

## The Orisha Changó and Other African Deities In Cuban Drama

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The body of Cuban drama contains many accretions from African sources. Among the most important of these is the presence of ancient deities from the Yoruba pantheon, a vast hierarchy of spiritual entities termed Orishas who range from the aloof Maker (variously Olofi, Olorum, Olodumare), through the hermaphroditic creative force (Obatalá) and the Mother of the gods (Yemayá), to those associated with specific aspects of Nature (Changó, for one).<sup>1</sup> These are the traditional deities still worshipped in what is present-day Nigeria and its environs. Many of the Orishas figure prominently in modern Cuban life and are manifest in the drama of the Caribbean island because they have had a long history there.

Religio-mythological beliefs from many sectors of Africa came to the "New World" between 1517 and 1873 with the enslaved peoples of the continent. These cultural elements survived the shock of transplantation and the subsequent break in continuity, first through the preservation of the deeply-rooted indigenous oral tradition by the slaves themselves, and, in due course, through the adoption of written expression for lyrical and narrative literature, old and new, both by educated slaves or freemen and white folklorists. All kinds of African and Afro-Cuban folklore came to the fore in the process and, having been collected in written form, survived alongside Hispanic traditions.

Despite the adversities suffered by the Africans through their diaspora and the oppressiveness of those who enslaved them, particularly in regard to their religious practices, their culture persevered. Today, many of the creative works of the Caribbean basin and Brazil are founded on African traditions extant in the Americas, if often in syncretic form.<sup>2</sup>

Nowhere is this more evident than in Cuba. The island nation's literature is replete with plays, poems, stories, and novels whose focus is Afro-Cuban, that is, whose themes and motifs manifest how integral to Cuban life is the religio-mythological system of belief brought to the island by the Yoruba-Lucumí peoples of western Africa, as well as by those from the Gulf of Guinea

and the Congo River basin (Ibo, Efik, Mahi, Fon [Dahomey], Bantu, Bambara, Foula, Wolof, among others).

The prevalence of one such motif, the Orishas, in modern Cuban literature is seen in works by such noted writers as the playwrights Carlos Felipe (*Tambores, Réquiem por Yarini*), José R. Brene (*La fiebre negra*), and Pepe Carril (*Shangó de Ima*), the poet Nicolás Guillén (*Sóngoro cosongo, West Indies, Ltd.*), the novelists Alejo Carpentier (*El reino de este mundo*), Guillermo Cabrera Infante ("En el gran Ecbó," *Tres tristes tigres*), José Lezama Lima (*Paradiso*), and Severo Sarduy (*De donde son los cantantes*), as well as in tales collected by the folklorist and short story writer Lydia Cabrera (*Cuentos negros de Cuba, El monte*).

Among the major Orishas whose identities are evident in these and other works of Cuban literature are Babalú Ayé, Changó, Echú, Ecué, Eleguá, Obatalá, Ochosi, Ochún, and Yemayá; others in the huge and complex pantheon appear with greater or lesser frequency as well. In the process of examining the modern literary treatment of these deities, variants in names and roles vis-a-vis the Yoruba-Lucumí Orishas emerge due to differences in the dialects and customs of the slaves brought to the island in the colonial period from those who came in the nineteenth century, as well as in the adoption of the dominant Yoruba system by peoples from other parts of Africa with different languages and cultures. Likewise adding to the complexity is the giving of different names to the same deity according to its manifestations (a process akin to that in Catholicism of giving Mary many titles, as in her litany).

Nonetheless, despite the Yoruba religion's separation in time and space from its matrix, Africa, the belief system in the Caribbean and Brazil has not been diminished in its vitality or its impact. To a large degree, this is due to the existence of a body of incantations, tales, recipes, myths, sayings, charms, and pharmacopeia known in Cuba as *Patakin*.<sup>3</sup> This traditional African knowledge has been in continuous use on the island both through oral transmission and manuscripts which the priesthood (*babalaos, santeros*) call *libretas*. Over the centuries, this lore has been accessed in one way or another by Cuban writers since many of the *libretas* have been printed and sold by unscrupulous initiates.

