



THE SANTERÍA EXPERIENCE

Migene González-Wippler

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For my mother and father and María



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BOOKS BY MIGENE GONZÁLEZ-WIPPLER

Santería: African Magic in Latin America (1973)

A Kabbalah for the Modern World (1974)

The Complete Book of Spells, Ceremonies and Magic (1978)

The Santería Experience (1982)

I wish to thank all the santeros and santeras who have given me their protection and instructed me in the mysteries and practices of Santería, especially my madrina and my ayugbona.

I also wish to thank Arthur Ceppos, my first editor and publisher, who started me on the way, and Tam Mossman, my editor at Prentice-Hall, whose vision and expertise proved invaluable in the preparation of the manuscript.

Foreword

The Santería Experience is an autobiographical account of childhood initiation into a clandestinely practiced religion. Ms. González-Wippler pointedly ignores the dense and often entangling obscurantism invariably employed by most writers of Santería. Instead, she rewards her readers with the raw, emotional impact of her personal experiences with a religion which is perhaps one of the most significant influences on the Hispanic peoples of the Caribbean.

Santería, like other ancient religions, is passed on through oral tradition from one generation to the next. It contains not only the history of a people determined to survive against overwhelming odds, but also their ritual behavior, forcibly inscribed in their consciousness through constant suffering and persecution.

Growing academic interest in the social and psychological benefits to be gained through the practice of Santería has resulted in many research projects, mostly sponsored by the departments of psychiatry of many medical schools. Among the most notable researchers are Dr. Vivian Garrison of the New Jersey Medical School and Dr. Mercedes Sandoval of the University of Miami School of Medicine. Present research is mostly directed to better understanding the practice of Santería's effects on its believers and how it helps them cope with problems of adjustment. Increasing numbers of North Americans, both black and white, are becoming adherents of Santería and are also the subject of much academic interest and speculation.

Santería emerged as a struggle for cultural and ideological survival between the enslaved West African Yoruba people and the Roman Catholic Church in union with the Spanish Em-

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pire. Slaves transformed the enforced worship of the Catholic saints into the veiled worship of their spirit ancestors. For centuries, the resulting magico-religious system remained an enigma to the Christian world. Only recently have some of Santería's traditional practices come to light. The first important study was *Los Negros Brujos*, written by Fernando Ortiz in Cuba circa 1902 and available only in Spanish. The next major work, *El Monte*, also available in Spanish only and regarded as the definitive study of Santería, was written in Cuba by Lydia Cabrera, Ortiz' niece.

Unlike Ortiz and Cabrera, who describe Santería in objective terms, González-Wippler reports her own encounters with the religion as both a researcher and an initiate. She is the first writer to present to an English-speaking audience the full emotional impact and ritual complexities of Santería.

It should be noted that Santería is not confined to the Caribbean and to South America. As a result of the migration of large amounts of Caribbean people, it is now practiced in the great cities of the United States and Canada, inevitably winning converts among many North Americans of varied ethnic backgrounds. These cross-currents of recent migration have kindled new interest in America's African and Hispanic cultural heritage.

According to Dr. Mercedes Sandoval, "The reason why Santería has emerged so powerfully resides precisely in the intrinsic essence of this religious complex. Santería is the result of a three-hundred-year process of acculturation which is not yet complete. Since it is always open to new beliefs, new gods, and new rituals, it is well equipped to deal with new situations and make the best of them."

The Santería Experience provides a particularly valuable personal insight into Santería's "ability" to make the best of any situation. Also of great value are Ms. González-Wippler's personal interpretations of the powers of the orishas and their important role in the development of the human mind.

Andres L. Perez y Mena
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Introduction

On New York's 115th Street near Park Avenue stands a religious-goods store called Otto Chicas, owned by a Guatemalan of the same name. His store features large statues of Catholic saints, some of them exquisitely carved in wood and ornamented in gold leaf. It also sells a huge variety of candles in all colors and sizes, exotic herbs and roots, special incenses, magical oils and powders, bead necklaces, all sorts of amulets and talismans, and other magical paraphernalia. These stores, known as *botánicas* in the Hispanic communities, cater mostly to the basic needs of the *santeros*, or practitioners of Santería, an African-based cult very popular in Latin America.

Understandably, the owner of the *botánica* must be well acquainted with his customers' magical beliefs and practices. Often called upon to provide solutions for a variety of problems, he usually has a keen understanding of human nature. Otto Chicas is no exception. A competent herbalist and spiritualist and a shrewd self-styled psychologist, he is quite well known in the community, and his name is a household word to most Hispanic families throughout New York. In fact, one could say that Otto is something of a celebrity. He and his family have been the subject of several articles in *The New York Times*.^{*} The Museum of Natural History has produced a film about Santería, featuring

^{*}See *The New York Times; About New York*, p. B20, September 11, 1979.

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Otto prominently in it.* The late Margaret Mead also expressed an interest in Otto's rare talents, and was preparing to make a study of his work before she died. Even mayor Ed Koch of New York City has visited Otto on several occasions, as have a large number of other political and entertainment personalities.

The reason for Otto's popularity is not difficult to understand, considering his reputed abilities to make herbal cures and solve practically any problem that is haunting an individual, no matter how complicated and unsolvable it may seem. Best of all, Otto does not charge any fees for a "consultation." The only expenses his clients incur are the prices of the herbs and other ingredients that may be part of a magic spell or herbal cure. But for all of Otto's well-deserved fame and his undeniable talents, he is not an initiated santero. In comparison with the knowledge and wisdom of a santero, Otto's magical expertise is like a drop of water in a vast ocean. And Otto is the first one to admit this truth.

Just who are these "miracle workers" known as santeros? And what is Santería? These questions have been asked of me many times since I first wrote about the cult. I am still looking for the conclusive, axiomatic answers. I doubt I will ever find them, for Santería is a mystery religion, and mystery religions are not meant to be wholly understood. One can only grasp their essence. Their true meaning is forever hidden, iceberg style, in the depths of the human unconscious.

The mysteries of Santería are deeply rooted in African soil, in the country of Nigeria, the homeland of the Yoruba people. With the slave trade, thousands of Yorubas were brought to the New World over the past four centuries. With them they brought the colorful mythology and magical practices of their religion, known in Cuba as *Lucumí* and in Brazil as *Macumba*.

In Latin America, the Yorubas were deeply influenced by the Catholic faith and particularly by the Catholic saints, which

*See *Nature*, "Botánicas: Puerto Rican Folk Pharmacies," May, 1978, p. 65.

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they identified with their gods and goddesses. This syncretism, or spontaneous combination of the Catholic and Yoruba religions, gave birth to Santería—a Spanish word that means literally the worship of saints. The Yoruba gods, or orishas, became known by both their Catholic and their African appellations. Sometimes a male orisha became identified with a female saint. A typical case is that of Changó, the god of fire, thunder, and lightning, who became known as St. Barbara, the Virgin Martyr of the Middle Ages.

The orishas are the very soul of Santería. The central aim of the santero is to worship the saints, to observe their feasts, obey their commands, and conduct their rituals. In exchange for this absolute submission, he gains great supernatural powers, protection against evil, and the ability to foresee the future and even to shape that future according to his will.

With all these fringe benefits as enticements, Santería has no problem with public relations. In the past two hundred years, hundreds of millions in Latin America (and more recently in the United States) have been initiated into the cult. But in spite of Santería's ever-growing popularity, it is not easy to break through into its inner ranks.

The reason why the santero is so reluctant to accept new converts is precisely his zeal and devotion to his faith. Deeply aware of the curiosity and greed that the orishas' powers can awake in the human heart, the santero cautiously shies away from the public eye and practices his religion in the utmost secrecy. You have to be very warmly recommended by someone a santero trusts implicitly before he will even allow you in the privacy of his home. At this point he will probably conduct a *registro*, or special divination process, to find out exactly who you are, what your intentions are, and if you are worthy of being allowed into the secrets of his faith.

If you pass that initial test, your journey has just begun. For he will then put you through a most harrowing and severe waiting period, during which he will further test your character

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and inner strength. Only after he is thoroughly satisfied that your intentions are honorable and your faith unshakable will he initiate you into the mysteries of Santería.

And there are many initiations. During the first initiation, one receives the five *collares*, or bead necklaces, known as *el fundamento*, the foundation, of Santería. Each necklace is made of different-colored beads and is consecrated to one of the five most powerful of the saints. The last initiation is known as the *asiento*, or "making the saint," and during the ceremony the saint who is believed to be the initiate's "mother" or "father" takes full possession of him, investing him at this time with all of the saint's supernatural powers. Indeed, the intention of the ceremony is to condition (*asentar*) the initiate's mind and body so that he may literally become the saint who presides over the initiation. In a sense, the ceremony of the *asiento* is a form of rebirth, and the personality that emerges after the initiation is an entirely new one, spiritually and psychologically.

After the ceremony of the *asiento*, the *santero* is invested with the supernatural potential of the saint into whose mysteries he was initiated. This means that the powers are in him to the extent to which he develops them. The greater the *santero's* dedication and devotion to his saint, the greater his supernatural powers will become. A fully developed *santero* is able to divine the future with uncanny accuracy, and his feats of magic can stagger the imagination.

Inextricably linked to each initiation are the oaths of secrecy that attend any mystery religion. These vows are severely observed in Santería, and are another reason why the *santero* is so reticent with strangers to the cult, so reluctant to discuss his religious beliefs. When I wrote my first book on Santería, I incurred the anger of many *santeros*, who claimed that I had revealed many of their initiation secrets and magical practices to the general public. Although several other writers had lifted the cult's veil of secrecy, I was the first one to write about Santería in the English language, awakening a great deal of interest in English-speaking persons from all walks of life. As a result,

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numerous Santería study groups were formed throughout the United States, particularly in New York and California. In England, Cambridge University lauded the book and initiated a series of studies of the cult. This example was followed by Iowa State College, the University of California, and several other American universities.

Naturally the santeros took a dim view of all this interest in their private affairs, and the blame was dutifully laid at my feet. At the time, however, I had not yet been initiated into any of the mysteries of the cult, and therefore I was not under any oath of secrecy that would forbid me to reveal the secrets of Santería. Being an *aleyo*, or noninitiate, I could not be chastized for my indiscretions. This was lucky for me because it is hardly enviable to be on the receiving end of a santero's wrath. Several years later, when I underwent my first initiation (the *collares*) into the cult, my *madrina*, or godmother—the santera who initiated me—warned me against revealing any of the details of this breathtaking ceremony. "You got away with it once because you were an *aleyo*," she told me with her very special wry smile, "but you wouldn't get away with it now." Needless to say, this is one ceremony that I will not describe in detail.

In the course of this book, you will meet some extraordinary people and witness some extraordinary occurrences. All are part of my lifelong experience with Santería. I will not waste your time or mine trying to provide a logical explanation for the extraordinary phenomena of Santería. I have done this elsewhere, but it was not really necessary. Santería does not need any form of apologia. It is strong and it is real. Experience it, revel in it, and you will never be the same again.

1

YORUBA

Arecibo, tucked in a fold of Puerto Rico's northeastern coast, is one of the oldest towns in the western hemisphere. Originally an Indian village ruled by a Taino chieftain called Aracibo, it was founded by the Conquistadores in 1616.

In the late nineteen-forties, when I was three years old, my mother hired María, a black woman of mammoth proportions, to be my nanny. María's skin was like shiny mahogany with almost iridescent tones, and her smile was radiant. I never saw María angry or sad, and if she was ever prey to these dismal human moods, she was quite adept at hiding them from me. I thought her very beautiful, and soon I would take my meals only if María ate with me and would not fall asleep unless María sat by my side.

María took me everywhere she went. To the marketplace where she did our daily shopping, and to the shantytown where her numerous family lived. To daily mass, for she was a devout Catholic, and to the neighborhood store where she placed her occasional bets with the numbers. My mother took a dim view of these escapades, but I was so healthy and so happy in María's care that my mother eventually relented and let her take full charge of me.

Each morning María would put me in a frothy sundress with a matching sunbonnet, white sandals, and socks which she bleached daily to ensure their whiteness. Underneath the bonnet, my long black hair would be meticulously braided and tied with silk ribbons matching the color of my dress. María was

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partial to the scent of Parma violets, and all my clothes exuded a faint violet fragrance.

Once my morning toilet was finished, María would march me proudly into our dining room, where my parents and grandparents would make proper sounds of praise and admiration at my dazzling pulchritude. Then, under María's watchful eyes, I would sit to breakfast without wrinkling my skirts or soiling my ruffles. After a substantial breakfast, María sailed majestically out of the house with me in tow, her long, immaculate skirts crackling with starch. On her shoulder was a huge parasol to protect us from the fiery Caribbean sun, while from her wrist dangled a fan to bring us relief from the stifling heat. Since air conditioning had barely made its appearance on the island, the fan was more than an ornament. But female vanity had long turned a necessary instrument into a thing of beauty, and fans had become the objects of both pride and delight, some of them made of fine sandalwood and hand-painted with exquisite landscapes by renowned artists. Others were of peacock or ostrich features, or of Chantilly lace embroidered with seed pearls. María had purchased her fan from a merchant marine sailor who had brought it from Spain. Its unusually wide span was of ebony, carved with intricate flowery designs and highlighted with delicate touches of color that made the flower patterns dance with light.

It was María who first taught me that with a flick of the wrist and the opening and closing of a fan, a woman can tell an admirer that she is angry or jealous, that she welcomes his advances or finds him a crashing bore. María taught me all this and more during the twelve years I remained in her care.

