had become idolatrous and had rendered the tradition’s imagery anachronistic.”²³ She believes that changing the image of God into more inclusive models, such as God the mother, God the

²⁰ Laderman, Carol. “The Poetics of Healing in Malay Shamanistic Performances” In *The Performance of Healing*, edited by Carol Laderman and Marina Roseman. New York: Routledge, 1996: 115.

²¹ Hagedorn, Katherine J. *Divine Utterances: the Performance of Afro-Cuban Santeria*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001: 85.

²² Examples of this are described in Gonzalez-Wippler’s *Santeria: the Religion* pages 202-203.

²³ McFague, Sallie. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987: ix.

lover and God the friend, will help liberate women, alleviate oppression and heal the earth. She therefore affirms the essential power of imagery and language when discussing issues of power, religion, identity and healing. This model for change and healing directly informs the thesis of this paper.

In the book *Goddess of the Americas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe*, various authors explore the image and myth of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Many of the female authors (most are Mexican), uncover their personal identification with the Virgin. The different women relate to Guadalupe in their poems, plays and essays and write on how their understanding of her, not as a sexless virgin to which they cannot connect, but as an unfailing, resourceful, powerful female religious figure, gives them faith and they may interpret her as more like themselves. The women in this book see Guadalupe with the characteristics of a typical Mexican woman, and understand that they do not have to use Guadalupe's traditional Catholic traits, i.e. virginity, humility, etc., to define themselves as Mexican women. Through their stories and redefinition of Guadalupe, they gain freedom, power and femininity. This image of women is not commonly circulated in Western society, yet these authors find the tales within themselves and their own lives for others to access this power.

Ifa

In Santeria, gender is constructed religiously through the use of patakis found in the divination system *Ifa*. Ritual also offers ways of expressing one's gender, either male or female. The religion cannot ignore gender differences because the stories of Ifa describe gendered deities. This system introduces people to the orishas and their stories, which explore and inform human behavior. These tales offer advice and ethical guidelines that are tailored to the individual. At times, the oddus or the letra²⁴ may be interpreted differently for a man than for a woman, in reference to specifically feminine issues. A babalawo or santero/a is not going to warn a man that he might get pregnant. Women cannot perform rituals when menstruating, and this may be seen as a gender barrier. However, women can receive high levels of initiation, and although they cannot

²⁴ The letra or oddu is a design determined by one of the divination systems in Santeria and relates to a variety of tales.

become babalawos, they may maintain comparable power. Although babalawos are the only ones who can read Ifa and perform certain rituals, there is also a great deal of religious responsibility given to the wife of the babalawo, the apetebii. She must be as strong and righteous as her husband. “Apetebii or Iyawo Ifa possesses her own level of respect among the people.”²⁵ In Nigeria, one is determined to be the wife of the babalawo (wife or Ifa or Orunmila) through divination. This is a difficult job to have with many social and moral responsibilities.

Ifa offers stories about divine women who are revered and worshiped but who make mistakes, who feel pleasure, who suffer, who dance, who enjoy parties. The female orishas affirm female reality through their many faces and stories. They feel the way that human women do and they act like human women. They help gender become less of a religious barrier. If the religion is examined from an ecofeminist perspective, it is clear that Santeria’s respect for and worship of the earth mirrors the respect given to women. Women are allowed in becoming divine because they have symbols and images by which they may become fully.²⁶

God can be seen as a tool to orient oneself; a Being in whom humans have faith. He is the One to give ethical guidance. According to Christian feminist theologians, the image of a male God alone is not enough to make women feel whole and healthy. It alienates them religiously. They are not able to develop fully as mothers to their daughters, as lovers or as friends. They are not given the religious tools to love themselves and therefore their love of the other is not healthy. The other (men) does not know how to love women because their only example of a man’s love for a woman is that of Jesus’ love for his mother. Therefore, there is no ethical value in a lonely male god for the human woman, nor much faith in becoming more than a mother to a son. She is alone without the ability to relate to her daughters, lovers and neighbors.

Santeria does not serve as a model on which Christianity needs to reconstruct its idea of a gendered God, however, it does offer an alternative perspective on the divine which incorporates the feminine into God-talk. When looking at the way that practitioners of Santeria identify the orishas, it becomes clear that they are active aspects

²⁵ Ifayemi, Elebuibon. *Apetebii: the Wife of Orunmila*. New York: Athelia Henrietta Press, 1994: 17.

²⁶ Refer to Irigaray: “The becoming of women is never over and gone with but always in gestation.” 1993: 63.

of the lives of the worshippers. Orishas are elements of the natural world in some of their forms. For instance, Oya is the wind, Chango is fire, Oshun the lake and Yemaya the ocean. The relationship to the orishas is clear and their relationship to the elements is clear.

CHAPTER 2

STORIES OF THE FEMININE

Afro-Cuban religions encourage a dialogue with the divine, the earth and the body through ritual. Ritual is used to help one become connected with the earth, with one's environment. There are processes of religious healing which take place through the rituals by the interested and initiated. By examining certain rituals in the religion, it becomes clear that the body is religiously used as a tool by which to contact the divine. This contact takes place through good deeds and ritual so that the practitioner might continue to have good relations with the divine. Since rituals utilize natural materials and particular places in one's landscape, they increase awareness of the earth and environment. The practitioner therefore becomes intricately and intimately involved with her surrounding world and human body. This awareness of body and earth produces in the worshipper a stronger sense of control over her existence. This sense of control stems from a knowledge of body, place and a heightened communication with the divine. Consciousness is more finely tuned by ritual and the refined consciousness gives the individual a real sense and understanding of her level of control over her own life. The sense of agency gained will encourage healing of the individual through continued contact with and awareness of her own body, surroundings and the divine. Stories of female deities create a more defined consciousness of feminine self-hood (both physical and psychological) and therefore offer more control over the females' self-healing.

The human/divine relationship in Santeria is one that can be seen as that of parent and child or human and guardian angel. In Africa, one's orisha was inherited through their familial lineage. However, when the Africans were enslaved and brought to Cuba, slaves were discouraged from forming family groups and also torn from their past ancestors. "For this reason, in Cuba the patron orisha of a man, woman, or child, that is, his/her "guardian angel," "chooses" someone as a son or daughter on an individual

basis.”²⁷ This means that the individual is bound to a particular orisha in a way that is intimate and personal. Although everyone has an orisha parent, they are also always in relationships with the other orishas. This need to maintain relationships is often most apparent during a divination ceremony where it is revealed that an orisha is protecting the person or that the person needs to make a sacrifice (ebbo) in order to receive the protection of an orisha which is not their guardian orisha. This may be because “(e)ach orisha rules over one or more aspects of cosmological reality and human existence.”²⁸ We are in constant conversation with the elements and the orishas are manifestations of the universe’s elements, therefore the orisha and humans are always interconnected spiritually and physically. This informs the way that life is experienced religiously for those who practice Santeria. The world is sacred and we are of and in the world.

If you set up a simple framework of the hierarchy of this religion, it is evident that the role of both women and men are necessary for creation. Oloddumare is the omnipotent and transcendent God who has always existed. He is also known as Olofi, Olorun, Ori and Eledaa, different aspects of the same Being. “Oloddumare is divine essence, the creative will; Olorun is the creative act; and Olofi is the creation. Eledaa is God’s spirit manifested in man. Ori is the driving force, the awareness of that spirit.”²⁹ Oloddumare has no characteristics and no active sexuality. There are no rituals that appeal to Oloddumare; it is through the orishas that humans are linked to him.