In viewing the works of Cuban playwrights, novelists, poets, and writers in other genres, it is impossible to deny that the exalted place of African deities in their writing is due to the importance in Cuban society, both on the island and abroad, of the Yoruba religion. Spanish-speaking countries of the Caribbean have come to call the worship of the Orishas *Santería*, a term which signifies the syncretic nature of the religion in the region, the result of dressing the African gods in Christian garb in order to circumvent the prohibition of their worship under Catholic strictures in place since colonial times. Rather than abandon their deities when priest and master demanded conversion to Christianity, the slaves associated the Orishas with saints whose colors, accouterments, functions or other aspects were the same or resembled those

of the African gods, gender notwithstanding. Thus, for one example, Changó, god of thunder (the music of the heavens) and lightning (and, in Cuba, of the drum), whose weapon is the double-headed axe, became manifest in the figure of Saint Barbara, patron saint of the Spanish artillery who is pictured with a two-edged sword alongside a cannon. So powerful was the association with their Orishas, and so impelling the need to preserve them at all costs, that the slaves throughout the Caribbean and Brazil resorted to this syncretizing process independently, admirably manifesting thereby the functioning of what Jung has termed "the collective unconscious" in the creation of archetypes.

Several plays are representative of the integration of the Orishas in Cuban literature, both in their African and syncretic guises. In *Shango de Ima* by Pepe Carril, the title signifies the deity's importance as king of Ima, an African land, and as the central character of the plot. Subtitled *A Yoruba Mystery Play* in its English translation, it presents selected segments of Nigerian legends about Shango. The playwright derived his version of the seminal myth in part from the folktale narrated in Rómulo Lachatañeré's *¡¡Oh, mio Yemayá!!*<sup>4</sup> There, the child of Obatala (Father-Mother) and Agayu-Sola (the Ferryman), Shango is raised by three sisters, the Orishas Yemayá (the Sea), Oya (Cemetery), and Oshun (Love), his rescuers from a fiery death at the hands of his male progenitor, who refuses to admit his fatherhood. Yemayá then arranges for Shango to marry Obba, a beauty who humbles herself before him and caters to his voracious appetite for food. When she cuts off her ears to provide him additional sustenance in his endless battle with Ogun Arere (the Warrior), Shango no longer finds her appealing and deserts her. So great is her sorrow at the loss occasioned by what proved to be a worthless sacrifice, that her endless tears fill ruts in the earth and she is metamorphosed into a river. Now wifeless, Shango's great sexual drive seeks new conquests and he ravishes Yemayá, Oya and Oshun, thus incurring the wrath of the powerful Ogun Arere. Shango is then brought to trial before Olofi (Creator, the Sun) for his many transgressions. He is tried and sentenced to undergo recurring cycles of birth and death; in the process, he is destined to seek his origins and to probe for answers about his own nature continuously. In his transgressions, punishment and search, Shango is Everyman. And his story is, in one respect, a Yoruba version of the fall of man, albeit one told in terms of deific beings.

Carril's play, however, selects out many elements of the traditional tale, opting for those which emphasize Shango de Ima as the victim of circumstances rather than as perpetrator of his own downfall. If he is guilty of any sin in the play, it is of abandoning Obba after her sacrifice. Turning to other women in itself is not seen as sinful. Indeed, the female Orishas with whom he sleeps are not forced into the sexual union; rather, they are willing participants: Oshun gives herself to fortify him for battle, Oya coquettishly allows him to remove her clothing and his step-mother Yemayá openly welcomes his passion for her. It is Iku (Death) who looks upon all these sexual liaisons with deep-seated hatred because Shango's passion symbolizes

Life. And it is Iku who brings Shango to trial. But Olofi does not pass judgment in the play; the Deity, Shango is told, has turned away from creation to remain aloof in his heaven. Like an oracle, Obatala acts in Olofi's stead. But Shango is not cowed by the power she represents. He defends his actions as emanating from the powerful sexual nature given him by Olofi:

This gift of light, of birth, of fire and flame is as it is and if Olofi orders my punishment for using what he himself has given me, then I reject that punishment . . . (89)

Reason cannot intervene where Fate is concerned, however, and Shango is put under the dictum of the eternal cycle of light and darkness, birth and death eternally repeating themselves: Shango as Life, represented by the color red, Iku as Death, represented by white, must forever be entwined. Even the Orishas must fulfill the roles assigned them in what the Greeks termed *heimarmene*, universal Fate.