I was thrilled at the idea of going to school, which opened the day after I turned five, and talked about it incessantly with María. My mother had promised me an especially nice party to celebrate my birthday, and my grandfather had a famous designer in San Juan make a special dress of pink organdy, hand-embroidered with tiny flowers and musical notes. The shoes and socks were also pink, as were the silk ribbons for my hair. But

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early in the morning, María dressed me in an old white dress and took me to mass. She did not take me in to my family and have breakfast with them. I kept questioning the departure from our daily routine, but María said to be silent and do as I was told.

After mass was over, María brought me to an altar over which stood a statue of the Virgin Mary. While I knelt down before the image, María pulled from her capacious handbag a large wooden rosary, and proceeded to pass the beads. She stood behind me, praying in muted tones, with her hand on my shoulder as if she were introducing me to the Virgin.

Even if you don't pray the litanies, a compilation of fifty-three Hail Marys and seven Paternosters is a lengthy business if you are a child of five. My stomach was empty. My knees ached and throbbed and threatened to buckle, and I had to keep balancing my weight first on one knee, then on the other. I must have presented a most unhappy picture to Our Blessed Lady. But not once did I think to complain to María. One did not question her orders, one simply did what one was told.

It was already midmorning when we left the church. My knees were functioning again after María rubbed them briskly with her handkerchief, but my stomach was grumbling louder than ever.

"María, are we going to the market place or back home?"

"I know you're tired and hungry," she said evasively, opening her parasol and pulling me under it. "But you must never let your body tell you what to do. It must obey you, not the other way around."

I trotted obediently by her side. "But how does my body tell me what to do?"

"By making you feel things," she answered. "It makes you feel hungry, so you eat. Tired, so you sit down. Sleepy, so you go to bed. Sometimes it makes you feel angry, so you scream and yell and stomp your feet."

My face colored, remembering my occasional temper tantrums.

"But, María, then my body isn't good."

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"Oh yes it is, *florequita* [little flower]. Because of your body, you can see the sky and the sun and the sea. You can smell the perfume of the flowers and sing and play, and love your mother and father."

"And you," I added, drawing closer to her.

"And me," she laughed her great throaty laugh. "But you see, *florequita*, your body is like a little child. It must be taught good habits and to obey. It must learn we can't always eat when we're hungry or sit down when we're tired or sleep when we're sleepy. And the best way to teach your body these things is by sometimes not doing the things it wants you to do. Not always," she emphasized. "Only sometimes."

"Like now?" I asked.

"Like now."

We reached the bus stop. With delight, I thought we were going home, where I could eat some breakfast and play before my party in the afternoon.

"But I will only eat a little," I promised myself, remembering Maria's words, "and I will play with only one doll."

But I was not to eat a little breakfast or play with any dolls that morning.

The bus chugged along the country road to our home. Palm trees and banana plants heavy with fruit grew profusely on both sides of the road, as did the brilliant blossoms of the hibiscus, the poinciana, and the bougainvillea. To our left, gently sloping hills alternated with narrow valleys carpeted in a dazzling variety of greens. To our right, the Atlantic melted with the sky in a majestic display of aquamarine and gold. A few peasant huts, known as *bohíos*, were scattered on the hillside, while on the ocean side rose elegant, luxurious *quintas* of white stucco ornamented with costly mosaics and Spanish ironwork.

We were still about ten minutes from home when Maria pulled the cord to get off. Before I knew what was happening I found myself standing by the road, watching the bus disappear in the distance. Maria opened her parasol and gathered her parcels together.

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Directly in front of us was a rough path, largely overgrown with vegetation. María and I trudged along this path until we emerged directly onto a part of the beach hidden from the main road by a series of large boulders imbedded in the sand. Among the dunes grew a profusion of tropical sea grapes, their hard, bitter fruit shining like amethysts among their harsh round leaves. Some palm trees bent their trunks so close to the sand one could easily grab the clusters of coconut growing among the fan-shaped leaves.

We stopped under the shadow of a palm while María removed my shoes and socks, her own heavy brogans, and the thick cotton stockings she always wore. Thus barefoot we trampled through the warm sand.

I did not bother to ask María the reason for our detour, used as I was to be taken along on all her outings. I had the vague feeling this surprise visit to the beach I had always admired from a distance, but never had walked on before, was María's birthday present to me. Intoxicated by the sharp, tangy smell of the sea, I wanted to stay on the shore for the rest of my life.

When we finally arrived at the water's edge, María set her parcels down, closed her parasol, and then calmly proceeded to tear the clothes from my body.

I felt no shame. María washed and dressed me every day and put me to sleep every night. I had stood naked in front of her many times before. I had not yet learned to be ashamed of my own body. But her action had a certain ominous authority that made me feel destitute and vulnerable beyond description. Deprived of more than my old clothes, I felt stripped of identity, of a sense of being. It was as if I had died somehow, standing there on the golden sand, with the sun like a halo around me and the taste of salt water on my lips. I stood there in shock and utter humiliation, tears rolling steadily down my cheeks. I did not understand María's actions, but I knew there was always a reason for everything she did. (Many years later I would find an echo of María's teachings, in the philosophies of some of the world's greatest religions, especially Zen Buddhism. When María tore my clothes

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and left me naked facing the sea, without any sense of ego or identity, she was echoing Zen's concept of the perfect Initiate, who must be "devoid of selfhood, devoid of personality, devoid of identity, and devoid of separate identity.")

Out of her handbag's unfathomable depths, María extracted a bottle of sugarcane syrup and the red handkerchief, tied in a knot, where she kept all her loose change. Only then did she turn to look at me, all at once the picture of consternation.

"Ah, my little flower, don't cry. You afraid of María? You think María can hurt you?" She rocked me gently against her bosom as she spoke her soothing words. "Why, *mi florecita*, María would cut out her heart for you. María could never hurt you."

Slowly my tears stopped flowing. I lifted my wet face from her shoulder. I felt I could question her now.

"Why, María?" I asked, with still trembling lips. "Why did you do that?"

"Because I want you to be protected from all harm. Now that you're going to school, you'll be alone, *florecita*, without María to watch over you. You need protection, and only God and the Blessed Lady can give it to you. That's why I bring you to the Lady in church, so she can know you and give you her blessings. And now I bring you to the Lady and her true power, the sea."

As she spoke, María opened the bottle of sugarcane syrup. Tasting it with her forefinger, she anointed my temples, lips, wrists, and ankles with the thick liquid. I automatically licked the heavy, cloying syrup on my lips.

"It's too sweet," I grimaced. "I don't like it."

"It has to be sweet for the Lady, as sweet as possible. Nothing can be too sweet for her."

María undid the knot of her red handkerchief. Counting seven pennies, she pressed them in my hand.

"Here, *florecita*," she said, closing my fingers around the coins. "This is the payment, *el derecho*, of the Lady. I give you seven pennies because seven is her number. You remember that. Seven is the number of the Lady, of Yemayá."

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"Of *who*?" I asked, staring at the pennies. "What Lady are you talking about, María? The Blessed Lady is in the church and in heaven."

"Yes, *florecita*, but her true power is in the sea and the seawater. She stands in heaven, but where the bottom of her mantle touches the earth, it turns into the ocean. The waves and the sea foam are her ruffles and her lace. And here, in the sea, her name is Yemayá."

She enunciated the strange name carefully so that I could grasp its melodious rhythm, "Say it, *florecita*. Ye-ma-yá."

I repeated it after her. "It is the prettiest name I ever heard, María!"

"The prettiest name in the whole world," María laughed delightedly. "It is the name of the Lady in African, in Yoruba. My mammy taught it to me. And now, my little flower, your black mammy teaches it to you." She took my hand gently and guided me to the water. "Come, let me show you how to salute Yemayá."

Lifting her voluminous skirts so that the waves would not wet them, she turned her body to the left and forced me to do the same. We both stood ankle-deep in the water, our bodies at right angles to the sea.

"See, *florecita*, you never enter into the ocean facing front. To do so is a challenge to Yemayá, it's like saying, 'I'm here, come get me.' So then maybe she does. Always, always enter on your side, better the right side. Then you say, *Hekua, Yemayá, hekua*.' Say it, little flower."

I looked dubiously at the water, then at María. Like most Puerto Rican children I had been raised as a very strict Catholic, and I had the vague feeling that our parish priest would not approve of what María was saying. But my trust in her had been firmly reestablished and I did not want to offend her. "Hekua, Yemayá, hekua," I repeated.

As soon as I repeated these words, I felt relieved and relaxed, as if an unseen link had been established between the sea and myself. My soul was overwhelmed by a great love for the sea

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that has never stopped growing within me. I have never bathed in the sea again without remembering that incredible feeling of love illuminating my entire being.

"See, *florecita*," María said joyously. "Yemayá blesses you, she accepts you. She will always protect you now."

I looked up at her with wondering eyes. "Is that what *hekua* means?"

"Yes, *hekua* means blessings. And see how Yemayá blesses you?"

María pointed to the water frothing softly around my feet. Small whirlpools of foam enveloped my ankles, then my knees. Then suddenly an unexpectedly huge wave rose from the sea like a great green arm. As the wall of water collapsed over my head, I heard María cry out, "The coins! The coins! . . . Let go the coins!"

I felt myself being drawn out to sea inside a glimmering cocoon, with the rushing sound of a thousand crystal bells. I opened my arms to embrace the sea, and the seven pennies fell from my fingers. Almost immediately, the water receded and the waves resumed their usual gentle motion. I stood as before, ankle-deep in foamy water, blinking at the morning sunshine.

I recall little of what happened inside the water. The lingering memory is one of silky green depths, of sun rays shining through the water; of softness, warmth and safety. It was almost as if I had returned to the womb of the world, and felt reluctant to be born anew. This episode at the beach was my first initiation in the Yoruba cult known as *Santería*.

María used to tell me that the presence of Yemayá is always much stronger in very deep waters. Off the north coast of Puerto Rico, in an area known as Bronson's Deep, the ocean floor plunges down to 27,000 feet. Measured from this depth, the mountains of Puerto Rico would be among the highest in the world, with an approximate height of 31,500 feet. Anything that falls within these waters is lost forever—says the legend—unless Yemayá is offered a prize in exchange for her bounty. Truly, her

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demands are modest. Seven shiny copper pennies, a bit of sugarcane syrup, and sometimes a few candles are enough to please her. Perhaps it is not the value of the gift that Yemayá really wants, but the faith with which it is given.

In these same waters, on August 16, 1977, off the coast of San Juan, an incident took place which was fully reported in the *San Juan Star*. For several weeks I had been in one of the hotels lining El Condado Avenue, working against a deadline on one of my books. One afternoon, a friend went snorkeling in the deep waters off the San Juan coast. When he returned several hours later, he had a tragic story to tell.

A family from nearby Santo Domingo had come to visit Puerto Rico for the first time. Their thirteen-year-old son disregarded the warnings of the dangerous undercurrents surrounding the coast of San Juan, and the great depths of the waters, and he swam out far from shore. Probably too weak to fight against the currents, the boy suddenly sank under the water and did not surface again. Local lifeguards and members of the Police Rescue Squad tried to locate his body, but all their efforts proved fruitless.

The story spread throughout El Condado, and all the hotels sent out search parties to find the body. The boy's mother was determined not to leave her son's body in the sea, as she wanted to bring it back to Santo Domingo for proper burial. But late in the afternoon of the following day, the authorities called off the search. All the desperate entreaties of the boy's mother fell on deaf ears. The police were sure the powerful undercurrents in these waters had driven the body toward the ocean floor or wedged it in one of the reef's many underwater crevices. But the mother asked to go along with a search party—the very last one, she pleaded. If the body was not found during this last search, she would not insist any further.

After some consideration, the authorities agreed. As the story unfolded in the *San Juan Star*, she brought along with her four white candles. When the boat had gone sufficiently out to

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sea, she asked the officers to stop the engines. Here, she felt, they would find her son's body. More to humor her than for any other reason, the Rescue Squad officers stopped the boat's engines.

The mother then approached the boat's gunwale and began an impassioned plea to the sea. Kneeling on deck, her hands linked together in prayer, tears streaming down her face, she called out to the sea to return her son's body to her. Reminding the sea that the boy was dead, she proposed that it exchange his body for the candles she had brought along. Since four candles are burned around a coffin, these also represented her dead son.

As she spoke, she pulled the candles from her handbag and threw them overboard. A few minutes later, the Rescue Squad officers aboard the boat watched, aghast, as the boy's body surfaced on the same spot where the candles had sunk into the water.

Had María been aboard that boat, she would not have been at all surprised. Without any doubts she would have stated that Yemayá, the Great Supernal Mother, had taken pity on another mother and had accepted the exchange willingly, and with her blessing. As to the apparent cruelty of the sea in taking the boy's life, María would have probably answered that the sea had been kind, saving him from a life of suffering and giving him eternal life instead.

María held the view that life was an illusion. So, for that matter, was death.

"It's just another way of life, *florecita*," she would say. "A far better way of life."

I would wrinkle my forehead. "But, María, then why do we live this life? Wouldn't it be better to die and live a better life in the other world instead?"

"No, *florecita*, we're here for a reason. We're here to learn, to become better so that we can enjoy that other, better life. If we're bad here, we don't go to the better life after this one. Instead, we have to come back, again and again, until we learn to be good."

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This simple explanation is exactly the same as the theory of reincarnation expressed by Buddha to his disciple Subhuti in the Diamond Sutra:

"Furthermore, Subhuti, if it be that good men and good women . . . are downtrodden, their evil destiny is the inevitable retributive result of sins committed in their mortal lives. By virtue of their present misfortunes, the reacting effects of their past will be thereby worked out, and they will be in a position to attain the Consummation of Incomparable Enlightenment."

The Consummation of Incomparable Enlightenment was the same concept expressed by María as a "better life in the other world."