As mentioned before, everything in the world is endowed with a certain amount of *ashe* or “an encompassing energy...which permeates the entire universe.”³⁰ George Brandon defines a hierarchy based on the amount of *ashe* that beings encompass. Oloddumare has the most, then the orishas, then the Eguns (or the dead), then humans, plants, and then animals, and lastly non-living things.³¹ The orishas have genders and very human personality traits. This hierarchy shows no sign of gender preference. In Santeria, divine favor is not defined on a gender basis according to mythology. This is

²⁷ Castellanos, Isabel. “From Ulkumi to Lukumi: A Historical Overview of Religious Acculturation in Cuba” In *Santeria Aesthetics In Contemporary Latin American Art*, edited by Arturo Lindsay. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996: 42-43.

²⁸ Castellanos 1996: 45.

²⁹ Gonzalez-Wippler 1999: 25.

³⁰ Brandon, George. *Santeria from Africa to the New World: the Dead Sell Memories*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997: 16.

³¹ Brandon 1997: 76.

contrary to the Christian Trinity, which posits spiritual power unequally based upon gender. Irigaray writes: “He is three. The virgin is alone of her sex.”³² This is not an issue in la Regla de Ocha, in fact, many orishas are transgendered. There is no real sense that they are androgynous usually, because they are either fully female or fully male at a given time. For example, there is a pataki that identifies Chango, a powerful and popular orisha, as the child of Obatala, a typically male orisha sometimes identified as Jesus, in one of his female forms Yemmu.³³ As Yemmu, Obatala is fully female when conceiving and producing Chango.

This makes gender an issue for further examination. When possessed by an orisha, the host may be a man possessed by a female orisha and may act as she would, as a woman. The stories of the orishas define gender, however fluid or changing, but when a practitioner is possessed, he/she acts out that orisha’s tale as the orisha’s gender. The possessed person takes the time to heal or divine for the observers. In Santeria, it is the initiated whom are able to be mounted by the orisha (or santo), and possession takes place in a structured ceremonial environment. “Those who are entitled to be possessed by a santo and who succeed in faithfully interpreting the santo’s gestures and character immediately attain a higher level of power within the social milieu...it entails the will to represent an archetype.”³⁴ The person possessed acts the tale, what Barnet calls the “archetype” gaining the power of the orisha, both social and spiritual. The person possessed has the ability to heal, divine and give advice as the orisha.³⁵ In acting out the stories of the orishas, the practitioner has a structured location to embody the divine, heal others and explore the concept of gender.

There are many examples of orishas who are generally male having female avatars and vice-versa. Other orishas take on different genders due to syncretism. They are identified with saints of the opposite sex because of other, i.e. non-gender, qualities, which they share. An example is Chango who is the hyper-masculine orisha, a “womanizer and drinker, quarrelsome, courageous, and daring...the god of music, master

³² Irigaray 1993: 62.

³³ Gonzalez-Wipler 1999: 52.

³⁴ Barnet, Miguel. “La Regal de Ocha: the Religious System of Santeria” In *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santeria, Obeah, and the Caribbean*, edited by Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997: 86.

³⁵ Gonzalez-Wippler describes this in her book *Santeria: the Religion* in her chapter “Spirit Possession” (specifically on page 204).

of the sacred bata drums, of thunder and lightening.”³⁶ Chango is syncretized with the Catholic Santa Barbara. These associations are not random. She was “probably identified with Chango because she has a cup in one hand (Chango’s mortar), a sword (his ax) in the other, and a castle at her feet.”³⁷ In her image, she shares the same colors that are associated with Chango, red and white. However, it would be safe to say that Chango’s identity is based around his masculine and sexualized personality rather than his association with a female saint.

Chango can be represented by a picture or statue of Saint Barbara, he may be accessed through the saint, but he is still Chango, the orisha. Orishas are, for all practical purposes, the gods of the material world. They are whom it is necessary to speak with if one wants to influence their destiny or enhance their lives. Orishas are not the same as the saints in their traditional Catholic representation. Their personalities are their orisha personalities, not their saintly personalities. This is an important distinction to make when contrasting this African based saint-worship with a more traditional Catholic understanding of God, like the one offered by Irigaray. Chango is a male deity and a female saint, but here he will be defined as a male divinity based on his hyper-masculine identity.

Divine personages that women may aspire to become infinitely are easily identified in the orisha family. There are an innumerable number of orishas, but the major female orishas in Cuba are Yemaya, Oshun, Oya, Yewa, and Oba. These divine women have different avatars, but in general, they are essentially accessible to a practitioner in that their mythology is clear and their presence is at times immanent through possession. They are dynamic characters who are highly anthropomorphized and whose power is evident. People identify with them on a very real level and come in contact with them through possession, life experiences, Ifa, santero’s stories, and through being identified and initiated as one of their children³⁸. The religious connection to the orishas is deeper and more immanent than a lay Christian’s identity with the Trinity or saints. This is not to say that Christian worship is weaker, but that as an embodied

³⁶ Barnet 1997: 91.

³⁷ Gonzalez-Wippler 1999: 44.

³⁸ This is known as asiento, or making the saint. It is a ceremony of rebirth and will be mentioned in regard to gender later.

religion, with a focus on kinship-based relations with the orishas and egun, Santeria forces the practitioner to have a closer human type relationship with their orisha and all of the orishas.

Practitioners of Santeria believe that before we were born, we decided our own fate before Oloddumare, the Supreme God. We knelt before Oloddumare and chose our destiny and only Orunmila, known as Orunla, was present as a witness. Therefore Orunla is the owner of Ifa, the divination system through which humanity can communicate with the orishas.³⁹ Only a babalawo can divine using Ifa with a divination tray and either kola nuts or an opele chain. After the babalawo throws the chain or nuts he uncovers different oddus, or letras, which indicate one of the 256 stories of Ifa used to give advice, warning or to indicate good things coming. The babalawo will interpret these stories as they are relevant to the person receiving the reading. Ifa provides the practitioner with insight into their life and solutions to their problems. Through Ifa a person will be consulted on a healing and then given the cleansing or told what offering, known as an ebbo, that is necessary to restore to them the appropriate ache. They will be healed from physical, psychological and/or spiritual peril, receive protection or healing based upon the completion of the cleansing or ebbo.

There are other divination systems that can be used by santeras and santeros. They may throw the obi, or coconut, a practice known as *darle coco al santo*.⁴⁰ Santeros and santeras will also throw cowrie shells, known as the diloggun, or read a practitioner's cards, usually a deck of Spanish playing cards. A large component of Santeria is Spiritism. This belief system supplements the African one by offering contact with the deceased or eggun, the dead. Spiritism acts as a form of ancestor worship where "mediumistic contact with the dead during spiritualist masses" takes place.⁴¹ All of these forms of contact with the eggun or orishas provide answers to the practitioners' questions, they pinpoint issues and then offer solutions to these problems. Most of the time, the solution will involve a cleansing, or despojo, using herbs and perfumes and the

³⁹ Matibag, Eugenio. "Ifa and Interpretation: An Afro-Caribbean Literary Practice" In *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santeria, Obeah, and the Caribbean*, edited by Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997: 152.

⁴⁰ Gonzalez-Wippler 1999: 17.

⁴¹ Wexler, Anna. "Dolls and Healing in a Santeria Household" In *Healing Cultures: Art and Religion as Curative Practices in the Caribbean and Its Diaspora*, edited by Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. New York: Palgrave, 2001: 90.