Changó's role is quite different in José R. Brene's *La fiebre negra* (Black Fever), in which the disappearance of a white girl in 1919 small-town Cuba is maliciously laid at the feet of the Blacks. Seen as practitioners of black arts by white society, a large group is rounded up and brutally questioned by the police and the military. The circumstantial evidence against them is made to appear conclusive and a mentally deficient Black is coaxed into verifying the guilt of the *curandero* (healer) and his cohorts in the killing of the girl. The only recourse of the oppressed Blacks is to pray to Changó to save them from certain death; their drums are heard incessantly invoking the mighty Orisha, but to no avail. Their fate sealed by an antagonistic society which will not accept their religion as other than witchcraft, many of the Blacks commit suicide. After the rest have died as a result of torture or execution, the child returns unharmed. The truth of her disappearance revealed (she had been kidnapped by her natural father, a white), those involved in the accusations and killings decide to cover up their grave actions. The play ends with the irreversible genocide of the Blacks and the contemptible hypocrisy of the whites. But looming even larger is the indifference of the Orisha to the plight of his people, perhaps because he cannot alter their fate, perhaps because their distance from their African roots has weakened the ties to the deity.

In Carlos Felipe's *Réquiem por Yarini* (Requiem for Yarini), 1910 Havana's world of prostitution, in which Blacks, mulattoes and whites participate, is depicted vividly in terms of Greek tragedy, Spiritism and the syncretic Yoruba tradition of Cuba. Santería is evident from the beginning, if only in verbal references. Jabá, an aging prostitute who runs Yarini the pimp's brothel, calls upon Changó, in his personification as Saint Barbara, to protect her man from the lures of another prostitute and from physical danger at the hands of powerful political enemies. When Bebo the *santero* enters, her conversation with him regarding Yarini's well-being is full of Lucumí (i.e.

Yoruba) references such as the *potencias* (African Powers, the major Orishas)<sup>5</sup> Santa Bárbara (Changó), Elegguá (Orisha of crossroads, i.e. life and destiny), the *caracoles* (the sixteen cowrie shells used in divination), *despojos* (ritual cleansings), *batá* (the sacred drums, here dedicated to Changó), *bembé* (a religious feast), *enyoró* (chants to the dead) and the like.

Although neither Changó nor Elegguá appear, Jabá's prayers are answered. Bebo, having undergone a trance in which Changó addressed him, returns to inform Yarini of what he must do to assure the protection of the Orisha against his enemies. Yarini agrees to undergo a *despojo* and follow the instruction to refrain from looking behind him and turning his body around until the next day; this, Bebo tells him, will guarantee his life. But, in a parallel to the classical legend of Orpheus and Eurydyce, Yarini breaks the charm when Santiguera (the woman Jabá feared) calls his name repeatedly and her alluring voice, like that of a siren, makes him turn to face her. Shortly thereafter, Yarini is killed in a duel over the woman. Jabá, who had foreseen it all and had called on Bebo to intercede with Changó, is left to mourn the tragic outcome. The Orisha had indeed answered her prayer, but Yarini had heeded a call stronger than the instinct for the preservation of life itself. Fate, as in Greek tragedy, has proven implacable.