After she took me out of the water, María dried me, braided my hair and tied it with pink silk ribbons, and then dressed me with the pink organdy dress my grandfather had given me for my birthday. She seemed in very high spirits and hummed a popular tune. When I told her I was happy to have come to the sea and hoped that she would bring me back again, she laughed and hugged me.

"We'll see, *florecita*, we'll see," she said, putting the finishing touches on a satin bow. "But I'm happy that Yemayá has accepted you. Now you can go to school without María and no harm can come to you."

To my lips came a question that was burning in my mind. "María, why did you tear my clothes?"

She looked at me briefly. Her smile widened, and she returned her attention to my hair.

"Why? Because you had to be presented to Yemayá without clothes, like a newborn baby. I tore the clothes to tell Yemayá you gave up your old life and wanted to start living again with her as your mother."

"And now my mother is not my mother anymore?" I asked in alarm, my eyes filling with tears.

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María hugged me again, brushing away my tears with expert fingers.

"Of course she is, *florecita*. But she's your mother on earth, while Yemayá is your mother in heaven and in the sea."

"But who is Yemayá, the sea?" I asked, still confused.

"Yemayá is the Yoruba name of the Virgin Mary, *florecita*," explained María patiently. "She's the mother of all, of whites and blacks, of yellows and greens; of everybody. But in Africa she's always black because the people there are black, and she wants them to know she's black too."

"But María, the Virgin is not black, she's white. I've seen her in the church."

"No, *florecita*, the Virgin is like your ribbons. She has many colors. Sometimes she's white, sometimes yellow, sometimes she's red, sometimes black. It depends on the color of the people who adore her. She does this to tell the world she loves everybody the same, no matter what their color is. To the Yorubas she's always black because they're black."

"Who are the Yorubas, María?"

María paused in the middle of a braid, her eyes lost in reverie.

"The Yorubas were a great black people." She continued her braiding. "My mammy was Yoruba," she said, with evident pride. "She come to Puerto Rico in 1872, year before abolition."*

When she spoke of her mother, which was often, María reverted to broken Spanish, with African words interspersed. "She come with two hundred fifty Yorubas from Ife, that's the name of Yoruba land in black country," she added. "Come from Africa, they did, in them slave boats. In chains they brought them, the mean slave merchants—*los negreros*. Many of the black people die on boat, of hunger and sickness, but mostly of broken heart. Yorubas is proud people. Don't like white man."

"I'm white, María," I reminded her sadly.

*Slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico on March 22, 1873.

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"No you aren't, *florecita*," María cried, holding me tight against her. "You aren't white, and you aren't black. You're like the sun and the stars—all light, no color."

She finished tying the last ribbon and stood up with great effort from her stooped position. Her usually immaculate clothes were drenched with seawater and covered with sand, but she paid no attention to them.

"Old María is not as strong as she used to be," she grunted, flexing her back. "Not like my mammy. My mammy real strong," she said with relish. "She only ten when she come to island. But white man leave my mammy alone. She knew how to talk to the *orishas*."

"What is *orisha*, María?" I asked.

"*Orisha*?" she mused. "*Yemayá* is *orisha*. *Elegguá* is *orisha*. *Changó* is *orisha*. *Orisha* is a saint, a force of the good God. But come," she added, taking me by the hand. "It's no good to ask too many questions all at once. Later, I tell you more."

"But, María," I insisted. "Are there many . . . *orishas*?"

"As many as the grains of sand on the beach. But I only know a dozen or two. There are too many. Someday you'll know them too. But now is time to get back home, *florecita*, or your mammy will be really worried. And then your cake will be eaten, your presents gone, and the ice cream melted."

The thought of the promised birthday party came rushing back to my five-year-old mind, erasing all thoughts about the shadowy *orishas*, the Yorubas, and even the black Virgin known as *Yemayá*.

The pink shoes and socks remained in María's handbag until we emerged from the sand into the path that led back to the road. Free from their confinement, I ran ahead of María toward the bus stop, oblivious of my fine embroidered dress, pigtailed dancing in the sun, my small feet encrusted with wet sand. She followed behind me slowly, dragging her heavy brogans, her parcels, and her parasol, tired but always smiling.

2

THE ORISHAS

Every day, after returning from the little school where I was attending first grade, I would reluctantly get ready for the afternoon siesta.

"Olorún-Olofi is *Papá Dios*—God the Father," María used to tell me. "Olofi made the whole world and the sun and the stars. Then he made the orishas, to take care of things here on earth, while he carried on with his business elsewhere in the universe."

"How did he make the orishas, María?" I would ask, sitting up in bed. María would push me gently back against the pillows and start the well-known tale all over again.

"Nobody knows for sure," she would say, settling herself comfortably on a corner of the bed with her sewing basket. "What we do know is that the first orisha made by Olofi was Obatalá, who is the father of all the other orishas and of all of us as well. Obatalá always dresses in white because he's a very pure spirit."

"What is pure, María?"

"Pure is clean, something that is never dirty or soiled or bad. Pure is always good and beautiful."

"Like you, María?" I would ask gravely, for I wanted very much to learn the meanings of things. María would laugh her inimitable gurgling laugh and hug me closely. "No, florecita, like you."

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In those lazy afternoons, while I rested from the suffocating tropical heat, the tale of the orishas grew and expanded and took on multiple dimensions.

Obatalá—said María—was in charge of the human mind. Olorún-Olofi had given him a beautiful wife called Oddudúa. Their daughter Yemayá—the Blessed Lady of the Sea Waters, as María used to call her—was the mother of fourteen of the most important orishas.

"Changó—*Cabio Sile*—is one of her favorites," María told me. "He's a great king, *Oba Koso*. Fire is his weapon, as are thunder and lightning."

"Is Changó also in the church, María?"

"All the orishas are in the church. But always remember, *florecita*, when you say Changó's name, you must always say 'Cabio Sile' afterward, and lift yourself a little in your seat if you're sitting down."

"Why?"

"Out of respect. Remember, he's a king. 'Cabio Sile' is an African saying that means 'Hail the King.' And you lift yourself from your seat because in front of a king, nobody sits down."

"I never saw Changó in church," I said, and added hastily, "Cabio Sile," squirming self-consciously in bed.

María, her eyes and hands busy with her sewing, did not seem to notice. But I knew she was pleased with my show of respect for Changó, and I settled more comfortably against the pillows, feeling very much at ease with the orisha.

"Changó appears in church as St. Barbara, the patron saint of thunder and lightning. She's also the protector of soldiers and of miners, and everyone knows Changó is the greatest warrior who ever lived . . . Cabio Sile." With some effort, María lifted her notable bulk from her place on the bed, and continued her sewing.

I knitted my forehead in an effort to recall the familiar statues of Catholic saints I saw almost daily in our parish church. But my memory failed me.

"I never saw Saint Barbara in church, María," I said with

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a frown. Besides, how can Changó be St. Barbara? How can a warrior have a lady's name?"

María put her sewing down for a moment and looked at me with grave eyes. "It is all part of a mystery, *florecita*," she said. "We must never question the mysteries of God and the saints. It is part of believing. Remember what the Sisters of Mercy taught you during catechism in Sunday school? There are three persons in the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. They are all God. We don't know why or how, and we are not supposed to question the mystery. We just accept what we are told. So it is with the orishas."

I pondered this for some minutes. I did not want to risk offending María, but my curiosity was stronger than my still undeveloped sense of prudence.

"I still don't understand," I said after some time. "I know what the sisters say about the Holy Trinity. But I still don't know how a warrior can be a lady saint."

I looked up with worried eyes, not wanting to incur her displeasure. But María appeared undisturbed. "It's like a costume party," she smiled. "When the Yorubas came to the New World, the orishas followed them here, disguised as different Catholic saints. This was so that black people could worship the orishas in church without getting in trouble with the white man."

"But how could they tell which orisha was disguised as which saint?" I asked.

"Very simple," María said. "Each orisha—as well as each saint—has certain qualities and does certain things. Changó, for example, is a warrior and a king. So he's never too far away from his castle or his sword. But he also knows a lot of magic and for that reason he always carries a *pilón*—a mortar—with him."

"What does he do with the mortar?" I asked, mesmerized by the tale of the multitalented orisha.

"Work his magic, of course," said María. "That's where he prepares all his *ebbos* and his *biyongos*—magic spells."

"And St. Barbara," I asked wide-eyed, "does she also carry a mortar?"

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"She sure does. Well, not a mortar exactly, but a sort of goblet which she carries in her right hand. And in her left she holds a sword, and there's always a castle by her side."

"Then she is Changó," I said, openmouthed.

"Of course she is," María smiled, gratified that I finally understood the syncretism of the orisha and the saint. "And that's not all. Like Changó, St. Barbara controls thunder and lightning. Changó—Cabio Sile—is the owner of fire. St. Barbara is dressed in a red mantle, the color of fire. So you see, it was easy for the Yorubas to know St. Barbara was really Changó disguised as a lady saint. It was the same with each of the other orishas."

"Like the Day of the Innocents!" I cried, delighted to understand at last.

"Like the Day of the Innocents," María agreed, laughing contentedly at my obvious satisfaction.

On December 28, the Catholic Church commemorates the slaughter of thousands of infants by King Herod. In many Latin-American countries, with inexplicable black humor, *el día de los inocentes* is a sort of April Fools' Day. Typically, people wear *máscaras*, or elaborate costumes, characterized by colorful masks made of meshed wire that make the wearer almost impossible to identify. People so disguised roam the streets, engaging in all types of innocent pranks and challenging friends and relatives to recognize them.

The similarities between the costumes worn on the Day of the Innocents and the personalities of the orishas hidden behind those of the Catholic saints illuminated my understanding of the syncretism between the orishas and the saints. This was how I first learned of the concept of reincarnation—a belief central to Santería, as well as to some of the world's major religions. The gods of the Yorubas, like those of Nordic mythology, die mythical deaths and return to life in new bodies to replenish the earth. To the Yorubas in the New World, the Catholic saints were the "new bodies," or reincarnations, of their orishas.

THE ORISHAS

The most important of the orishas, María told me firmly, is Elegguá, the redoubtable messenger of the orishas.

"He's the guardian of the doors and the roads," she said. "Without his goodwill, all the other orishas can do nothing."

"Why, María?"

"Because once, when Olofi was very sick, Elegguá was the only orisha who knew how to cure Papa Dios. Olofi was so pleased that he immediately gave Elegguá the key to all the doors and roads and told the other orishas that from that time onward they all had to pay *foribale*—homage—to Elegguá before any party, and ask his permission before starting any work."

"And how did Elegguá cure Olofi?"

"With *ewe*."

"What's *ewe*, María?"

"That's Yoruba word my mammy taught me. *Ewe* is herbs, plants, leaves, and all things that come from the good earth. Elegguá was born in *el monte*, the woods, and he knows all about *ewe*. That's how he knew which one to use to cure Olofi."

"Do you also know about *ewe*, María?"

She nodded. "Not as much as Elegguá, but I know a little. Someday I take you to the woods and teach you about *ewe*. But don't tell your mammy," she added with a conspiratorial smile. "She don't like I take you to woods."

"No, María," I assured her gravely. "I never tell anyone the things you tell me."

This assurance, given with all the respectability and honesty of a five-year-old, was of the utmost importance, for my mother would have been quite distressed to learn of my apprenticeship in Yoruba lore, and most likely would have taken me away from María's care. (As it was, she did not find out until many years later, long after María had died.)

The mischievous Elegguá, obviously one of María's favorite orishas, was the topic of many of our conversations. A great herbalist, he was also a great sorcerer, like Changó, and knew how to prepare *ebbós* for all purposes. "Mostly for good, *florecita*," María would hasten to add, as if the orisha might be

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listening behind the door. "But sometimes, when someone does something *burucu*—bad—that Elegguá does not like, he will punish that person. So it's important to keep him happy."

"How do you keep Elegguá happy, María?"

"Well, in many ways he's like a little child. Some of the *patakís*—the legends—describe him as a very young boy who loves candies and cakes. If you give him candies, he will be happy and be nice to you. But the *patakís* say he also likes rum and cigars and smokes *jutía*—possum. That's because there are many Elegguás, say the *patakís*, twenty-one in all, and each likes different things to eat."

"How can there be twenty-one Elegguás, María?"

"That's part of the mystery, *florecita*," María said seriously. "Think of it as if Elegguá had many identical twins who all looked alike but had different names, and liked and did different things."

"Who is Elegguá in the church?"

"Some say he's St. Anthony of Padua, and others say he's the Holy Infant of Prague."

"But, María," I said, openly scandalized. "Neither St. Anthony nor the Infant of Prague smokes cigars or drinks rum."

"They don't, but Elegguá does. Remember the costume party we talked about? Elegguá and St. Anthony are the same spirit. You pray to St. Anthony as a saint and to Elegguá as an orisha. You give each one his proper treatment in his proper place. The important thing to remember is that no matter which name you're using, you're praying to the same spirit, a force of the good God." I accepted this explanation at face value, like all of María's teaching.

Unlike Changó and most of the other orishas, Elegguá was not a son of Yemayá. He was said to be the son of Alabbgwanna, also known as the "Lonely Spirit," who is said to be the patron of desperate causes. According to a *patakí*, as soon as Elegguá was old enough to walk, he chained Alabbgwanna's hands and ran away to grow up alone in the woods. Later he met and made friends with Oggún, another orisha, who is the

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patron of iron and all workers, and who is syncretized with St. Peter.

Eleggúá, Oggún, Ochosi (the Divine Archer), and Osun, who warns the santeros when danger is near, are known as *los guerreros*, the Warriors, and have wonderful adventures together. They also work together against the enemies of the santeros, creating the most powerful and hair-raising *ebbós*.