“sacred liquid of Santeria” the omiero, which is a mixture of the respective fresh herbs and liquids that represent each orisha and are dedicated to them.⁴² If the problem is more severe, then the cure may require more effort and may be a larger ebbo where an animal is sacrificed to an orisha for its ache.

Only men may become babalawos in la Regla de Ocha. The topmost ranking priest in la Regla de Ocha, are babalawos known as *omokolobas* who have received Ifa and have had an initiation known as Olofi. Second in rank are babalawos who have received Ifa and the babalawos sacred knife in a ceremony known as *cuanaldo*. Third in line are Babalawos consecrated to Ifa who are known as *oluwos*. Those fourth in line are consecrated to Ifa without undergoing the *asiento* ceremony (the initiation ceremony), men known simply as babalawos. Finally, fifth in line to have access to divine knowledge are santeros, who may be either men or women. From then on down the ranks, position is based on ceremonies received or not received, with non-believers ranking at number twelve in the hierarchy.⁴³

The reason that women may not become babalawos is linked to a particular pataki. It is related by Gonzalez-Wippler:

at one time Orunla was married to Yemaya. In those early times, Orunla divined by means of the seashells. One day he went away on a prolonged trip, and Yemaya –who had been watching him conduct the divination and knew how to do it– decided to start consulting people so that her husband would not lose his business. She was so proficient in her consultations, and her prognostications proved so accurate, that she soon became more popular than Orunla himself. When Orunla returned and saw what his wife had been doing, he became so enraged that he abandoned her. He also swore that he would never again read the Diloggun and that he would find a divination system that would forever be forbidden to women. That is the reason that women cannot be babalawos, because they are the priests of Orunla and the ones empowered by him to interpret his oracles.⁴⁴

She tells the tale and in the end, her reasoning for the inaccessibility of women to read Ifa in society is because Orunla will not allow them this access. Perhaps this is a religious legitimization of power being withheld from women based upon the desire of the god.

⁴² Gonzalez-Wippler 1999: 22-23.

⁴³ This is explained in more detail by Gonzalez-Wippler on pages 84-85.

⁴⁴ Gonzalez-Wippler 1999: 94-95. This pataki is also mentioned in Joseph Murphy’s book *Santeria: African Spirits in America* as the story of the diloggun, or divination system using 16 cowrie shells. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993: 88.

What is interesting is that Yemaya can read the shells, and is in fact better than her unintentional teacher. The myth itself shows the complexity of religious beliefs and that cultural norms can be muddled. Santeras can divine as well; they only cannot read Ifa. This is a spiritual power they are denied, much like the denial of women to become priests and bless the Eucharist.

At the end of Gonzalez-Wippler's chapter on the babalawo we see other cultural forces determining what she easily dismisses earlier in the chapter as a restriction based upon a myth. She writes about some restrictions:

Very often, santeros are initiated into Orunla's mysteries, but only if their ruling orisha has never possessed them, and if they have not initiated many people as santero. Once a person becomes a practicing santero, he cannot "make Ifa," that is, he cannot become a babalawo. Another important restriction forbids homosexuals from becoming babalawos. Women are also forbidden Orunla's mysteries, as we have already seen.⁴⁵

Perhaps, since being possessed is likened to being mounted, a sort of penetration of the body by the orisha, those who are perceived as being penetrated are restricted. The reason is not clear, but what is important is that women and homosexuals and many men may not enter this realm of communication with the divine. This restrictive reality is in contrast to the presence of divine women in Santeria with fully sexy, motherly, angry, ugly, frustrated, beautiful personalities. It could be safe to assume that from the perspective of Irigaray's "Divine Women" essay, in Santeria, God is healthy despite a somewhat sick and restrictive society.

Irigaray may be seen as somewhat presumptuous in attempting to create a valid social ethic within her, or any, religion with no material proof that divine gender is a model that aids in healing society. Although postmodernists do not abide by universal formulas, and Irigaray is definitely speaking specifically about Christian society, a model for a better society needs to be based on some sort of evidence from an existing society. Without these comparisons, no matter how loosely they are associated, there is no proof that what she is saying is true. Those who practice Santeria are also practicing Catholics, so indeed, they are a group of people she may reference in her studies. What will heal French Catholic or European-Christian society very well may begin with "a disruption"

⁴⁵ Gonzalez-Wippler 1999: 108-109.

of the entire patriarchal system including, “a reassessment of religious symbols and imagery, and the development and elaboration of women-identified religions that recognize female divinities.”⁴⁶ In Afro-Cuban religions, there is an example of a religious system where women have divinities whose stories they can use to build personal and spiritual power and protection within their communities.

The orisha who governs the sea and maternity is Yemaya. She is known in her Catholic identity as Our Lady of Regla, Regla being a region in Cuba. Her personality is described by Gonzalez-Wippler as, “loving, maternal, gentle, kind, generous, dignified, lofty, but terrible in anger.”⁴⁷ She is a powerful emblem of womanhood and is connected with the moon. The moon and the sea being likely associates in the realm of mythology and science, she is a motherly figure. Miguel Barnet describes her as “the goddess of intelligence, of rationality...she is judgement and reason, but she can also be inflexible when she punishes.”⁴⁸ Her personality is dynamic as is her sexual life. She has had many lovers and was married to Orunla and Oggun, male orishas. Her sister is Oshun, the goddess of love and money, whose children she takes care of since Oshun is busy with her tambors (drum parties for an orisha) and her love affairs.

The pataki mentioned before in which Obatala is the birth mother of Chango continues where Chango is given to Yemaya at a young age as an adoptive son. Since there is no written canon in the religion, many myths differ when relating the same story. One pataki describes Chango as committing incest with Yemaya because after much traveling, he does not remember his adoptive mother. However, in another pataki described by Luis Manuel Nunez, Chango attempts to seduce Yemaya, and she pretends to give in to his advances, luring him onto a small boat to teach him a lesson. She smothers him with a huge wave. He struggles to the surface of the ocean and begs Yemaya to save him, she agrees on one condition, “You must respect your mother.”⁴⁹ He becomes confused and remembers only that Obatala abandoned him, at which point

⁴⁶ Chanter, Tina. *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers*. New York: Routledge, 1995: 174.

⁴⁷ Gonzalez-Wippler 1999: 229.

⁴⁸ Barnet 1997: 92.

⁴⁹ Nunez, Luis Manuel. *Santeria: A Practical Guide to Afro-Caribbean Magic*. Woodstock, Connecticut: Spring Publications, Inc. 1999: 59.

Obatala arrives at the scene. Obatala and Yemaya then tell Chango how lucky he is to have two mothers when some have none and that he should respect Yemaya.

“I brought you into the world,” said Obatala. “But it was up to another to bring you up.”

“You forget women too easily, Chango,” said Yemaya. “You have hated your mother, but you have forgotten your second mother.”⁵⁰

He lets his hatred toward Obatala dissolve and apologizes, feeling very lucky to have two mothers and learns to respect women more. Nunez does not forget to mention that despite this revelation, he is still a womanizer; that is his personality.