In the expressionistic prologue to Carlos Felipe's *Tambores* (Drums), set in the eighteenth century Africa of the slavers, anguished groups of Blacks from different parts of the continent are brought together for auctioning to Europeans. Left in shackles to cry in the night, they are unaware of the presence of a beautiful long-haired woman dressed in animal skins. Her name is Africa, and she symbolizes the continent and its peoples. Pained by the suffering she has witnessed, which she calls seven daggers piercing her heart,<sup>6</sup> she cries out to the Great Power for help in freeing her enslaved children, whose moans accompany her chant. Her entreaty is answered first by thunder and lightning, the manifestations of Changó. Suddenly, the grave voice of the Great Power himself addresses her:

Why do you invoke me with the provocative rhythm of your hips, O Africa, you savage mare? Why do you stir the phallic power of the Cosmos to make me aware of your seven daggers? Your children are going to the Antilles, islands in a distant sea. Let them go. Let them take to other lands the vigorous passion of the African sun.  
(122)

To her further pleas, he replies: "There's no recourse to this evil." And, as in the other plays, it is universal Fate that dictates his words. He offers only the consolation of the African drums, which the slaves will take on their journey. The drums begin to sound as the Great Power speaks. Then, The Soul of the African Drum becomes manifest in a circle of light; it is personified as a

strong, semi-nude young Black man seated majestically on a regal ceremonial throne, from which he addresses Africa:

I am The Soul of the African Drum. My voice can sing out in various tones, from those of life to those of death. I will be the ancestral consolation to your children. Their sorrow will be eased by my beat. When the wise hands of a Black musician strike my drumhead, I will speak in words of life and hope, of joy and love to whoever will listen . . . I will go with your children across the sea, to the colonies, through the centuries. They will find their salvation in me, Africa. (122-123)

The rest of the play is set in pre-Castro Cuba, the year unspecified. The beating of the drums heard in the prologue continues in the background, now associated with the preparations for Carnival that are taking place in the Havana *barrio* where the action is set. Although the plot centers on the frustrations of a young white playwright who has failed to win applause for his stage interpretation of indigenous life (the Siboney Indian culture of Cuba), the presence of a huge drum in the patio of the boarding house insinuates itself into the action. At first absorbed by his grief, Oscar begins to realize that a "musical voice" is speaking to him through the beat of distant drums. Then, The Soul of the African Drum manifests itself, addressing him as it had Africa in the prologue:

I am The Soul of the African Drum. . . . It was centuries ago that I left the jungles and coast of the mysterious and bewitching continent to take on the mission of giving life to the dying. . . . The slave needs me. You, a slave with white skin, need me. I take pity on you because you're young and you're suffering. . . . Place your hands on me; caress my hide; beat out my sounds . . . (141-142)

Apparently possessed by Changó, the Orisha of the drum in Cuba, Oscar pounds the sacred Batá drum frenetically, eliciting the sounds of Africa. What he has had revealed to him, leading to the playing of Iyá (the name of the largest of the Batá drums), is his salvation, both as man and as artist. Magnanimously, The Soul of the African Drum has taught him to pursue his ideal (the Siboney culture of the island rather than Cuba's African heritage) in order to truly comprehend it. In the last act, Oscar sets out joyously to discover for himself the roots of the indigenous culture he had depicted only superficially before.

The play ends with the convulsive rhythms of the conga drums, the spirit of Changó overcoming even the ignorant American tourists who have come to the *barrio* to see "strange things." And the point is well taken that the

power of *The Soul of the African Drum* is all pervasive, no matter what the race or the nation or the era.

The three plays analyzed all too briefly here are but examples of a greater current of African religious influence in Cuban literature. One of several genres in which the Orishas and other religious motifs appear, the drama (theatre, when performed) permits the figures and the voices of the Orishas to become manifest to the reader (or the spectator) with some of the awesome power they possess for the faithful of the Yoruba religion as for those of Santería. If *Shango de Ima* enfoldes the mythological exclusively, without an application of its outcome to that human society influenced by the Orishas, it is because the origin of the deities, their place in the Cosmos and their symbology are mysteries that must be celebrated in and of themselves. They cannot be comprehended and so are articles of faith to be held as sacred by the believers. Therefore, *Shango de Ima* is to Santería what a Mystery Play such as the Passion is to Catholicism: the representation in human terms of a divine action. It is up to other works to show how the Orishas have been integrated into the daily lives of Blacks, mulattoes and whites alike in Cuba; thus, the plays by José R. Brene and Carlos Felipe present, to a greater or lesser degree, the impact of Changó, in particular, on the hybrid society of the island in different periods of its history.