Santería, according to María, was the name given in Spanish to the Yoruba religion. The orishas, María told me, were emanations from Olofi, *papa Dios*. The worship of the orishas as *santos* gave birth to Santería, which means literally "the worship of saints."

"It's not pure Yoruba, *florecita*," she used to tell me. "It's a kind of mixture of the Yoruba faith and the Catholic faith. Which is pretty much the same thing," she added, shrugging her shoulders. "It don't make no difference how you worship God, in church or in the woods, as long as you worship him."

Because she took such a great care to uphold the belief of the church, María's teachings never interfered with my Catholic upbringing. I never found any discernible differences between the essential beliefs of either faith. Both taught the existence of One God, omnipotent and just, who, for the benefit of mankind, delegated some of his power to highly favored and exalted spirits. Both faiths believed in the power of prayer to these spirits, and in the reward of good and the punishment of evil. Therefore I embraced both with equal fervor.

The *patakis*, as María called them, told fascinating stories about the orishas. Love, jealousy, hatred, deceit, and many other touching human frailties often surfaced in the orishas. Oggún's fabled struggles with Changó, Changó's weakness for women, the rivalry between Changó's wife Oba and Oshún, goddess of river waters. "They are not like us," María told me many times. "We are like them. Remember what the Good Book says: Man was created in God's image."

According to María, the orishas have two aspects. Under one aspect, they control a variety of human endeavors; under the

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other, they represent various natural forces. One could say that certain natural forces have power over certain human endeavors. And if we observe natural forces at play, we can learn how to control and influence other human lives.

Changó, for example, represents fire, thunder, and lightning, but also controls passions, strength, and all difficulties. If we observe the elemental forces Changó represents, we immediately notice that thunder and lightning move swiftly and unexpectedly, and that fire can be of service to man only when it is kept under complete control. A simple analogy teaches us that passions must be kept under strict control, while any actions intended to overcome difficulties must be undertaken swiftly and when our adversary least expects them. The element of surprise, like Changó, has won many a battle.

As a child, the tales of the orishas simply enthralled me. I did not understand any of these deeper meanings until I grew older; then, somehow, they all fell into place.

María instilled in me a healthy respect for the forces of nature. Fire, water, wind, earth, sun, moon, and other natural phenomena all had *alogurá* powers, and had to be respected since they represented the different orishas. Nor did María forget to teach me about *ewe*. At least once a week during that first year, she took me to a wooded area not too far from our house and showed me how to recognize various herbs and use them for cures and simple spells. By the time I graduated from first grade, I could easily identify several dozen varieties of plants and recite their most important uses.

To this day I will use aloe vera for cuts, abrasions, and irritated eyes. My favorite remedy for an unsettled stomach is spearmint, marjoram, and sage in a tea; but I will also use them in a bath to dispel negative vibrations. For me, a bunch of rue tied with a red string still keeps evil at bay, and in my mind, myrtle and vervain will be forever associated with love.

3

THE SANTERO

Santería's most basic belief is that destiny begins before birth in *Ilé-Olofi*, the house of God, heaven. Like the ancient Babylonians, the Yorubas believed that we are the children of the gods. Race, language, and place of birth are of no importance to the orishas, who encompass the entire world with their divine powers and claim all human beings as their children.

Long before Obatalá has finished his work of shaping the child in the womb, that child's life has been preordained by Olorún-Olofi and the other orishas. Also determined before birth is the orisha who is going to be the *iyá-Oro* or *babá-Oro*, the newborn's heavenly mother or father. Sometimes (as when a person does not believe in the Yoruba faith) the child never learns he is the offspring of an orisha. Nevertheless, the orisha who claims that person as his *omo-mi*—one of his children—will guide and protect him all through his life. Of course, should the *omo* get out of hand and offend his orisha with his bad behavior, the orisha will withdraw his protection and unleash heavenly rage upon his *omo-mi*. The punishment may sometimes be slow in coming, but it will come inexorably.

In some Latin-American countries where Santería is practiced assiduously, the *babalawo*, or high priest of Santería, can foretell the protecting orisha of a child long before the child is born.

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The babalawo is the son of Orúnla, also known as Orúnmila and Ifá. Only men can claim the privilege of becoming babalawos since Orúnla is a male orisha and demands that only men should serve him. Orúnla owns the Table of Ifá, the main divination system of Santería. The babalawo, the supreme diviner of the Table of Ifá, can foretell an individual's future with astonishing accuracy. As high priest, he must be consulted before any major ceremonies and only he can determine a person's protecting orisha with absolute certainty.

When a woman desires to learn which orisha will preside over her unborn child's destiny, she visits a babalawo so that he may provide her with this vital information. This lets her pray to that orisha for her safe delivery and teach her child to honor and serve his heavenly protector from an early age. The child will often be dressed in the colors his orisha favors and will not be allowed to eat the foods sacred to his protector.

Upon reading the Table of Ifá, the babalawo sometimes ascertains that the gods have chosen an unborn child to be an *olocha*, a santero or santera. This causes a minor commotion, for the child must be initiated into the mysteries of Santería while still in his mother's womb. The ritual involved, known as *medio asiento*, or half initiation, is conducted over the mother's abdomen. When a child is born, he is immediately presented to the *otanes*, or sacred stones which represent the orishas in Santería. The newborn is then washed in an *omiero*, a ritual liquid prepared with the favorite ewe, or herbs of the orishas. The remnants of the bath are thrown under a large tree that casts ample shadow. The correlation is simple: as the liquid falls under the tree's shadow, so will the child always be under his orisha's protecting shadow. When the child reaches a certain level of maturity, the other half of the initiation is conducted, and he is then a full-fledged santero.

There are several categories of santeros. An *iyalocha* is a female santera; the term means mother (*iyá*) of an orisha (*ocha*). Likewise, *babaocha* means father (*babá*) of an orisha. How do we explain the extraordinary fact of a santero suddenly becoming the

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father or mother of an orisha? Santería believes that upon initiation into the faith, the initiate becomes his deity's physical counterpart. Since he then has the power to initiate others in the religion, he is said to "give birth" to other santeros, providing the orishas with new channels of manifestation. This belief is sustained by the central purpose of the initiation, which is to be born anew. In this sense, Santería is very much a "born again" religion.

There are other orders of priests in Santería. The *babalawo*, as we have seen, is the high priest of the cult. The *oriaté* is the master of ceremonies during all the rituals, while the *ayugbóna* is an assistant to the principal *iyalocha* or *babaocha* during a rite.

It is interesting to note that in Bhakti, or devotional yoga, there are five different possible relationships with Krishna, or the Godhead. One may adore Krishna as a lover, as a friend, as one's owner, as the Supreme Being, or as a son. To love Krishna as a son is far more important than to love him as a father, because the son always expects help and care from the father, while the father always wants to do something for his son. When the yogi sees himself as a father to Krishna, his only desire is to serve the Godhead for as long as the yogi lives. Likewise, the santero's only true concern during his life is to serve the orishas, to whom he is both father and son.

The santeros believe that some children are possessed by a transient spirit known as an *abikú*, a "traveling being" who comes to the world for a short time only.

The *abikú* chooses a certain womb for his birth, dies soon, and when he leaves takes the child with him. Perversely, he returns to the same womb over and over, destroying all the children born under his evil star. In Santería, naturally, young children are anxiously observed to see if they show any of the dreaded signs traditionally associated with the hated *abikú*. Firstborns are notoriously susceptible to the spirit's evil influence and they are more carefully watched than other children. Very serious or precocious children, those who never cry or who cry

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too much, or who have unusual marks on their bodies, are immediately suspected to be possible preys of an abikú.

But not always does the abikú succeed in his villainous intentions. If discovered in time, he can be "chained" to this life, making it impossible for him to leave with his innocent host. This *amarre*, or chaining, is done very swiftly by an iyalocho or babaocha. The child suspected to be under the influence of an abikú is conscientiously spanked seven times with a small broom to which are tied several branches of the plant known as *escoba amarga* (*Partenium hysterophorus*). Then a small iron anklet is locked around the child's left ankle. Thus beaten and chained, the abikú is forced into submission and is not able to destroy the child's life.

Although I showed no real signs of being an abikú's unwitting hostess, I was rather serious and precocious. This obviously worried María, who was not an iyalocho and therefore could not determine with any certainty whether I was the potential victim of the abikú—who had been credited with her younger brother's early demise. Finally, she decided to bring me to a santero's house, an action she might not have undertaken had she not lived in eternal dread of the spirit and been so concerned about my safety.

María carefully coordinated the visit to coincide with the celebration of a *tambor* or *toque de santo*, a ceremony often conducted to thank an orisha for granting a favor to one of his followers. The *tambor* is also one of the many rituals that comprise the *asiento*, when a believer becomes a santero.

María brought me to a *tambor* in honor of Changó, the mighty owner of lightning and thunder, the orisha who spouts fire from his mouth and nostrils when his wrath has been aroused. The iyalocho offering the *tambor* was an initiate of Changó and wanted to repay the orisha for many past favors.

For María, the days immediately preceding the *tambor* were very busy ones. With her own money she bought a piece of white linen from which she made me a dainty dress, with a great many frothy ruffles and a wide fluffy skirt. She could not afford to

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buy me a new pair of shoes, so she scrubbed one of my old pairs of sandals until the leather was almost completely discolored. Then she painstakingly covered the sandals with white shoe polish, leaving them almost as good as new.

As she labored with the sandals, I sat at her feet, asking her innumerable questions, which she answered with her usual patience.

"Why did you wash the sandals, María? They looked clean to me."

"Because I'm presenting you to the orishas, florecita," she answered. "Nothing can be too clean for them."

"Why, María?"

"Because they are very pure spirits. Do you remember what pure is?"

"Pure is clean, something that is never dirty or bad."

"That's right, florecita, and that's why the sandals must be very clean for the orishas." She looked up at the sky and frowned. "Looks like rain," she said, putting aside the finished sandals. "I hope we get a good day for the tambor tomorrow."

The orishas must have heard this expressed hope because the next day dawned splendid and luminous, with that hazy radiance that permeates all sunny days in the tropics. The sun's rays, shining through the polished fronds of the palm trees, cast multiple reflections on my mirror, forcing me to look away from the fascinating image of a pretty young girl dressed in a swirling white dress and spotless white sandals. Around my head was a white handkerchief tied with a knot in front, African style. Around my throat was a necklace of alternating white and red beads. I swung my body around, and the wide skirt billowed gracefully around me. I was seven years old, and slowly becoming aware that I was a woman.

As I danced in front of the mirror, María walked into the room. She stood just within the doorframe, and stared at me. Her face was serene as always, but there was an almost imperceptible hardening to her mouth. The laughing lines around her eyes had disappeared.

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"Do you know why you're wearing those clothes?" she asked gravely.

I stopped dancing and lowered my head. "To go to the tambor," I answered.

"Yes, but why?"

"Because it's a party."

"What kind of a party, florecita?"

"A party for Changó," I said, shuffling my feet self-consciously.

"And why are you wearing that white-and-red necklace?" she insisted.

"Because they're Changó's colors, María."

"And what is Changó, florecita?"

"Changó is an orisha, a saint."

"That's right. And the tambor is a party, but a party for a saint. The clothes you're wearing are not for pleasure or vanity. They're meant to please him and the other orishas. Vanity," she added grimly, "is an offense to Olofi and the orishas. Vanity makes you forget you're human and mortal and equal to all other people, who are also the children of God and the saints."

My eyes slowly filled with tears. "But I just wanted to see myself in the mirror, María," I said, with trembling lips. "I did not mean to be vain."

As usual when she saw me crying, María softened. Coming closer to me, she knelt down by my side. "I know, florecita," she said, wiping away my tears. "But I have nothing else to give you but the things I know, and someday these things will be very good for you, you'll see. There's nothing wrong in looking at yourself in the mirror," she added with a smile, "as long as you remember to be humble."

"What's humble?" I asked, comforted to be back in her good graces.

"Humble, florecita, is remembering always you're God's creation, and thanking him for his blessings." She stood up with a grimace, as her back always gave her trouble. "And remember something else," she said as an afterthought. "When you dress

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for the orishas, you must never look at yourself in the mirror."

"But, María, if I don't look at myself in the mirror, how can I know if I look all right?"

"By letting somebody else's eyes be your mirrors. For now, florecita, I'll be your mirror *en el santo*, and you'll be mine. Maybe someday some other people will also be your mirrors and you'll be theirs." She looked down at me and her smile illuminated her face. "Your mirror says you look beautiful, florecita. What does my mirror say?"

She spread out her white cotton skirt, revealing several inches of immaculate petticoat trimmed with yards of ruffled cotton lace. Many colored-bead necklaces glimmered on her pleated shirtfront and the white handkerchief on her head contrasted agreeably with her dark skin.

I clasped my hands on my chest and smiled delightedly. "You look wonderful, María. You look like a queen."

María gurgled with laughter. "If I do, florecita, I must have lost my crown somewhere. But now we better hurry, or we'll be late for the tambor. And that is displeasing to the orishas."

She hurried me out of the house and off to the shantytown where the tambor was being held, but when we arrived the ceremony was well on its way. Over the years, I have forgotten many of the details of that day. But during that unforgettable first tambor I met Changó for the first time.

The small bohío where the tambor was held was packed closely with many people, most of them of African descent. María's late arrival, with me in tow, caused a little commotion. With her typical sangfroid, María pushed her considerable bulk through the throngs of people, forcing them to let us pass. She pointedly ignored the unkind remarks and continued to press on until we arrived at the center of the room where the people had formed a wide, circular space. In a corner of this room sat three black men, each behind a large drum. Many years later I learned that these drums were the *bata*, the instruments used by the

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santeros to call down the saints; their names are Iyá, Itótele, and Okónkolo. The drums are not played simultaneously, but in a certain order, curiously like a three-sided conversation. Okónkolo's sound never varies, for it is the base upon which Iyá and Itótele speak to each other.