This is an important tale to be examined in light of Irigaray’s critique of Christianity where the mother receives respect, but no real power. Mary has the power to be a mother, but Yemaya has the will and strength to control the elements and to assert herself sexually. She will not be sexualized by her male adopted son. Her sexual relationships are independent of her role as mother. Irigaray writes on the “mythological, religious and symbolic foundations of our contemporary culture and social order.”⁵¹ One example is:

According to Freud, the mother-son relationship is the perfect model of desire, and love between a woman and a man is possible only if the woman has become the mother of a son and she transfers to her husband what she feels for her boy-child.⁵²

This sort of sexual relationship is explicitly dealt with in the aforementioned myth, which shows mother-son relationships as riddled with turmoil and confusion. It may also deal with what can be seen as Chango’s Freudian Oedipus complex. However, the woman teaches him a lesson, and he is not castrated by the lesson, but rather is shown that he needs to respect women more. Divine relations between orishas are very complex and the ethic of sexual difference is evident. Yemaya is a divine woman who is motherly but severe; she has a sex life, but it is not modeled upon a sexual desire for her boy-child. Through this mythical model, “woman’s subjectivity” is able to “accommodate the

⁵⁰ Nunez 1999: 59.

⁵¹ Irigaray, Luce. *Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution*. Trans. by Karin Montin. New York: Routledge, 1994: 8.

⁵² Irigaray 1994: 9.

dimensions of mother and lover as well as the union between the two.”⁵³ Yemaya is not an object, but an active subject whose personality is that of a whole woman: a mother and a lover. The myth also designs an ethic of respect toward the other for Chango. He may not understand women, he may at times hate them, but essentially he is taught not to understand the relationships, but that he had to accept and respect them. The myth therefore defines the role of the son as well. In a healthy society, the man knows how to act toward women and learns this ethic religiously. The myth is an example of the creation of a divine understanding and acceptance that needs to be modeled by humanity.

Oshun is the younger sister of Yemaya. She rules the rivers, money and love. Yemaya and Oshun have a wonderful relationship, which in many ways reflects the mother-daughter relationship that Irigaray laments that Christianity lacks. In “Divine Women,” Irigaray wonders where the female trinity is in Christian mythology. This trinity of mother, daughter, spirit, is the image through which women will gain subjectivity and respect among ourselves as women. Women will learn how to love each other through this divine relationship. The older sister, younger sister relationship between Yemaya and Oshun works well at attempting to show a loving and productive mother-daughter relationship. Irigaray writes that, “it is equally essential that we should be daughter-gods in the relationship with our mothers, and that we cease to hate our mothers.”⁵⁴ Oshun is a mother gives her children to Yemaya to care for, not because she is a bad mother, but she trusts Yemaya to do the best job possible. It is said that all of Oshun’s riches are given to her from her loving older sibling. This relationship is metaphorically described as Oshun, the river, always coming to Yemaya, the sea.⁵⁵ The mother-daughter image is undeniable. Yemaya is the divine representative of motherhood and Oshun is the romantic goddess of love and wealth. With or without the likeness of Yemaya and Oshun’s relationship to that of a mother-daughter, what is essentially important in this divine relationship, is that these two are women in harmony with each other and who display a trusting model friendship. This myth shows that women can love each other and can cease to hate their mothers, daughters and female

⁵³ Irigaray 1993: 63.

⁵⁴ Irigaray 1993: 71.

⁵⁵ Gonzalez-Wippler 1999: 58.

friends. Modern society encourages women to compete with each other. Very rarely is there an image of mutual respect between women, religiously or otherwise.

Oshun is a goddess whose personality is very different from Yemaya's and who offers another potential way for women to define themselves. Oshun is the river goddess who controls issues of love, money, children, marriage and pleasure.⁵⁶ She protects pregnant women and is known as a healer. She is the Virgen de Caridad del Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba. When a woman wants help in conceiving a child, finding a lover, or needs money, she may ask Oshun for the favor. Her personality has been described as "seductive, tender, gentle, kind, irresistible, insatiable, flirtatious, loving, sweet, generous, ambitious, soft yet tenacious, dangerous, unforgiving, unforgettable."⁵⁷ The orishas have different caminos, or paths. She is not only Ochun Ibu-Akuaro, the camino which is "hard-working, joyful, young, beautiful, and fond of music and dance," but also a homemaker as Orunmila's wife, a sorcerer associated with the buzzard, a deaf, old rich woman, or the patroness of the sexual act as Ochun Ibu-Doko.⁵⁸ Oshun is one orisha whose being is expressed in different ways. One may experience any one of the orisha's paths at different points in their lives, but she is one.

Miguel Barnet claims that, "she is thought to represent many Cuban women in her sensual grace and Creole mischievousness."⁵⁹ This one line is a defense of Irigaray's essay in that her personality represents a divine gender model by which women who worship her might define themselves. Oshun has become a symbol of Cuba; she rescues those in need, the oppressed and those in danger. The image of Caridad del Cobre shows the Virgin suspended above water while three men struggle in a boat below. She became a symbol of freedom for African slaves in Cuba, and then a national emblem. The Shrine to Caridad del Cobre overlooks Biscayne Bay in Miami and it is there that Cuban Americans worship their Virgin in exile. She is therefore a political figure that links Cubans with Cuba and with the idea of freedom and release from suffering. The image shows Caridad del Cobre as a mulata, and this image of a dark-skinned lady who is

⁵⁶ Gonzalez-Wippler 1999: 59.

⁵⁷ Gonzalez-Wippler 1999: 229.

⁵⁸ Castellanos, Isabel. "A River of Many Turns: the Polysemy of Ochun in Afro-Cuban Tradition" In *Osun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas*, edited by Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001: 35.

⁵⁹ Barnet 1997: 95.

coquettish and life-loving is reflected in the persona of many Cuban women. She “may reflect this socially-constructed ambivalence in that her outward character is rarely what it seems. What seems flighty can be serious, what seems to be feminine weakness can be powerful, what seems erotic can be deadly.”⁶⁰ Oshun’s power is in her ability to alleviate tense situations by being as sweet as the honey over which she rules. This is a necessary power to have in a complete ethical religious body since some situations warrant careful negotiation and sometimes, manipulation, for the best outcome. Sometimes one might need to use the aggressive nature of Ogun, the blacksmith, to defend or protect oneself; all of these are different solutions to problems humans face daily.

Oshun has had many lovers, but her greatest love is Chango. He is her husband, and she shares him with two other wives: Oya and Oba. The practice of polygamy is not seen in the mythological context of Santeria as one that objectifies women. These orishas have personalities like humans do, so they get jealous, they cheat on their spouses, they may be haughty and angry and some are drawn to violence. The interesting feature of this polygamous marriage is that the three women have *very* different personalities and when placed in the context of marriage with Chango, the mythology demonstrates three contrasting images of marriage. Each of the three women has a unique approach to this marriage. Their individual natures determine how this relationship functions in their own lives. When Oshun met Chango and fell in love with him, she was already married to Orunmila. She left her first husband and went to live with Chango; their children are the Ibeyi, the divine twins.⁶¹ It is apparent that she is an agent of her own destiny. Chango’s other wives, Oya and Oba offer contrasting models of divine femininity.

Oya lives in the cemeteries. She is a warrior orisha who controls tornadoes, twisting storms, hurricanes and gale winds. She is also a sister to Yemaya, Oshun and Oba. She is Chango’s first wife, and does not seduce him the same way that Oshun does, but rather shows her “challenging personality, before which he generally surrenders in bewilderment.”⁶² In the mythology, she possesses the same powers in war as Chango. Oshun and Chango are a divine pair who display a sort of relationship based upon mutual desire, sexuality and power. Chango’s attraction to Oya is one based upon fascination.

⁶⁰ Murphy 2001: 98.

⁶¹ The myth is recounted in Luis Manuel Nunez’s book, on pages 47-51.

⁶² Barnet 1997: 94.