Whether or not Changó and other Orishas perform roles on the stage, their presence in these and other plays, as in other literary genres, is central to the development of plot, to the understanding of the psychology of the characters and to the quality of life of those characters in the works who hold the syncretic beliefs termed Santería.

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## Notes

1. The Yoruba Empire was in the west African region known as Oyó, the ancient realm of Ulkamy (which is the possible antecedent or root of the Cuban *Lucumí*, the name given to all the Yoruba slaves regardless of tribe [cfr. Ortíz, 316 and Law, 16 concerning such variants as Ulcumi, Ulcuim, Ulkami, Licomin, etc.]). Just as their lineage was ancient, so too was their religion; in fact, the Yoruba consider theirs to be the oldest extant religion in the world. Their cosmogony is centered on Ifé, the sacred place in the East said by some to be in the western Sudan; it was there that the world, the Yoruba people and their religion began (cfr. Davidson, 97-98). In the pantheon of the Yoruba religion were hundreds of Orishas who personified Cosmic and other archetypal images; these entities often vied with each other for power and influence in both the supernatural and natural levels, as in the systems of ancient Egypt, Babylonia and Greece. Fate is an important concept in the religion and divination is an integral

aspect thereof. This is done periodically through various means, the most significant of which is the Table of Ifá, a verbal system in which the *babalawo* (the priest; literally, the father of the secrets) recites the prognostication after casting seeds (in Cuba, *caracoles*, cowrie shells) upon the "table"; his words convey the Orisha's revelation to his people. The closeness of the Yorubas to their deities is further manifested in the individual's ultimate desire to be as one with the Orisha with whom he is identified through initiation; this end is attained whenever the Orisha "mounts" the person, who becomes a "divine horseman" in a state termed possession but which is really equivalent to the mystic experience. That a particular Orisha is present is determined by the facial gestures and body movements of the possessed, as well as by his predilection for the deity's color and accouterments. The visit by one or more Orishas during a ritual is a sign of the integration of the natural and supernatural worlds.

2. In many cases, the syncretism is threefold: Yoruba-Bantu(Congo)-Christian, which designates the fusion of the major African and European strains, or African-Indian-Christian, which includes the sometimes important incorporation of indigenous beliefs (Carib, Taino, in Cuba and other islands of the Greater Antilles; Tupi, in Brazil, etc.).

3. According to Rogelio Martínez Furé, *Diálogos imaginarios*, there are: "cientos de mitos y fábulas, listas de refranes, vocabularios yoruba-español, formulas rituales, recetas de encantamientos y de comidas sagradas, relaciones de los Orishas y pormenores de sus avatares, cantos, los sistemas adivinatorios y sus secretos, los nombres de las yerbas de los dioses y su utilización en los ritos y en la farmacopia popular, etc. En fin, toda la sabiduría de los antiguos yorubá y su cultura, que se niega a morir." (211-212)

4. Variants of the tale appear in Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte: Igbo-finda*, as in other texts. See the recent book by Julia Cuervo Hewitt on the broad spectrum of African motifs in Cuban literature.

5. The most powerful Orishas grouped together are called the African Powers. Although most often seven in number, here they include Babalú Aye (St. Lazarus), Elegguá (Holy Child of Atocha), Los Iberi Taebo y Kainde (Sts. Cosmos and Damian), Obatalá (Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of Mercy), Ochosí (St. Norbert), Ochún (Our Lady of Charity of Cobre), Oggún (St. Peter), Oko (St. Isidore the Worker), Orunla (St. Francis of Assisi), Osaín (St. Joseph), Oyá (Our Lady of Candlemas), Yemayá (Our Lady of Regla).

6. The syncretism of Santería in the Caribbean is, curiously, transferred back to the character Africa in her identification with the seven daggers that pierce her heart, which are symbolic of the seven sorrows of the Virgin Mary, also daggers in paintings and statues of her under the title Our Lady of Sorrows in her litany. The translations that follow are mine.