The sound of the drums was echoed by the drummer's plaintive singing. Although I had never heard African chants before, María used Yoruba words very often and I was familiar with the musical sound of the language. Those present answered the singing with a resonant chorus while they swayed and shuffled their feet in time with the drumbeat.

Seated on a low stool in the center of the circle was an elderly woman, her light-brown face deeply etched with furrows, magnificently attired in bright red taffeta trimmed with white lace. A red handkerchief covered her hair, while colored beads dangled from her neck, wrists, and ankles. To her headdress were pinned four brightly colored feathers. She was the *omo-Changó* who was offering the *tambor*.

María approached the old woman resolutely, while I followed shyly behind. Once in front of the *iyalocha*, María lay facedown on the floor, holding her stretched arms close to her body. "Your blessings, *madrina*," she said humbly, her lips against the hard-packed earth of the floor.

The *iyalocha* bent forward and placed her hands on María's shoulders. The African words she uttered were completely unintelligible to me. She helped María stand up and stood up herself, with much clinking of beads. María crossed her arms in front of her chest. Then she and the *iyalocha* embraced, pressing their cheeks together first on the left, then on the right side, in the traditional embrace of *Santería*. When the two women separated, María quickly took me by the hand and pulled me forward.

"*Madrina*, this is the little *mundele* [white person] I told you about. Please give her your blessing." As she spoke, María pushed me down on the floor in the same position she had assumed before.

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The iyalocho repeated her previous actions, putting her hands on my shoulders and muttering the same cryptic words in Yoruba. Then she stood me up, crossed my arms over my chest, and embraced me in the same fashion as she had embraced María. She looked at me long and hard with her ancient hooded eyes. Finally, seemingly satisfied with the prolonged inspection, she grunted and gently pushed me aside.

"Little *obini* not abikú, María," she said in a deep, hoarse voice. "Eyes bright, skin clear, breath sweet, *didún*. No sign abikú. Abikú hands *otutu*, ice-cold. The *ara*, the body, always sick, *arón*." The iyalocho's voice was final in her pronouncement. "Little *obini daradara*, *lalafía* [strong, healthy], not abikú."

María thanked her profusely and moved me to a side of the circle. I looked up at her with dubious eyes. The dark room was very warm, and the sounds of the drums and echoing voices made me frightened and uneasy.

"Are we leaving now?" I asked hopefully.

"*Daque!* You're not to speak one word, *floreceita!* Besides, we just arrived. How can we leave now?"

She stood behind me, her hands protectively on my shoulders. Within a few minutes she was singing and swaying to the beat of the drums. From my vantage position I saw several people come within the circle to pay their foribale to the old iyalocho. Some of the people lay down first on the right side, then on the left, the free hand on the hip in a typically feminine gesture. Those, I learned many years later, were the children of female orishas, such as Yemayá, Oshún, and Oyá. The ones who saluted face down were the children of male orishas such as Changó, Elegguá and Obatalá, María's own *baba-oro*. Because she did not know who was my patron saint, María had me salute the iyalocho as she herself did.

After some time, the circle closed once more. The iyalocho stood up and set the stool aside. It was obvious that everyone she expected had arrived, and the *tambor* could now take place without any further interruptions. The iyalocho joined the circle. Turning toward the drums, she yelled out in a stentorian voice, "*Cabio Sile pá Changó!*"

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They all responded simultaneously, with one voice, "Cabio Sile," lifting themselves a few inches from the floor on the balls of their feet. Almost at once the drumbeat changed. The main singer started an impassioned invocation to Changó. The drum increased in tempo, and so did the dancing of the people.

Standing next to us was a tall black man dressed in white with a red sash tied around his waist. His legs and feet were bare, as was his head, and he was swaying heavily from side to side. Losing his balance for a moment, he stumbled clumsily into the middle of the circle. The *iyalocha* stepped out from the throng of people and started to push them back.

"*Abrir paso!*" she cried loudly. "Give way! Changó's here! Changó's here!"

At her cries, the drums doubled their intensity. As the people fell back from the center of the circle, the man began to spin faster and faster, his body shaking uncontrollably, his mouth lax, his eyes rolling. The *iyalocha* stood by the side of the circle, calling down the *orisha* to the beat of the drums.

For some time, the man continued to spin around. Then he stopped suddenly, straightening his body with an obvious effort. His eyes were open but unfocused, and he kept working his mouth from side to side in a terrible grimace. Terrified at the sight, I shut my eyes tightly. But soon my curiosity won out and I opened them again, cautiously peering over the edge of the circle.

Someone handed the *iyalocha* a pair of huge double-edged axes with white handles trimmed with red—the traditional weapons of Changó. The *iyalocha* offered them to the man. He stared at her with his terrible unfocused eyes, mouth still working, but made no effort to take the axes.

"Baba-mi, Changó, you take ax, my father, you fight *tó burucu*, all that's bad, *tó l'otá de tu omodere*, all the enemies of your children," the *iyalocha* insisted. Behind her, the beat of the drums increased to a frenzy, as did the singing and swaying of the bodies around us.

Suddenly and quite unexpectedly, the man reached out and grabbed both axes from the *iyalocha's* hands. With a wild yell

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he swirled both weapons high over his head and started the dangerous dance known as *alayá*, Changó's typical dance, performed by the orisha brandishing a sword or ax in each hand.

The transformation was extraordinary. One moment the possessed man was swaying uncertainly to the beat of the drums, and the next he stood towering over us, awesomely powerful, his body rippling with superhuman strength, his face an inscrutable ebony mask.

María's fingers tightened on my shoulders and I could feel a tremor go through her wide frame. "It's Changó, florecita," she whispered in my ear. "It's Changó."

Terrified beyond expression, I stared at the gigantic black man. Behind us, the throngs of people pressed forward, all calling on the orisha, chanting in Yoruba and clapping their hands. The possessed omo-orisha continued to dance, swirling the axes over his head, first with one hand and then with the other with terrifying speed. The weapons' burnished steel glinted dully in the candlelit room, and in spite of the drums and the singing, the swishing sound of the blades as they cut through the air was plainly audible.

Suddenly the ritual dance stopped. At the same time, the drums fell silent. The sudden and unexpected silence was far more ominous than the music and the dancing.

Changó, now in total possession of the omo-orisha, hung the axes from the red sash at his waist and turned to survey his audience.

The iyalocho came forward to throw herself at the feet of the orisha. He smiled, not unkindly. Picking her up bodily from her prostrate position, he held her up in the air over the sea of astonished faces.

"Omo-mi," he cried out with a loud, infectious laugh. "Omo-mi. Changó happy, lalafia."

He put down the iyalocho, who seemed delighted with the orisha's playfulness and clung to him with undisguised affection. "Baba-mi, Changó," she kept repeating, laughing and crying at the same time.

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The orisha looked down at her with a smile. "Omo-mi," he said, "you love Changó?"

"Oh yes, my father, baba-mi," the iyalochoa cried, tears streaming down her smiling face.

"Then why you not feed Changó asé? Changó hungry. Changó wants eat *amalá* and drink *cheketé*."

The food the orisha demanded, prepared with okra and cornmeal, was soon presented to him in a *jícara*, or hollowed gourd. The *cheketé*, the saints' traditional drink, was also offered to him in a second *jícara*.

The orisha, surrounded by tenderly ministering iyalochoas and babaochas, used his fingers to bring the sticky *amalá* to his mouth. After some time, he pushed away the santeros, and stood alone in the middle of the circle, a *jícara* filled with *amalá* in his right hand.

"Ah," he said, with a smile of satisfaction, "*amalá dara-dara*, very good, *alaguó*." He held out the *jícara* filled with the unappetizing concoction to the people who formed the circle. "Who want eat *amalá* with Changó?"

Although the taste of the *amalá* is less than palatable, the *aché*, the blessing, that is received when one eats of Changó's food is so great that everyone is willing to partake of this food when the orisha offers it. Still, it is better to wait for the orisha to offer the *amalá* to each person individually than to beg for it. The people within the circle eyed the *amalá* with anticipation, but did not come forward at the orisha's call.

Changó, who knew the reason for their reticence, smiled mischievously and held the *jícara* against his chest. His eyes, burning brightly with his own hidden fires, moved thoughtfully over the eager crowd. Almost imperceptibly, they stopped on me, and I flinched at their intensity. A moment later he was standing in front of me, the *jícara* right under my nose.

"Omo-mi, my child, Changó wants you eat *amalá* with him," he said softly. He dipped his hand into the food and offered me a fistful.

I looked at the slippery okra shining through the corn-

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meal and my stomach turned. But when I lifted my eyes to the orisha, there was such love and tenderness in his face that my heart was filled to overflowing with affection. Obediently, I took his hand in mine and ate all of the *amalá* he had offered me.

My spontaneous action seemed to please the orisha, for he took me by the hand. No longer afraid of him, I followed him unhesitatingly to the center of the circle.

He squatted down by my side and took my face in his hands. As he looked into my eyes, little flames seemed to dance in front of me, making his face shimmer in the darkness.

"Omo-mi," he said. "Never fear no one, no thing. I, Changó, always be with you. I, Changó, touch my heart for you."

He emphasized his words by placing his hand over his chest. "When you need Changó, you call. Changó answer with fire, with thunder. If someone hurt you, call Changó. I come and burn them all with fire. I rain thunder and lightning on their heads."

He stood up and smiled sadly.

"You be not really omo-mi," he said regretfully. "You omo another orisha, orisha Oshún, who own the river waters and is beautiful as Oru, the sun, and Ochu, the moon. Oshún be my *akpetehí*, my favorite sweetheart, and she be your mother, your *iyá*. But I love you and protect you like you be omo-mi. Now I give you rain and fire power. You stop rain. You stop fire. I, Changó, say you do."

He stepped back and his eyes closed. The great body started to shake convulsively. The orisha was about to leave. I moved toward him instinctively, but María's protective hands held me back. I felt a great sadness at his departure, but I also knew he would never be too far away from me and that I would see him again.

His promises of power and protection, which astounded those present at the *tambor*, I did not fully understand until much later. But by the time I was eight, I could stop rain at will and, with little effort, was able to keep fires under control.

4

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It is much easier to bring on the rain than to stop it, María used to tell me.

"All you need are five oranges and a few small branches from the same orange tree. Then you locate a cloud—large or small, depending on the amount of rain you want—and say your invocation to Yemayá and Oshún. Rain comes soon."

"But María, if Changó stops the rain, how come he doesn't bring it?"

"Changó stops rain because he's fire and thunder," said María, shaking her head. "You don't understand orishas, *florecita*. Fire evaporates water, makes it *ursará*, disappear. But fire can't make water. For that, you need Yemayá and Oshún because Yemayá owns the seas, and Oshún owns the rivers. Together they own all the waters in the whole world."

According to María, this identification of the orishas with natural forces and the proper observance of natural laws was the greatest power of Santería.

"If you know the orishas, you know everything," she told me many times. "The earth teach you everything, but you

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must pay your respects to her always, do *foribale*, so she will give you all her secrets. And always remember, the secrets of the earth are the secrets of the orishas."

She shook a finger at me admonishingly, and said with a sigh, "I ask too much of you, *florequita*. You be patient with old María. I try to teach you too much too fast." She smiled at me and straightened out one of my ribbons with her usual meticulous care. "This is all I have to give you. I want you to learn it because it is more precious than all the gold in the world. And you want to learn, don't you?"

"Of course I do," I said, hugging her affectionately. "But tell me, María. How do you bring on the rain with five oranges?"

"You need formula, *florequita*, an invocation to the orishas Yemayá and Oshún in Yoruba. It's very long. You forget."

"Then write it for me," I cried. I ran over to my desk and handed her a pencil and a piece of paper.

María looked down at the paper with an amused smile and pushed my hand away gently.

"*Yo no sé ná' de letras, florequita*. I don't know how to read or write."

I looked at her in utter consternation. Suddenly I remembered that in all the years María had been in charge of me, I had never seen her reading or writing. Since my father always supervised my schoolwork personally, I had never asked María for help with my homework.

I did not know what to say to María. I was only twelve years old, but I was already a voracious reader and could not imagine life without books. In spite of my youth, I felt a deep sense of outrage and shame. I knew that María's poverty and her status as a black woman had kept her away from school.

"Let me teach you, María," I cried impulsively.

"What's the matter, *florequita*?" María lifted my face and peered suspiciously into my eyes. "Oh, please don't cry. Of course you can teach me letters if you want, but old María is much too old. I don't learn so good anymore."

This episode marked the start of an unusual double ap-

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prenticeship. Every day after my return from school I instructed María "in the letters," while she continued to teach me the lore and ritual of Santería. I used the same books and methods my first-grade teacher had used, and contrary to her self-deprecating ideas, María proved to be a very good pupil. Within a year she could read simple sentences; by the end of two years, she could understand most of the newspaper. But writing was never her forte. She learned to write only a few words besides her name.

Around this time, María taught me the legend of Obi, the coconut, and how to read the coconut rinds. This system of divination, the basic tool of the santero, is known as *dar coco al santo*, giving coconut to the saint. Although the coconut is employed usually to consult with Elegguá, all the other orishas can also be questioned by the same means.

According to María, the coconut is also a saint: "His name is Obi, and at one time he was a very powerful orisha. But he was reduced to his present circumstances because of his pride."

This patakí is one of the oldest of Yoruba lore. At one time Olofi esteemed Obi very highly for his purity and sincerity. In appreciation, Olofi made Obi white as snow both inside and out and placed him high on the top of the palm tree. But when Obi found himself in such an exalted position, he became arrogant and conceited and would not condescend to speak with people on a lesser footing than himself.