...Oya, the Orisha of the winds and storms, a woman warrior who stole the power of lightning from Chango when he betrayed her with Oshun. Eleggua taught her to temper her violent rage with her loving passion so she could lure Chango back. Dressed as a gypsy, she receives the dead who have been walked to the cemetery gate by Babalu Aye, and who now enter her dominion.⁶³

Oya is a very powerful female character who defines a different kind of strength in women than is commonly seen in the West. She represents justice and also passion. According to one story, Chango most respects Oya when he mounts her. This is an image of power that does not define a female by her sexuality, it does not confine her to it as her source of power, and rather it shows a divine woman whose strength makes her sexual.

A small paperback booklet on Oya, purchased at a botanica in Miami, Florida has recorded in it this Ifa tale, “The Spirit of the Wind is Dear Woman” which is retold by a Nigerian priest:

Oya made the journey from *Ikole Orun* (the Realm of The Ancestors) to *Ikole Aye* (Earth) in the form of an antelope on the day that she wanted to sell her good in the market. Every five days *Oya* was able to change her shape from *gala* (deer) to *obinrin* (woman). *Oya* waited five days, then entered the market carrying a bundle of multi-colored cloth. It was on that day that *Chango* (Spirit of Lightning) became overwhelmed by her beauty.

Oya ignored *Chango's* efforts to make her acquaintance. Instead, she sold her cloth, left the market and headed into the forest. Because he was struck by her beauty, *Chango* followed *Oya* into the forest, where he watched her put on the skin of *gala* (deer) and transform herself into a creature of the jungle.

Five days later *Chango* returned to the same place and watched *Oya* transform herself back into a woman. As she headed for the market, *Chango* took her animal skin and placed it in his sack. Later that day *Oya* returned to the forest and made a desperate search for her skin. Because *Oya* could not live in the bush without her animal skin she agreed to return with *Chango* to his home and become his wife.

Chango has two senior wives; *Ochun* (the Spirit of the Ochun River) and *Oba* (the Spirit of the Oba River). In time *Ochun* and *Oba* became jealous of the favored treatment that *Oya* received from *Chango*. *Ochun* and *Oba* told *Oya* that they thought that she was crude, and that she behaved like an animal. Because *Oya* did

⁶³ Rok, Ester Rebecca Shapiro. “Santeria as a Healing Practice in Diaspora Communities: My Cuban Jewish Journey with Oshun” In *Healing Cultures: Art and Religion as Curative Practices in the Caribbean and Its Diaspora*, edited by Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. New York: Palgrave, 2001: 83.

not want the women to discover her secret, she renewed her search for her skin. When she found the skin in *Shango's* sack, she took it and returned to the forest.

Shango felt grief when he found that *Oya* had left him. He followed her into the forest until he spotted a *gala* (deer) with two powerful horns. The beast was digging a hoof into the dirt and had its head lowered in preparation for battle. It was on that day that *Shango* recognized the *gala* as *Oya*. Instead of lifting his bow, *Shango* offered the animal a plate of *akara* (bean cakes). *Oya* removed the horns from her head and presented them to *Shango* in return for his kindness. From that day on *Shango* had used the horns of the *gala* to call the Spirit of *Oya*.⁶⁴

This pataki shows *Oya* as a force who is changing, from woman to deer. As the ruler of the winds, she is always in transition. *Oya* is both powerful and vulnerable in this tale. *Oya* is the goddess of the marketplace, and here we see that she is on her way to sell multi-colored cloth, one of her trademarks whose rainbow of colors is hers as well. She is able to move smoothly between the animal and the human worlds, making her powerful in both. *Shango* attempts to trap her, but is unable to do so completely, and only receives the ability to call to her when he first treats her with reverence. This offers an ethic of respect, not dominance. Although the elder wives are jealous of *Oya*, to her, their words are not cruel, rather, they send her back to where she should be and *Chango* learns how he should be treating her once she has left. *Oya's* ability as a warrior and to invoke “elemental assistance” in battle, make her “one of the guardians of issues related to the fair treatment of women.”⁶⁵ She is a protector and offers women a female model who changes in order to improve situations and protect oneself. She also is an independent spirit, even though in other tales, she is extremely jealous.

Oya wanted *Chango* to be faithful to her and suffered a great deal when he had affairs with other women. Since *Chango* –the plentitude of life- cannot abide death, she struck a deal with several deceased people to surround her house and thus to keep *Chango* locked inside. Every time that he opened the door and tried to leave, one of the dead would approach him whistling: “Fuuiii!!!” and *Chango* would hasten to retreat. One day, *Ochun* went to see him in *Oya's* absence. “Hey *Chango*,” she asked, “how come you don't visit me anymore?” “I can't, *Ochun*,” replied the god of thunder, “*Oya* is keeping me inside the house and the *iku* [the dead] are watching my every move.” *Ochun* got a bottle of rum, a calabash full of honey, and soon began to flirt with the leader of the dead: “Hey, you, handsome, come and drink some rum, come and taste this delicious honey...” The leader of

⁶⁴ Fatunbi, Awo Fa'lokun. *Oya: Ifa and the Spirit of the Wind*. New York: Original Publications, 1993: 9-10.

⁶⁵ Fatunmbi 1993: 10.

the dead responded immediately and began to court her. In the meantime, Chango took advantage of the distraction and escaped. The *oricha* of love was thus able to inebriate and to sweeten Death.⁶⁶

This pataki shows Oya as a jealous deity who traps her lover. Oshun, however is able to counter the controlling ways of Oya with her charm and cunning. The two do not directly confront each other in this story; however, it is clear that Oya is not acting properly in trying to keep Chango, the essence of life, guarded by death. This can be seen metaphorically in that people should not let the fear of death stunt their lives. Chango is fearless but for the dead. Ochun is also a preserver of life, and Isabel Castellanos sees her as a “mediator and a saving force.”⁶⁷

As we have seen, Oshun is the patron of pregnancy and romance, in whom life perseveres, Yemaya of motherhood and childbirth and Oya leads us all to our resting place and is a powerful warrior. This can be considered a feminine triumvirate that does not mirror the Christian Trinity, but reflects the stages of the female life. In Hinduism, the concept of the goddess discusses a female trinity of sorts. It is important to look at the concept of the holy woman in Hindu thought because it offers a reflection of other religions with goddesses and offers a reference for those interested in revising religious thought in the West using a feminist perspective. In Hinduism, the world and the goddess consist of *maya*, *prakrti* and *sakti*. *Maya* is illusion in the world, *prakrti* is the material world and *shakti* is “divine energy, creative power.”⁶⁸ *Prakrti* is made up of three *gunas*, or qualities, “purity (*sattva*), energy (*rajas*), and lethargy (*tamas*)” which can be likened to the nature of certain goddesses, such as Yemaya as *sattva*, Oshun as *rajas* and Oya as *tamas*.⁶⁹ These different energies are all necessary for creation and each orisha possesses all three. They are shown entrenched in *maya* while still encompassing the raw power of *sakti*. Oya in her many forms is similar to Hinduism’s Kali, the black goddess who also guards cemeteries. Goddesses around the world imitate each other and

⁶⁶ Castellanos 2001: 38-39.

⁶⁷ Castellanos 2001: 39.

⁶⁸ Wulff, Donna M. “RADHA: Consort and Conqueror of Krishna” In *Devi: Goddesses of India*, edited by John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff. Berkley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1996: 111.

⁶⁹ Kinsley, David R. “KALI: Blood and Death Out of Place” In *Devi: Goddesses of India* edited by John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff. Berkley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1996: 82.

possess similar qualities, especially those relating to birth and death. The example of this triumvirate offers a way that feminine energy can be honored and the beginnings of a way to integrate a reverence for females into a revised social ethic are created.