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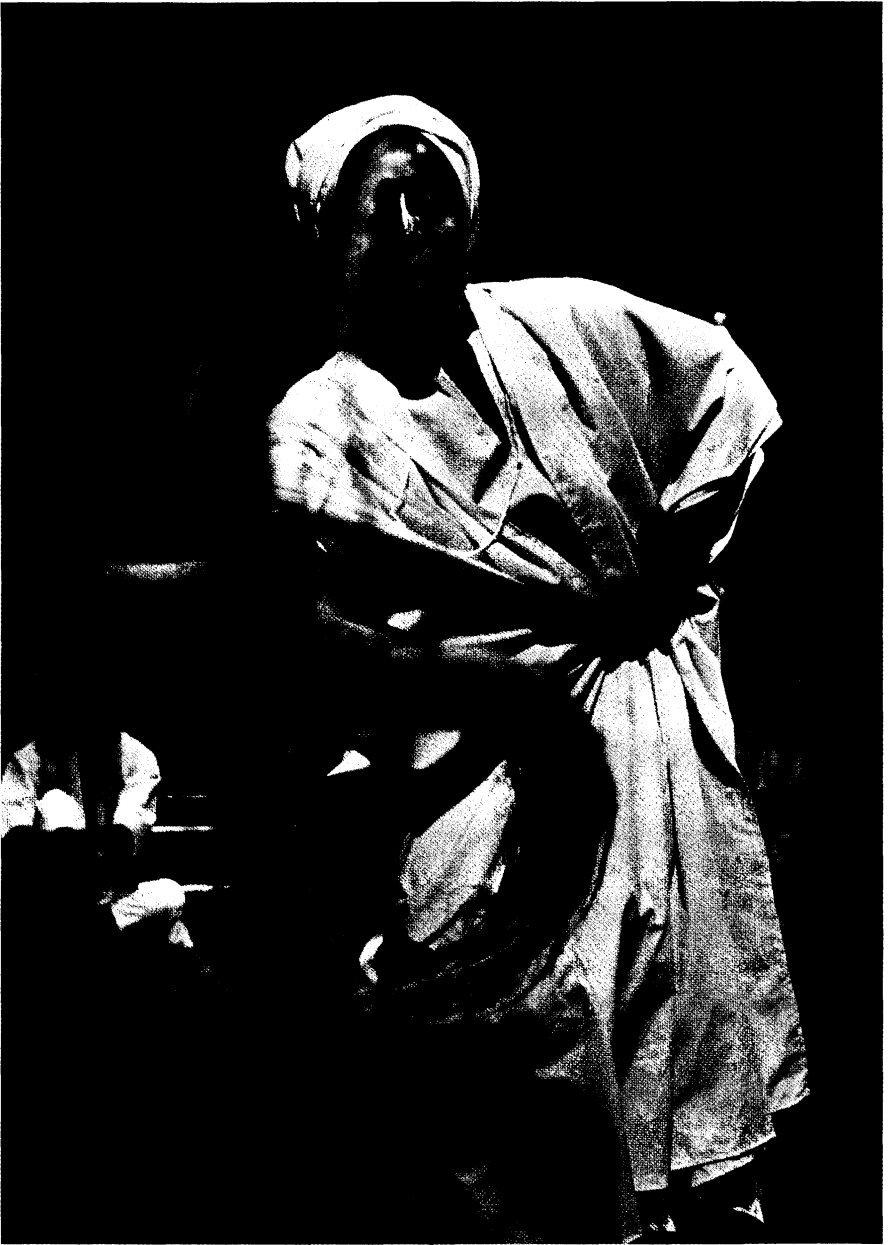
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Yemaya, supreme goddess of the oceans and of motherhood. Photo courtesy of La Mama Experimental Theatre Club, New York, New York.



Obatala, mother of earth and of man, of justice and of purity.  
Photo courtesy of La Mama Experimental Theatre Club, New York, New York.