One day Obi decided to give a party; the first person he invited was Elegguá, one of his closest friends. But Elegguá, noticing the sad change that had taken place in Obi, decided to play him a trick to test his good faith. Since Obi had asked him to invite several of their mutual friends to the party, Elegguá gathered together all the worst derelicts he could find.

"They were really dirty and smelly," María told me. "They were *ainí, ochí, eburegua aimó, alakisa, alégbo*—just awful."

When Obi saw his exquisite palace invaded by riffraff, he went into transports of rage and, without a word of apology, mercilessly booted the entire unkempt lot into the street. This

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action confirmed Elegguá's suspicions and filled him with great sadness. He did not express his disappointment, but left Obi's house and did not return.

Several days later Olofi asked Elegguá to bring a special message to Obi's palace. Elegguá refused and told the father of the gods what Obi had done. To verify the story, Olofi disguised himself as a beggar and went to knock on Obi's door. As soon as Obi saw the poor mendicant standing there, he slammed the door in Olofi's face.

Olofi turned his back to the house. "Obi," he cried out loudly. "See who I really am. *Obi meye lorí emi ofé.*"

When Obi saw that the beggar was really Olofi, he trembled with terror, and begged with Olofi to forgive him. But Olofi, seriously offended and disappointed, would not listen to Obi's pleas. He immediately decreed that from that moment onward Obi would fall from his high place to the ground, where anyone could pick him up. He also changed Obi's color, making his shell black (to symbolize Obi's sin of pride) and his outer cortex green (to express the hope that someday Obi would regain his former purity, which he hides in his heart). Olofi also condemned Obi to foretell the future. Ever since, a dry coconut—*obi gūi gūi*—is placed at Elegguá's feet.

The ceremony of initiation with the coconut is used by the santeros in all their major ceremonies. The coconut is used not only to divine an individual's future but also to inquire if a saint is pleased with a particular offering.

Although not a santera, María was a devout practitioner of Santería and had received the cult's first two initiations—the necklaces, or *elekes*, and the Warriors. This latter initiation, also known as taking or receiving Elegguá, invests the initiate with the powers and the protection of Elegguá and three other Warrior orishas—Oggún, Ochosi, and Osun.

When a person has received Elegguá and the Warriors, he or she is entitled to use the coconut rinds to ask questions of Elegguá and any of the other Warriors, but not of the rest of the

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orishas. This is because that individual has not been initiated into the mysteries of the other saints.

Maria kept her Warriors in a small cabinet in her room. Whenever she wanted to question any of these saints, she opened the door of the cabinet so they could hear her, and proceeded with the divination ceremony. During one session, she asked me to write down the ritual in detail. "So that you don't forget later," she said with a smile. "But after a while, you learn it so well, you never again forget."

When I was ready with pencil and paper, she took a coconut from a shelf, broke the hard shell with a small hammer, and used the blade of a kitchen knife to dislodge the brown rind from the shell. Gathering the coconut's milk in a glass, she set it aside and cut five pieces of the rind into uneven squares about three by four inches in diameter.

"Coconut milk is good for many things," Maria told me. "Don't throw it away. You can use it for kidney trouble, to make hair grow strong. But best of all, you can use it to get rid of *fibú* and everything *burucu*, *ororó*. It brings good luck, *orobó*. Bathe your forehead with it and it clears your mind. Then throw the rest on your doorstep and you'll be healthy and happy, *araní*."

She filled a small clay vessel with water and placed it in front of the cabinet where Elegguá and the Warriors were kept.

"Water is important," she explained, "because Obi—the coconut—must be refreshed all the time. Otherwise he gets heated and his answers are not good."

She opened the door of the cabinet and pulled out the clay vessel where the stone head representing Elegguá was reposing. The head had small cowrie shells for its eyes and mouth, and from the top of its skull protruded a small metal ornament in the shape of a feather. Coins, stones and other attributes of Elegguá surrounded the orisha's head. Alongside Elegguá stood a small cauldron with all the metal implements of the other Warriors.

Maria sprinkled water three times in front of Elegguá and started an invocation in Yoruba:

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"*Omi tutu a Elegguá, omi tutu a mi ileis, Olodumare modupué. Boguo yguoro iyalocha babalocha babalawo oluo iku embelese yhae baye tonu . . . Boguo yguoro aché semilenu, cosi iku, cosi ano, cosi allo, cosi ofo, ariku Babá awó . . .*"

I translated this prayer many years later—with much difficulty due to the increasingly corrupted spelling and pronunciation of the Yoruba language in the New World.

"I give some water to refresh Elegguá, I give you some water to refresh my home, and I thank you, O great Lord of the Universe. I salute all the faithful santeras, santeros, babalawos, and great seers who have died and are at the feet of eternity. May they all rest in peace . . . I salute all the santeros and I ask their blessing, so that I will be safe from death, from illness, from tragedy, from shame. Greetings, holy father . . ."

This invocation, known as *moyubar* in Santería, is sometimes much longer. Some santeros believe it is better to name individually all the dead santeros *mayores*—the oldest and most famous santeros—to ensure their blessing. The blessings of the santeros' *madrina* or *padrino* (godmother or godfather) are also requested *in absentia*.

After she finished the invocation, María picked up four of the five pieces of coconut and washed them with some water. The fifth piece, kept in reserve, is used in case one of the other four pieces breaks during the consultation.

"Remember, *florecita*, you must always tear off three small bits of each rind and sprinkle them on Elegguá's image. But that's only because three is Elegguá's number. If you were speaking with Changó, Cabio Sile, you'd use four or six bits because those are Changó's numbers. For other orishas, you'd use their individual numbers instead."

"How do you tear off the bits of coconut?" I asked, inspecting the rinds curiously.

"With your nails, of course," she answered, taking the rinds from my hands. She sprinkled the bits over Elegguá and resumed her invocation.

"*Obinu ikú, Obinu ano, Obinu allo, Obinu ofo,*" she said,

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continuing to exorcise death and destruction. Holding the rinds in her left hand, she touched the floor and Elegguá's image three times with her right hand. "*Elegguá mocueo mocueo unile obo obi mocueo*," she prayed, then turned to look at me. "Now you say *acuelle*, *florecita*, to get Elegguá's blessing."

"*Acuelle*," I responded obediently, without the slightest idea of what I was saying.

"*Acuelle oguo acuelle ono, arikú babá awó*," said María, touching her left hand with her right and touching the floor in front of Elegguá. She joined her hands in front of her chest and made the sign of the cross.

"*Unile obi a Elegguá*," she said and turned to me once more. "Say *asoñá*, *florecita*, it means amen."

"*Asoñá*," I repeated, scribbling down all the strange words as fast as I could. I had no way of knowing that my little notebook was the beginning of my *libreta*, the traditional journal where all the santeros and their followers write down the cult's various rituals. Like the modern witches' Book of Shadows, the *libreta* is a journey into the human soul, and its intimacies are zealously guarded from the curiosity of noninitiates.

During this first session of giving coconut to the saint, María wanted to ask Elegguá if I could receive the necklaces, known in Spanish as *collares* and in Yoruba as *elekes*.

"You'd be so well protected with the *elekes*, *florecita*," she often said, a worried look in her eyes. "Specially now when you go to big school."

I was not to attend high school for another two years, but to María's mind, the "big school" was a sinister place full of dangers. The necklaces, therefore, were the ideal answer to the problem—if only Elegguá agreed.

I put my notebook aside and stood respectfully by María's side. She held the rinds against her chest and began to question the orisha.

"Elegguá, my father, *babá awó*, please tell me if this little *obini* should receive the *elekes* for her protection."

As she finished speaking, María threw the coconut rinds

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on the floor in front of the orisha's image. The white sides of all four rinds came face up, in the pattern known as *alafia*.

"*Alafia, alafia omo, alafia ago, alafia osi, alafia ariku babá awó,*" María exclaimed joyfully. "Kiss the floor, *florecita*! That is *alafia* and it means Elegguá gives you his blessing."

I obeyed and kissed the floor in front of Elegguá.

"Does that mean I can have the *elekes*?" I asked hopefully.

"*Alafia* is not a sure answer," said María. "It means the saint gives you his blessing, but that's all. I must ask the same question again."

She repeated the question and again threw the coconut. This time, only one of the white sides came up, making the pattern known as *Ocana sode*.

María's face was a study of consternation.

"*Ocana sode*," she said with dismay, "means no. And sometimes it also means there's something bad coming."

She picked up the coconut rinds, refreshed them with water, and made the sign of the cross. "Elegguá, *baba awó*, please tell me, is there something wrong—some danger for the little *obini*?"

She threw the rinds on the floor and watched anxiously as they rolled around and finally settled in a pattern—*alafia* again. But this time, one of the rinds fell on top of another.

María's face relaxed. "*Alafia* with *iré*," she exclaimed with a sigh of relief. "It's all right, there's no danger. Elegguá just don't think you should have *elekes*—at least not now."

As she spoke, she poured a few drops of water on top of the two rinds that had fallen together, and offered them to me.

"Drink," she smiled. "That way you receive the *iré* of Elegguá. And if you want, you can make a wish and he'll grant it."

I drank the water and looked at her dubiously. "What I want is the necklaces, María. When can I have them?"

"I don't know, *florecita*. Maybe later on, when you grow

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up. You don't need them now. There's no danger for you. Elegguá said so, and he knows. But let me ask him to be sure."

She picked the rinds again, refreshed them, and faced the orisha once more. "Elegguá, my father," she asked respectfully. "Can the little obini receive the elekes when she grows up?"

This time the resulting pattern was made of two dark and two white sides.

María smiled. "That's *elife*, *florecita*, the strongest of the answers, and it means yes. Be patient, and someday you'll have your elekes."

The fourth pattern, *itagua*, where three white sides and one dark come up, is a tentative yes and the orisha must be consulted again for a definite answer. When I remember that day I sometimes wonder what María's reaction would have been if the dreaded pattern *oyekun*, with four dark sides, had fallen during her consultation. For Oyekun predicts death and destruction and all sorts of protective measures have to be undertaken to dispel its evil influence.

Although I was present during many of María's consultations with Elegguá, I was never again the subject of her queries. Not until many years later, when I was fully grown up and living in New York, did someone consult Elegguá again on my behalf. Though I knew the ritual by heart, I was not able to perform it myself because I was not yet in possession of the Warriors.

The woman who did the questioning was not a santera, but had received several of Santería's preliminary initiations, including that of the Warriors. She did not charge for her consultations, other than the *derecho*, or token fee given the orishas for their help. This *derecho* varies in accordance with the help rendered, but is minimal and consists usually of \$3.15 for a coconut reading and \$5.25 for the cowrie shells, or *caracoles*. These consultations are known as *registros*, or searches. Indeed, a competent practitioner of Santería can make such a thorough search into a person's life that hardly anything will be left uncovered. The *derecho*, or "right," of the orisha is usually placed in front of the

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sopera, or soup tureen, where the *otanes* are kept. The money, sacred to the *orisha*, is used to buy candles, flowers, herbs, and sometimes sacrificial animals. My *madrina*, a *santera* from the Bronx who was initiated into the mysteries of *Oshún*, always keeps behind *Oshún's* *sopera* several thousand dollars, all earned by the *orisha* in countless *registros*, *ebbós*, and initiations. My *madrina* would never dare to spend this sacred money.

"I'd sooner hold up a bank," she told me once, puffing on a cigar, a staple in *Santería*. "You have a better chance of escaping from the FBI than of escaping from *Oshún*. And when she catches you . . . it's better not to talk about it."

Naturally there are exceptions to every rule, and many *santeros* try to use their religion for their personal gain. The annals of *Santería* are full of stories of these foolhardy people and the hair-raising punishments rained on their heads by the enraged *orishas*. But most practitioners of *Santería* live in such preternatural awe of the *orishas* that they simply do not dare offend them. This fear of the *orishas'* powers has kept *Santería* largely free of abuse and corruption.

Of course it is difficult for those unfamiliar with the phenomena of *Santería* to understand the basis of the fear and the respect which the *santeros* feel for the saints or *orishas*. These phenomena have to be experienced to be understood. I have recounted the problem that brought me back to *Elegguá's* feet in full in my first book on *Santería*, but so extraordinary is the experience that it deserves to be told once more.

At the time of the second consultation with *Elegguá*, a very attractive business proposal had been made to me, but it required that I moved to Denmark. I was in severe doubt as to what I should do, and a little talk with *Elegguá* seemed eminently desirable.

Doña Pepita is the name of the woman who gave coconut to *Elegguá* that day. Although she now lives in San Juan, I still keep in close contact with her. A retired schoolteacher, *Doña Pepita* is a blue-eyed strawberry blonde who in her early youth must have been an extraordinary beauty. There are still traces of

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this beauty in her smooth skin and fine eyes, and it is obvious that she makes every effort to preserve her attractive appearance.

Although she is not an *iyalocha*, her talents in the interpretation of the coconut are extraordinary. When I called her to ask for a *registro*, she set up an appointment and asked me to bring \$3.15 for the *derecho*, tightly wrapped in a piece of brown paper (a procedure followed for all *derechos* given to the saints), and two fresh coconuts. (This fruit goes rancid very quickly. Bringing two coconuts increases the chances that at least one will be fresh.)

On the day appointed I showed up with the coconuts and the *derecho* and was quickly brought to her workroom, where she kept the small cabinet with Elegguá's image.

Breaking one of the coconuts, Doña Pepita found it was fresh, and proceeded to prepare the four pieces traditionally used for the reading, and the one in reserve. When she opened Elegguá's cabinet, I noticed that the head of the *orisha* was encased in a large seashell.