The last two female orishas to be discussed are Oba and Yewa. Oba is Chango's other wife. She is the symbol of the family and is a virtuous wife. She is not a popular orisha perhaps because she does not dance, and therefore does not mount anyone during possession ceremonies. "Domestic and diligent, she is a sad and silent oricha."⁷⁰ She is shown as a loyal and virtuous woman. She is sometimes overlooked due to her lack of representation in the texts. This lack of prevalence shows that the docile and invisible woman is not as respected as the lusty or powerful one. Yewa is also not mentioned often, but she symbolizes death, and is therefore feared. Oya eats whatever is left over after Yewa devours dead bodies. She is a virgin, and most of those initiated as her children in the religion are older female virgins. Each female orisha represents a myriad of personalities that are reflected in women and men.

Certainly, one may argue that these myths, which show Chango as a polygamist and womanizer, might somehow justify this sort of behavior in non-divine men. The myths already recounted show that this is not the case because Chango is often put in his place by women, and he is not the only male orisha, he is just the sexiest. Also, this mythology does not translate directly into the lives of the practitioners. Women and men model their identities on their interpretations of the orishas, as Irigaray and Feuerbach suggest men and women do. Although powerful guides, the myths do not always directly guide the actions of people. Although Chango's is very virile and the orishas are sexualized, many holy men and women in Santeria must abstain from sex in times surrounding initiations and such. Sexuality is not an irrelevant characteristic, nor is it an ideal. Besides myth, ritual informs practitioner ethical behavior.

⁷⁰ Barnet 1997: 97.

CHAPTER 3

RITUALS AS PLACES OF POWER AND HEALING IN SANTERIA

Everyone has an orisha parent who lives in their head. Before one gets initiated, a babalawo will identify which orisha rules the initiate's head. The practitioner and their guardian orisha share personality traits. Yewa does not tolerate any sexual dalliances among her children, whereas Chango encourages these affairs. These differences are not gender specific because if an initiate's parent orisha is Oshun, and the initiate, man or woman, has a similar personality to Oshun, they might also be drawn to many romantic encounters. However, since almost all of the orishas have avatars, the personality types for each may be very varied. A man may be the omo-orisha, or child of an orisha, to a female orisha, and vice versa.

The orishas may be seen as archetypes and we may fit into one of the personality categories of each. The important part of identifying your orisha and cultivating a relationship with them is that you are able to discover your own identity through this divine persona whose character is similar to your own innate personality. This is a way of creating a relationship with the divine that is relevant to healing and self-understanding. When people are able to see themselves in the divine, they are able to orient themselves better in the universe. This is not limited to a specific gender in the sphere of Santeria; however, it is relevant when viewing a religious approach to one's gender. Since religion defines its ethic and that identity is expressed through stories, it is through these tales that a gender ethic is explored.

When a person receives a divination reading, they see themselves in the divine, and "(t)he orishas, then, reflect back to the faithful the complexity of their own human lives."⁷¹ When people seek a reading, they are searching for a connection with the divine. They are also looking for advice and direction. In order to gain answers to their predicaments, they need to listen to the advice of the orishas uncovered through the

⁷¹ Castellanos 1996: 46.

shells, cards, opele⁷² chain or coconuts by the santero/a or babalawo. If the reading is done with a spiritist, otherwise known as a medium, then the orisha's stories may also be referenced. In a reading done by a spiritist, usually using a deck of Spanish playing cards, the orishas show themselves as helpers or ones that need to be asked for help. Their stories arise, but not as with as much detail as in an Ifa reading. If the advice comes from an Ifa reading, read by a babalawo or the case when the diloggun is read, then the person finds solutions to the problems that they have with direct use of pataki of the orishas. The orishas' stories mirror the events or situations in the person's life. At times, the person is represented by the orisha in the story, and from the orisha's experience, the person receives advice. For instance, in a pataki, a group of a male orisha's enemies may be plotting to kill him by digging a hole and filling it with snakes and placing his mat over it for him to sit on. The advice for the person might be to watch out, because someone is out to get them and they should watch where they sit. In other words, the stories of the orishas are the stories of the people asking the orishas for help and through this identification process, the solution for a problem can be found.

Since these solutions, other than advice, are usually offerings, ebbos, or cleansings there is a trading of ache and the person gains mental and spiritual strength from the orishas. These solutions create a strong bond with the orishas, they also create a stronger sense of self. The healing comes from within, when one gains a sense of agency over one's destiny as well as through the transference of energy. When it is divined that an ebbo or cleansing is necessary for the person's protection and/or to avoid a negative fate, then the practitioner is usually given a list of things to buy to use in the ebbo or cleansing. Sometimes the person doing the reading has the herbs and other products that the person needs for the reading and simply includes the cost in the charge for the healer to do the cleansing. Other times, the santera or santero are giving a reading in a back room of a botanica, so when they write the list of ingredients, then the person is generally inclined to buy them at that store.

For the most part, a typical cleansing type or ebbo ritual is somewhat interactive. A santero/a may tell you that you need to give Eleggua an ebbo because you need a metaphorical door opened in your life or your path cleared. In order to do this, you need

⁷²A chain used by babalawos in Ifa divination.

to buy a fish and cook it with lard and maybe other things that belong to Elegua and then present it to the orisha. Another example would be that you need protection and blessings from Chango, and so the person doing the divination tells you to buy different kinds of fruit and put it into a bag with things that belong to Chango, things that he likes, certain herbs, etc., and then place them under a palm tree. Or maybe you need your santera to make you a perfume to attract love, and to do this, you need to visit the river to gather water, since the river belongs to Oshun. All of these are exercises which bring you closer to the orishas, by teaching you what herbs, animals and landmarks are associated with them. It also brings you to do things you might not normally do, for instance, cook a fish. The exercise also brings you to places where you might not normally go. You might not know how to get to the river in your town, or where to find a palm tree. By going to the river, you are placing yourself actively in your environment. By creating this connection with the physical locations in your neighborhood or city, you are putting yourself in control of your environment, orienting yourself and updating your mental landscape. Now you know where the river is and know what it looks like and feels like in a different way. Maybe you have not been there since you were a small child, but now that you have visited it again, you know what it looks like now. It is healing to have this new sense of awareness of your environment. It shows you that you can make things happen in your life, because you know where you are.

There is a ceremony called *rogacion de cabeza* known as a head cleansing. The head, in Santeria, is the place where you are most vulnerable to the spiritual realm. “According to santeros, the best way to refresh the Eledaa is through a *rogacion de cabeza*, which is a combination of prayers and coconut plaster applied directly to the head. The basic rogacion is made with coconut, cascarilla, and coconut butter, although sometimes other ingredients are added.”⁷³ This ebbo is done by a santero/a or babalawo and the ceremony cleanses away negative energy from the person. A coconut is split for divination and part of it is put into the plaster. The part used for divination is placed on a plate that goes under the person’s bed while they sleep. The divination tells the practitioner where to place the plate the next morning. The person’s head is wrapped in white cotton and they are sent home to rest. All night the person sleeps with this paste on

⁷³ Gonzalez-Wippler 1999: 146.

their head, wrapped in a white handkerchief. They are acutely aware of their body and how it is positioned so that the handkerchief and the mixture do not fall off of their head. The washing of the head brings the person's attention to their head in a specific way, but also to their body in a more general way. Cleansings often leave practitioners feeling light, dizzy or dazed. The process changes them in that it cleanses away old negativity and refreshes their head. They are now lighter and more aware of their bodies. Although one's landscape is shared with all, one's body is generally limited to one gender. In becoming more aware of one's body, one is also gaining a better understanding of their gender and the physical selfhood associated with it.