"That is simply the path my Elegguá walks," she explained. "You know there are twenty-one Elegguás. Before you receive the Warriors, the *babalawo* or the *oriaté*—who are the only ones who can give you that initiation—find out which of the twenty-one Elegguás walks with you. The image will then be prepared accordingly. Mine calls for a seashell, maybe because I'm a daughter of Yemayá, and she's the owner of the sea waters."

She filled an empty *jícara* with fesh water and started the process of divination. Although the procedure she followed was similar to the one María had taught me, I noticed the prayers she used were different—and considerably longer.

"The prayers to Elegguá are innumerable," she said when I commented on this difference. "I know many, and I vary them all the time. I don't want to bore Elegguá with the same litanies day in and day out."

She poured three sprinklings of water in front of Elegguá's image, threw the traditional bits of coconut on the image,

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and asked the orisha what the outcome of my planned trip would be. Elegguá answered with oyekun. As I already explained, this pattern, composed of four dark sides, is the most evil oracle, predicting death and bad luck.

Doña Pepita did not seem disturbed by the answer. She simply presented the orisha with another question. Should I accept the offer I had been made and move to Denmark? Again, oyekun. Undaunted by Elegguá's negative answers, Doña Pepita started a barrage of questions. Was there any danger connected with the actual flight? Was the offer unsound? Was I threatened with bodily harm? Immutable and stubborn, the orisha persisted in the same answer: oyekun.

Each time, Doña Pepita bent down to refresh the coconut, threw some water in front of the orisha, and then straightened up to continue the questioning. Finally she turned to look at me. There were fine beads of moisture on her carefully made-up face, and her eyes were dark with concern.

"Elegguá says the offer is no good," she told me. "There is only disappointment in it. You should forget about it. Furthermore, the trip itself is hazardous. If you make the trip, your life is in danger."

I was filled with dismay. I had been planning the trip for weeks. My contacts in Denmark were expecting me, and a series of meetings had been arranged on my behalf with some very important people. I simply had to make the trip. I asked Doña Pepita if anything could be done to dispel the dangers and the bad luck that Elegguá had foreseen.

"Let's ask him," she replied.

This time, Elegguá's response was an alafia (blessing) followed by ellife (yes). Pressed by Doña Pepita, the orisha told us that he would protect me against death and other dangers if I made him an offer of a small chicken and a large basket of fruit. But he warned me that nevertheless, the trip would be a complete waste of time and money, and that I would do better staying in New York where I belonged.

Upon hearing that Elegguá was willing to help, both

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Doña Pepita and I heaved deep sighs of relief. We closed the consultation without any further questions.

Several days later I returned to her house with the basket of fruits and the young chicken that Elegguá had requested. This was the first time that I saw an animal sacrifice, and my knees and my teeth knocked together all during the ceremony.

In an animal sacrifice there is something primeval, deeply connected with the collective unconscious of the race. It is all so simple. A quick twist of the hand, the chicken's head is gone, and a thick stream of dark-red, hot blood is steaming from the severed neck. But it is not the beheading of the animal that is so earth-shaking. It is the giving of the blood, the acceptance that blood is the life, the spirit; and that it is being returned to the divine source from where it came.

I saw the blood fall on the stone head representing Elegguá and fill the small lips formed by the cowrie shells. The blood flowed thickly over the stone and the seashell that encased it, and the image seemed to pulsate momentarily, as if it were alive. Doña Pepita added fresh honey to the blood—to "sweeten Elegguá," she told me—and soon the image was hardly visible beneath the viscous mixture.

She pulled some of the chicken's feathers and placed them over the orisha's image until it completely disappeared under a downy mound. Doña Pepita guided my hand to gather feathers that had fallen in front of the image and had been dampened by the water and the blood on the floor. This action represented my gathering together all the evil around me. She instructed me to squeeze the liquid out of the feathers in front of Elegguá and to leave the bundle of wet feathers there, together with the inevitable *derecho*.

When this last part of the ceremony was concluded, Doña Pepita took again the coconut rinds and asked Elegguá if he was pleased with the offer. The answer was a rotund *ellife*—yes! Further questioning elucidated where Elegguá wanted the body of the chicken to be disposed of—an extremely important part of the ritual, for the orishas are very particular as to the disposal of

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animal sacrifices. These remains are as sacred as the blood offered, since they represent the will of the orishas. Most of the time, the animal flesh is consumed by the santeros and their families. But sometimes, especially during cleansing ceremonies such as the one I underwent, the sacrificed animal takes on all the dangers and bad luck threatening an individual, and therefore cannot be eaten. It must be taken where the orisha who has partaken of the blood decides. Since Elegguá is the owner of all roads, animals are often brought to a crossroads, to the woods, or simply to the garbage, as this also belongs to him.

The chicken sacrificed in my name was to be brought to the woods, the *manigua-eggó*—as María called it. This eggó is alive, say the santeros, and is full of countless spirits, most of whom have died in the woods. "Never go to woods alone, florecita," María used to tell me. "Anything can happen there. Sometimes in the woods people talk to you who are not alive. They seem to be, but they are not. It's all eggó, big mystery, no one knows what it is."

I left Doña Pepita's house feeling more relaxed than I had in a long time, almost as if all my heavy worries and problems had been left at Elegguá's feet. I still felt uneasy about my trip, since the orisha had warned me against it. But now I felt confident that at least no physical harm could befall me.

A few weeks later I flew to Copenhagen. I was not at all surprised when, mostly due to a language barrier, the business offer fell through. I spent less than a week in Denmark, when I had planned to stay several months. Upon my return to the United States, the connecting flight to Frankfurt developed engine trouble. We had to return to Copenhagen after twenty minutes of flight. The transatlantic flight also developed technical difficulties, and circled the airport for several hours with faulty landing gear. When it finally landed, we stepped out of the plane with blanched faces and shaking knees to see the landing strip covered with foam. Ambulances and fire engines were nearby, obviously anticipating a major disaster. Later on I learned that the

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police, fearing the plane would fall in the vicinity, had evacuated all the major highways leading to the airport.

Perhaps it was all a coincidence. Carl Gustav Jung would have probably called it a case of synchronicity. But I believe, quite strongly, that Elegguá and the blood of a chicken saved me and more than three hundred other people from almost certain death.

In Santería, the coconut is not restricted to divination purposes. It is also used for a variety of medical cures, as I mentioned earlier, and also for dispelling negative vibrations. Many santeros recommend that their disciples bathe their heads with coconut milk every time they have a headache or feel tired and confused. Coconut milk is believed to clear the mind and to bring peace and stability to the spirit.

But perhaps the most important use of the coconut, after divination, is the cleansing ceremony known as *rogación de cabeza*, or prayer for the head. This ritual is always undertaken before any initiation and when an individual finds himself beset with difficulties. Only a competent santero can conduct the *rogación*, which is performed to refresh a person's *eledá*, or guardian angel. The santeros believe that when a person falls down easily, gets hit on the head, feels depressed, or is plagued by misfortunes and accidents, his *eledá* has become heated and needs to be refreshed. Coconut milk can help alleviate matters, but the ideal cure is a *rogación de cabeza*.

When I received the necklaces of Santería, my *madrina* performed the *rogación* for me in front of her *canastillero*, the cabinet where a santero keeps the *soperas* with the *otanes* of the saints. The *canastillero* usually has four shelves, each of which houses the *sopera* and special attributes of one of four major *orishas*. The first shelf belongs to Obatalá, the owner of the heads, whose color is white and whose most important attribute is a white dove. The second shelf belongs to Oshún, the *orisha* of river waters, who owns love, marriage, and money. Oshún's color is yellow, her metal is gold, and among her attributes she counts fans, perfumes, corals, honey, and canoes. Oshún's sis-

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ter, Yemayá, owns the third shelf, adorned with her favorite color, blue. As the owner of ocean waters, Yemayá owns sea-shells, pearls, oysters, ships, sirens, and all sea creatures. Her shelf always has small representations of her attributes, often including beautiful jewelry encrusted with pearls. Directly below is the canastillero's fourth and last shelf, devoted to Oyá, the owner of the cemetery and of the flame—one of the most powerful and respected of the female orishas. Oyá's colors are a mixture of nine shades or a flowery background where purple predominates. Some santeros believe her to be the rightful owner of lightning and fire, which she gave to Changó because she loves him.

Other orishas live in their own special cabinets. Obatalá, Oshún, Yemayá, and Oyá are the only orishas who live together in the canastillero.

These four orishas, together with Changó, Elegguá, and the Warriors, are the foundation of Santería. Orúnlá, who is the patron of the babalawos and cannot be invoked ritualistically by anyone but a babalawo, is also of great importance to the cult as the supreme oracle.

All the santeros receive the *soperas* of these orishas (except Orúnlá), with the respective *otanes*, on the day of the *asiento*, when they are initiated into the cult. Having a saint's *otanes* means that a santero can "work" with that particular orisha and get his or her special blessings.

When an *ahijado*, or godchild, of the santero visits his house, his first act, after embracing his *padrino*, is to pay *foribale* to the orishas in front of the canastillero. *Foribale* is done by lying face down on the floor if the person is the "child" of a male orisha, and first on one side and then on the other if the orisha is a female. The santero hovers watchfully to ensure that the *ahijado* does not make any mistakes. Then he mutters a few words in Yoruba, taps the *ahijado* lightly on the shoulders, and helps him up. Both *ahijado* and *padrino* salute each other, arms crossed on their chest, touching cheeks, first on one side of the face, then on the other.

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The day of my rogación, my madrina told me to bring with me two coconuts, two white candles, and a roll of cotton. One coconut was intended for reading, the other for the ritual cleansing of the head.

She sat me in front of the open canastillero on a low stool, barefoot and legs uncovered, my hands resting on my knees, palms upward. She then brought out two large dinner plates. On one she placed the five pieces of coconut used in divination, and on the other the ingredients of the cleansing, which consisted of bits of coconut, cocoa butter, and the substance known as cascarilla (*efún*), made of finely pulverized eggshells. The food of Elegguá—toasted corn and bits of smoked fish and dried possum—which is offered to the orisha after the rogación, was also reposing on the plate.

The madrina placed the dishes in front of the soperas and poured three sprinklings of water on the floor. She then began to moyubar, to ask the permission and the blessing of the dead *santeras mayores*—*aré ikú, igbón*—and of the orishas. The first prayer was to Olodumare, the other name of God in Yoruba.

"Olodumare ayuba. Boguo embelese Olodumare ayuba bai ye baye tonu. . . God almighty, we ask your blessing; we are at your feet. We do this with your permission and the permission of the faithful dead. Drive away all evil, God almighty . . ."

She continued her prayers, calling again to the spirits of the dead *iyalochas* and *babalochas* for help, saluting her own madrina and padrino, and invoking the aid of the orishas. Finishing her prayers, she picked up the two plates, faced me, and announced her intentions to the orishas.

"Emí bori. . . I now cleanse this head," she continued, this time exorcising evil and destruction. *"Cosí ikú, cosí aro, cosí eyé, cosí ofó. . . arikú babá awó."*

She carefully enumerated all the ingredients in the plates, and touched the plates to my feet, knees, hands, shoulders, forehead, and the back of my neck, praying in Yoruba all the while. When she finished this presentation, she anointed those same parts with water, then with cocoa butter. When she bent

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down to pick up the coconut rinds to ask for the orishas' blessing, I timidly interrupted her.

"Madrina," I said. "Could I ask a question of the orishas through the coconut?"

She turned to look at me, and transfixed me with a cold, severe glance.

"We are here to cleanse your head," she said, as if speaking to a small, spoiled child, "not to ask personal questions. There is a time for that, and that time is not now."

Thoroughly chastened, I lowered my head and said nothing. Where is María? I pondered sadly. She would have never answered me so. Patiently, gently, without hurting my feelings, she would have explained why I could not ask questions of the orishas during a rogación. But María had been dead a long time. Maybe she was among the aré ikú, the faithful dead whom the madrina had invoked before. Maybe her beloved presence was here now, watching as always over me, making sure that I was well protected. I felt strangely comforted by this thought and less hurt by the madrina's words.

The questioning of the orishas through the coconut gave us *alafia*, followed by *ellife*, indicating the orishas were well pleased with the ceremony. Satisfied with the result, the madrina put some bit of cocoa butter and coconut in her mouth, chewed them up, and placed the resulting paste on the top of my head, the back of my neck, the inside of my elbows, my throat, and my temples. She also placed some of the paste on my knees, the palms of my hands, and my feet. She sprinkled some of the *cascarilla* on top of this paste, covering it with clean balls of cotton.

The madrina then lit the two candles, placed them on the palms of my hands, and closed my fingers around them.

"You sit here quietly for some time," she instructed me, "and ask the orishas, especially Obatalá, to rid you of all the evil influences in your life. I'll also be praying for you."

Her voice was gentle, and I found myself warming again toward her. In my long association with her, I was to learn that her affection for me was deep and real. The severity that some-

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times surfaced in her relationships with her ahijados appeared when Santería's strict protocol was breached. After twenty-five years as an iyalocho, she lived only to serve the orishas and to help her ahijados. She was a devoted daughter of Oshún, and the orisha had given her wealth that she shared generously with her ahijados, often herself paying for some of the most costly initiations of the cult. Her only demand was that proper respect and tribute be paid to her orisha and to her.

The rogación ended with the feeding of Elegguá. Pleased with the food offering, he gave us his blessing with *iré*. Then the *madrina* tied a white handkerchief around my head and told me not to remove it until the next morning.

"To ensure Obatalá's blessing and protection," she told me. "Tomorrow you remove the paste from your head carefully and bring it back to me. I will then have someone take it to the *marigüa* to complete the rite."

"What about the paste on my neck and the rest of my body?" I asked her.

"That can be taken off now," she said, and she proceeded to remove it.

"Madrina, why did you chew the coconut and cocoa butter?"