There are other ways and ceremonies that bring one closer to the orishas, however, the initiation ceremony, known as the *asiento* and the instance of possession are the two best examples of ways that a practitioner may bond with his/her guardian orisha. These two processes help bond one to and also *become* their orisha, manifesting the orisha's power. In Santeria, one may not be "mounted" by the orishas or possessed by them unless they have first been initiated.

Asiento and Possession

The *asiento*, or initiation ceremony, lasts a few days, though the entire process is not completed for a year. Being initiated is a very serious, expensive ceremony that can be given to someone that is very ill to save their life, or when one is told they are ready to receive their orisha through divination. It is a secret and intricate ceremony. What people who have not been initiated know is usually told to them by someone who has undergone the process. However, there are many things that remain secret to the uninitiated. The initiate usually spends sixteen days at his or her *madrina* or *padrino's* house.⁷⁴ The ceremony begins with an *ebbo* (sacrifice) and then there are a series of cleansings. The person is symbolically dying and being reborn. They are treated like a newborn baby, unable to care for themselves. The initiate's head is shaved toward the end of the time spent with the *madrina* or *padrino*.⁷⁵ The ceremonies need to be done properly and according to the strict rules of the orishas. Each orisha's ceremony varies.

⁷⁴ Gonzalez-Wippler 1999: 175.

⁷⁵ This draws attention to the head, in a similar way that the *rogacion de cabeza* does.

For instance, Oya is the only orisha whose child's hair is not shaven during the asiento. The initiation ceremony is complete once the person has been possessed by their orisha. For a year after initiation, the individual wears white and must have their head wrapped. They are supposed to be pure like babies.

A babalawo must determine who the guardian orisha is for a person before they are initiated. "This central deity, often called 'the owner of the head,' represents an important part of the individual's character...a growing relationship between the individual and the eleda often leads to initiations, after which the ache of the orisha literally resides in the initiate's head."⁷⁶ The orisha is not just part of oneself, but also something outside of oneself with which to build a relationship, and through possession, one is the orisha. Therefore the individual has a personal deity to which they are devoted and whom which they are involved with on many levels.

The orishas are elemental forces and gods. This makes them multi-dimensional and one must relate to them in the many ways that humans can relate to others and to the divine. Orishas "can also be our lovers" and that the sexual relationship is like "a mystical union in which the orishas are 'inside' their brides."⁷⁷ During the asiento, the initiate marries their orisha as well. So they are experiencing a variety of relationships with the orisha, child and spouse. In this way, people can fully experience their deity. They have a very personal devotion to their specific divinity.

Not only do they experience the deity in a mystical sense, but also live as a sort of representative of the orisha. The initiate must adhere to the restrictions of their orisha in order to live properly. For instance, children/brides of Oshun are not supposed to eat pumpkins because that is where Oshun keeps her money. In living with the restrictions and benefits that the orisha parent demands, the person is granted protection and blessings. They are therefore living the correct path for themselves in light of the deity. All of these different aspects of initiation create an environment of appreciation of and union with the divine.

There is a goal then of understanding the orisha and therein, understanding oneself. The self is enhanced and better related to the world when seen in reference to

⁷⁶ Mason, Michael Atwood. *Living Santeria: Rituals and Experiences in an Afro-Cuban Religion*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002: 33.

⁷⁷ Murphy 1993: 89.

the divine. In their parent's faces, the child sees their own. The initiates learn about themselves when learning about their orisha and the stories and advice that define them. We all represent certain aspects of our parent orishas and must be aware of their negative and positive tendencies in order to know one's own, since they are similar. Identity is not recreated, but further defined. Since your personality is similar to that of your guardian orisha, you have a natural tendency to relate to them. The divination system and asiento allows for a deeper understanding of self and offers advice on how to manage ones' affairs.

The importance of becoming not just intimate, but actually one with the deity is an actualization and proof of Irigaray and Feuerbach's assertions that the divine mirrors the self. In that developed relationship with the divine self, one becomes whole, healed and divine. The asiento strips people of their old sins and gives them an opportunity to live life in reference to and as a divinity with the knowledge of the divine's ethic. They gain personal spiritual power and social spiritual power. With every new initiation-type ceremony, the person is building their ache and they are gaining control over their spirituality and reality.

Since women have less societal power than men, they are gaining the most from these initiation ceremonies. Their personalities are allowed to develop more fully with their introduction into the religion. Women are given a certain place of control. They are introduced to the elements of the religion, which are the elements of the environment where they live. They have knowledge of the plants, animals and tools needed to maintain protection from harm and also to sustain a relationship with the holy.

The rituals are not only a place where women are allowed into a secret relationship with the divine, but also the place where that relationship begins. The asiento is the only place where women or men can gain the knowledge it takes to fully practice the religion, but the daily worship is where the religion creates a culture and allows for spiritual growth to develop fully. While being possessed, the person actually embodies the orishas. This is symbolic of the nature of the religious relationship with the divinities. One is born into this powerful realm during the asiento, they enact the orisha's will through possession and they are growing through the practice of the religion.

Popular Culture

Santeria is far from being a perfect religion with any real gender equality. Men still maintain the most powerful positions in the religion and Santeria is part of a misogynistic culture. Cuban culture, although maintaining a fascination of women, is still male dominated. However, Cuban and Cuban-American media shows that culturally, the santera is highly regarded and respected. The woman in tune with her santo is an integral, respected and inspirational part of Cuban and Cuban-American society. One must keep in mind though, that not everyone in this culture will feel that way (she is also feared).

In Miami, Santeria is everywhere. It is common to see someone walking down the street or waiting for the bus wearing white from head to toe. Most Miami natives know that the person draped in white is a practitioner of Santeria. There are botanicas, religious stores that sell products used in Santeria, spread widely over the landscape. They are more prevalent in lower income neighborhoods, but wherever you live, there is a botanica not far away. The religious culture affects the environment and society in many ways. Often local bands will play concerts whose names reference Ochun or the other orishas. Local artists, usually of Cuban descent, use elements of the orishas in their pieces, sometimes paintings and other times interactive art. The examples of this are widespread, and most people who live in Miami know about the religion and are familiar with its images and orishas. There is a huge Cuban presence in South Florida and this is evident in the movies, TV and other media produced here.

There are powerful, religious women represented in the popular culture through Santeria. Movies based on the Cuban immigration to the U.S., usually Miami, often have a santera represented by an actress in the film. Three examples of this are *The Perez Family*, *Mambo Kings* and *Honey for Oshun*. *The Perez Family* and *Mambo Kings* are both Hollywood features with mostly Hispanic-American actors. In both, Celia Cruz, the famous Cuban singer and sort of matriarch for Cuban culture in America, plays a santera.

The Perez Family is a story based on the Mariel boatlift during which thousands of Cuban refugees arrived in South Florida in 1980. In the movie, Celia Cruz, as a santera, prays for the marriage of two of the main characters. Although they are not married, and she was lied to, her prayers to San Lazaro, or Babalu Aye, are heard and the

two end up happily married. She plays an important role in the movie and also in the lives of the characters. Her prayers are what make the ending possible. In *Mambo Kings*, she is also a santera and an advisor to the characters and leads them in the right direction. Warning them of possible harm and leading them toward prosperity. In the Cuban movie *Honey for Oshun*, the santera plays a similar role. She leads the main character to his mother from whom he had been estranged for most of his life. She gives him a clue telling him where his mother is living and eventually he finds her because of this advice. The three movies show that Cuban culture prefers to show and see santeras as spiritual guides who create physical results. These women are empowered by their religion in the eyes of popular culture.

The Cuban author Pedro Juan Gutierrez writes about the religion in his book, *Dirty Havana Trilogy*. This book chronicles one man's experience of Havana in a time of great squalor in Cuba, around the time of the fall of the USSR. Throughout the book, Gutierrez shows the intricate relationships that the orishas have in the lives of Cubans. He describes people in reference to their guardian orisha, "she was a mulatta and an evil daughter of Ochun."⁷⁸ When begging for food or money when he was starving, an old woman who gave him some bread asked him why he was begging as a son of Chango and tells him to pray to his parents, Chango and Ochun.⁷⁹ People are ailing throughout the book and the way that they find solutions to their problems, from love problems to hunger, is by asking the orishas. In particular, they express the need to visit a santera and almost every time someone is receiving or needs help from the santos, it is from a santera or female spiritist.⁸⁰ The spiritual healing power of the santera is clearly evoked in these passages.

Sexual Ethics

The Christian idiom touts that we should do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Yet in not creating a full identity for females through images and stories of the divine, although they are "the other," they are not seen as equals, as an other that

⁷⁸ Gutierrez, Juan Pedro. *Dirty Havana Trilogy*. New York: Ecco, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2002; 46.

⁷⁹ Gutierrez 2002: 57.

⁸⁰ Gutierrez 2002: 90, 102, 158, 235, 287.

deserves the same respect as oneself. Women are in need of a redefined religious sexual ethic which allows them the tools to be more self aware and also to face life situations which are more current, realistic and relevant to a real woman.

The divine/human relationship becomes an opportunity for growth and healing for women especially in this religion where almost everyone (essentially everyone) may access this power. The power is divine, male and female. Ritual grounds the divine and the religious beliefs empower and make the human holy.

The goddess also functions as a feminist in that she offers women comfort. She is an advocate of humanity offering hope and comfort (and maybe answered prayers) to women who may otherwise lack authority in their lives. The goddess who is the most powerful and effective recognizes all other power, the power to know when to be strong and that it is acceptable to be weak. To know that it is acceptable to make love, feel jealous and to know how to manage both.

CONCLUSION

Religion offers humans a moral code and therefore an understanding of self and others. The proverbs and tales that the religion tells of its people and its gods shape this understanding. In Christianity, there are tales that teach an ethic of forgiveness and love, however they are lacking an essential natural element: a divine real woman. Although the Virgin Mary can be interpreted as a figure of an empowered female, she is not depicted as a sexualized or fully emotional being. Her strength is not in her ability to be human, but in what separates her from other women. Her holiness arises from her position of mother to a son. Her femininity is not divine in and of itself. People need a divine figure to relate to, a being through which they can create an identity for themselves. Men have that and women do not. Without a female godhead, women are unable to relate to the divine as whole women. This hinders a complete sense of selfhood in that women lack the tools to define themselves by and through which to interrelate with other women or how to relate to men.

Santeria offers a religious system and ethic that shows divine women, whose divinity is in their absolute humanity. They are creatures of skill and creation, love and forgiveness. Women need an ethic to understand themselves, and they need to see their own faces in the divine. They need to understand whom they are and that when they are themselves, it is a beautiful thing. Stories do not make women and men different. Women and men are different. Religious and cultural stories need to show how people can be themselves, different in their gender and how to act accordingly with one another.

Santeria rituals serve as locations where women can access religious power, which is healing in light of Irigaray's essay "Divine Women" and based upon concrete examples from anthropological literature. Ifa stories provide women with divine role models through which to create an identity. The rituals are healing in that they deepen one's identity through the use of the elements, the earth, location and the body. One is better oriented in their own bodies, homes, cities and spiritually through the use of ritual. They make the Ifa stories real and the orishas alive not just in a metaphysical sense, but also within oneself and one's community.

The cultural, physical, spiritual, religious, ethical and intellectual landscape of gender is one that needs to be explored by women today in order to heal themselves. Although we may not be able to heal society just yet, we can see the potential healing power of the religious rituals and stories of Santeria and the respect that the religious woman, the santera, receives. Women can start by healing themselves by realizing their divine identities therefore better understanding the world and their place in it. When women are able to see themselves in the divine their identity is enhanced and a clear ethic by which to live their lives is uncovered. Christianity needs to begin to see women as whole beings with human needs and solutions. In order to do this, Christianity must accept a divine female with human characteristics that define her as a full member of her gender, defined in and of herself, not in reference to a male divinity. Women are not going to stop feeling emotions or having sex, nor should they or the human race would cease to flourish. Therefore, a human religion needs to begin to recognize and accept female emotions and sexuality and let women heal themselves. Santeria offers a complex example of how women can empower themselves to heal one another by first understanding themselves and then learning rituals that connect them with healing powers from plants to stories, all accessed through their ancestors and divinities. Christianity needs to ground itself in the earth and in the earth wisdom of those who have passed in their families, communities and cultures. They need to learn to hear God in the living women and men so that men and women can truly learn from each other instead of staring into a mirror of confusion, seeing only a half developed person with little direction for self or understanding of each other.

APPENDIX A

DEFENSE ANNOUNCEMENT

The defense announcement should be turned in to the Office of Graduate Studies, 408 Westcott, two weeks prior to the scheduled defense. The announcement may also be faxed to (850) 644 -2969 or e-mailed to gradstds@www.fsu.edu. Please type or print legibly.

Thesis Treatise Dissertation (please circle one)

Name: Elizabeth Tracy Phone #: 305-720-6594

Department: Religion

Major Professor: Dr. John Corrigan

Defense Day 3/30/05 Date 1:00 p.m. Time

Location (room and building) Dodd Hall, Philosophy Library

Title: DIVINE WOMEN IN SANTERIA: HEALING WITH A GENDERED SELF

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Elizabeth Tracy is the Communications Coordinator at the Human Services Coalition of Dade County, Inc. In addition, she works as the local coordinator for the Youth Vote Coalition Miami. Elizabeth was born in White Plains, NY on August 19, 1979 but has lived in Miami for the past 17 years. She devotes her time exploring creative ways to improve her community and the world.

Elizabeth graduated from Florida International University and received her Bachelor's degree in Religious Studies while minoring in Visual Arts. She is currently completing her Master of Arts degree in Religion at Florida State University. While attending FIU, Elizabeth was granted a FIU Faculty Scholarship, Florida Academic Scholarship and was on the Dean's List. At Florida State University, she received a full departmental scholarship with a stipend and teaching assistantship.

Elizabeth has volunteered at various Miami organizations, including HealthSouth Doctor's Hospital, American Civil Liberties Union, Democratic Executive Committee and Miami for Peace, among others. It was through these volunteer experiences that Elizabeth gained the knowledge to perform at her current position at the Human Services Coalition as the Communications Coordinator. She plans various events that educate and inform low-income community members about increasing their prosperity through government programs and advanced education. Elizabeth's ability to coordinate respected community members with non-profit as well as for-profit organizations, has gained her respect in the community. Her goal is to be a shaper of events, not an observer, and to work for the betterment of mankind. Elizabeth is currently teaching a class at Florida International University with the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy and Citizenship Studies on empowering youth to become activists. Her work was recently recognized when she was honored as one of the Youth Vote Coalition's "30 Under 30" honoring 30 people under 30 that are impacting politics.