"Because the saliva has *aché*, power. Some *santeros* will not do it because they don't want to give of their strength to their ahijados. But that's an offense to the orishas, and those *santeros* will reap their own rewards."

I heard her utter many pronouncements on the improper behavior of many *iyalochas* and *babalochas*, and yes, even some *babalawos* who, in her opinion, were a disgrace to Santería.

"This is an earth religion," she often told me, "which is the closest we can come to God. Because of that, it must be kept pure. There's no place for personal gain in Santería. Its purpose is simply to worship God and the orishas."

Maria would have echoed this sentiment with her own special grace: "Olofi and orisha *son tó*, *florecita*, you know orisha, you know all. *Ná má impo'ta*, nothing else matters . . ."

5

OF LIFE AND DEATH

When I was fifteen, María's oldest brother, who was also her favorite, became severely crippled by arthritis. She decided to leave and take care of him. The following year, I would be starting college in the university town of Río Piedras, where she could not accompany me. I was devastated by her leaving, but consoled myself with the knowledge that I could visit her as often as I liked.

I missed María most during the late afternoon, after my return from school, when we had had long conversations to instruct me in the complicated business of growing up. Around this time my father bought me an old Buick convertible, and I spent most of my free time roaming the countryside in the car. I had been driving since I was twelve, but this was the first time I was allowed to drive alone. The experience seemed like an exciting prelude to my forthcoming university stay.

Very soon I started driving to María's house after school. She was always happy to see me and invariably had a small feast waiting for me usually consisting of *surullitos de maíz* (corn fritters prepared with coconut milk), *bacalaitos* (dried fish fritters), and sometimes, as a special treat, a batch of her famed *alcapurrías* (green banana patties stuffed with spiced pork). Occasionally one of her nephews would go fishing in the river basin at the edge of town, where the ocean and river joined at high tide. He would

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return balancing on his shoulders a long wooden pole with a large tin can hanging from each end. Both cans would be filled with *setf*, a highly prized half-inch fish which could only be found in that particular river basin. He would sell his valuable cargo in the food market at a considerable profit, but he would always save a large portion of the catch for María, who would use the rare fish to prepare one of Puerto Rico's most delectable native specialties, *empanadas de setf*. She grated the yucca root and prepared a savory paste with it, stuffed the paste with the *setf*, which had been stewed in a rich sauce, and wrapped each empanada, or croquette, in banana leaves. The wrapped empanada was then roasted on live coals until the leaves were burned through, at which point it was ready to eat. The great talent of making the empanadas lies not only in the spicy fish sauce but also in timing the empanadas on the burning coals and the amount of banana leaves used for the wrapping. Properly made, the *empanada de setf* is a gourmet's dream come true, and María was an accomplished dream maker.

I always knew when María had made the empanadas because the *anafres* (large tin cans filled with live coals) would be out cooling in the yard. Inside the tiny, spotless house, María and Don Flor, her brother, would be sitting behind a heavy wooden table blackened by many years of use. A large plate of steaming empanadas would grace the center of the table, which also held three empty coconut shells polished to a high shine. These *coquitos* would later be filled with sweet hot milk and delicious coffee whipped to a high froth. María, Don Flor, and I would sit for many hours at this table, sipping coffee from the *coquitos* and eating empanadas.

Because I knew María eked a meager living from her work as a seamstress, I always brought her milk, eggs, and butter from our house. My mother always sent her money, which I took care to emphasize was for Don Flor's medicines. This way, I knew María would accept the money without embarrassment.

Often, as we sat eating the empanadas, María would comment on the magical properties of the *setf*, which she claimed

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were the result of the union of the ocean and river waters at high tide.

"Yemayá is the ocean waters, and Oshún is the river," she would say, munching on an empanada. "The two orishas are sisters, and when they meet, they overflow with joy. The setí is born out of this happiness. When you eat setí, you receive Yemayá's and Oshún's blessings."

Don Flor, who shared María's beliefs in Santería, nodded his white head in agreement.

"And that's why setí so hard to find," he added gravely. "Only those the orishas want to bless can find them."

"Then your nephew Ramón must have many blessings," I said, a twinkle in my eye. "He always finds the setí."

"Ramón is Yemayá's son," María answered, ignoring my flippancy. "And he sure has her blessings. There's always plenty of food and clothing for him and his family, and all his children are going to school. His oldest son will start college next year, like you."

I felt suddenly ashamed of my light words. "I'm sorry," I said with a deep sigh. "I still have much to learn. But it's just that the setí is only a fish. You make it seem as if everything had special reasons for being, as if the orishas were behind everything that exists."

"But they *are*, florecita," said María with a wide smile. "Everything that exists has its own special *aché*, a certain power that's up to us to find." She offered me another empanada. "Here, have some more blessings," she said, with her happy, gurgling laugh.

Some afternoons, when her workload was lighter and Don Flor was resting comfortably, María agreed to accompany me on a long drive. Often we visited the beach which extended the whole length of the town. One of our favorite haunts was *el faro*, a picturesque lighthouse on a rocky promontory on the edge of the ocean. We would sit on the rocks overlooking the water at the foot of the lighthouse and feed the *gaviotas*—seagulls—with pieces of dried bread María kept in her handbag for that purpose.

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"The gaviotas are Olocun's messengers," María told me. "Olocun be Yemayá at the bottom of the sea. She most powerful orisha. When you say her name, touch floor and kiss dust off your fingers."

She threw another piece of bread to the seagulls milling around us and continued her tale. "Many old Yorubas say Olocun is a mermaid, others say she is half man and half woman. My mammy told me that in the beginning, there was only Olorun-Olofi and Olocun. Olofi owned the skies and Olocun the oceans, but Olocun was so powerful and dangerous that as soon as Obatalá took over the earth, he chained Olocun with seven chains at the bottom of the sea, so Olocun would not cover the earth in a fit of rage. Chained like that, she can cause so much trouble when she gets angry. Imagine, florecita, what would happen if she be free."

I was pensive for some time. "María," I said finally, "we were taught in school that gravitation is what holds the ocean waters in their place and keeps them from covering the rest of the earth."

"*Gravedad*—gravitation," said María thoughtfully. "That be very good name for Obatalá's chains, florecita."

According to María, Olocun's main attributes were a *majá*—a tropical snake—and a mask. The orisha loves to dance with one of these snakes wrapped around her body. The mask symbolizes the one used—very rarely—by the babalawos who dare to perform Olocun's ritual dance. This sacred mask, one of seven belonging to the orisha, is kept zealously by her children. Olocun must receive her sacrifices on a boat far from the coast, and invariably one of those in the boat is taken by the orisha. For this reason most santeros are terrified of Olocun and very seldom dare to "feed" her.

Yemayá "begins" in Olocun, María told me. There's only one Yemayá, but she has seven paths. On each path she has a different name and does a different thing. The oldest, the most important, is Yemayá Awoyó, who wears seven skirts to fight for her children and crowns herself with Ochumare, the rainbow.

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Yemayá Ayawá wears a silver anklet and listens to her children only with her back toward them. She's wise and haughty, and even Orúnla, to whom she was once married, listens to her advice. Yemayá Okuti is a warrior and in this path was married to Oggún, the iron god. She's violent, does not forget an offense, and when she fights she carries Oggún's knife and other weapons hanging from her belt. Yemayá Konlá lives in the sea foam and often goes to sleep curled around the prow of a ship. Yemayá Mayalewo lives in the forests in a saltwater pool where she works the most powerful spells. Yemayá Asesu lives in the sewers and other unclean waters. A messenger of Olocun, she eats with the dead and is very slow in listening to prayers, which she always answers very late. Lastly, Yemayá Akuará lives in two waters, where the ocean meets the river. She's happy and loves to dance, but will not cast any spells. It was this Yemayá, according to María, who lived in the river basin where the setí could be found.

"Yemayá Akuará very good for the sick," María told me. "She takes care of them and heals them. That's why setí so good. Make my brother feel better."

"Setí would make anybody feel better, María," I said, smiling up at her.

"Specially in María's empanadas, eh, florecita?" she said, returning the smile. I laughed and she joined me, her laughter rippling joyfully in the midst of the startled seagull's cries.

Sometimes we would drive deep into the karst country, near the remote village of Esperanza, where the Arecibo Ionospheric Observatory would be built many years later. The countryside there was rugged and forbidding, thickly wooded and mountainous. Some parts of the terrain were crisscrossed by large sinkholes and underground rivers whose dull rumble could at times be heard above the ground. One of these underground currents emptied into a cave which I had never seen, but which María mentioned often. Although the countryside was the prop-

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erty of Osain, the owner of all woods, the cave and the underground river belong to Oshún.

"Oshún has many paths—*caminos*—like Yemayá," María told me. "Here *en el monte* her name is Oshún Niwe. Sometimes, when she lives in the bottom of the river, she calls herself Oshún Ololodi. She sews and knits down there surrounded by the fish. My mammy told me Ololodi is half woman, half fish. There's a name for that."

"You mean a mermaid?" I said.

"That's right, *florecita*," said María. "That's the reason she don't leave river. She sits down there all the time with a star and a half moon to give her light for her knitting. Ololodi very deaf. When you ask for a favor, she takes a long time to answer. You need to call her with the *agogó* [a ritual bell]."

"Who is the Oshún that likes to dance at parties?" I asked.

"That be Oshún Yeyé Moro," María said. "Sometimes they also call her Yeyé Cari. She loves to dance and to paint herself. She's always looking at herself in the mirror and loves perfumes and pretty clothes. Men are crazy about her, and she plays with them all the time and makes them do whatever she wants." Here María rolled her eyes and heaved a great sigh. "There are many mysteries with the saints, *florecita*. With Oshún 'specially. She be many women and still be herself only."

"I like Oshún very much," I said. "She's such a happy orisha."

"That she be, *florecita*, that she be," María said gravely. "But she can be very serious when she has to. And it's very dangerous to make her angry. She don't forgive as easy as Yemayá."

Many santeros have confirmed María's pronouncement on the dangers of offending the usually happy and charming Oshún. A now-famous story illustrating this orisha's delicate sensibilities has been reported by many *iyalochas*.

It seems that at a *güemilere* given in Havana in honor of

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Oshún, one of her children became possessed by the saint, who very promptly wrapped herself in a yellow-silk mantle and began to circulate among the guests. Never had Yeyé Cari been happier and more flirtatious. She laughed and joked and swung the fringes of her mantle from side to side with her inimitable sauciness. No one could have been more feminine and seductive, even though she was occupying a man's body. One of those at the party reached out an irreverent hand and slapped the backside of the possessed omo-Oshún and jeeringly accused him of being an *invertido*, a homosexual. His action froze everyone in the room, which became cold and silent. Oshún stopped in her tracks. Very slowly she turned to face the man who had insulted her. Looking at him hard and long, she said, "Five *irolé* for you and five *irolé* for my omo-orisha."

Irolé means day in Yoruba. Five is Oshún's adjudicated number in Santería. None of those present at the *güemilere* was unduly surprised when both Oshún's son and the man who had offended her died five days later of the same intestinal trouble. (The entire abdominal region is sacred to Oshún.)

Perhaps the most frightening part of the story is that both men were buried the same day. Their graves, coincidentally, were side by side. Twenty-five *iyalochas*, all daughters of Oshún and all possessed by the orisha, showed up at the burial. All during the services they stood by the graveside laughing in low and tenebrous tones, with a curiously mirthless and contemptuous laughter.

Many other stories about the dangers of offending the Venus of the Yorubas are told by the *santeros*, who say that Oshún is most frightening when she laughs.

"It be better when she cries, *florecita*," María used to tell me. "Anytime she cries, she's happy with you and will give you what you want."

"But why, María?"

"Oshún be very sentimental, very passionate. Feelings very strong, *alogurá*. She cries when she be happy, and laughs when she be sad."

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"But she also laughs at the parties when she's not angry," I argued.

"That be different," smiled María, patting my hand. "Nothing deep there, no feeling involved. You still have much to learn, *florequita*, but you learn."

I looked at María with understanding awakening in my mind.

"María . . . Is Oshún love?"

Her smile deepened. "Among other things, *florecita*, among other things." She tilted her head sideways in a familiar gesture and looked thoughtful for some moments. "Oshún be life, earth, nature; like life, she sometimes happy, sometimes sad, sometimes good, sometimes bad . . . Not bad, *bad*," she hastened to add, as if afraid to offend the orisha, "but bad when life's sad because there's no love. Oshún's love realized, that's why she's marriage, but she's also other kinds of love—love that's not pure," she added delicately. "In *that* path, that *camino*, she's Oshún Kayode or Oshún Miwa. She protects those women who 'lead the happy life,' *mujeres de vida alegre*, prostitutes, who worship her by offering her five egg yolks sprinkled with cinnamon on a deep white plate."

"How can Oshún help these women?" I asked. Like most adolescents, I knew more about the shadier sides of life than I was given credit for. But María, like most overly protective adults, was always very cautious when we spoke about "wordly" matters, *cosas del mundo*.

"Because they're businesswomen in a way," she said carefully. "And Oshún owns all the gold, all the money in the world. You can't make money without her help."

"Looks like Oshún owns everything, María," I smiled.

"Not everything," said María seriously, "but she's what makes life worth living . . ."

According to María, Oshún owned marriage because she had been married more than any of the other orishas. Those male orishas she has not married, she has had "adventures" with. The most important of her affairs is Changó, whom she loves pas-

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sionately. But the tempestuous god of fire, thunder, and lightning has a "legal" wife, the orisha Oba, patron of the Nigerian river of the same name. Oba is very serious and ladylike, and suffers in dignified silence all of Changó's extramarital dalliances.

Of all his *akpetebís*—mistresses—Changó is said to prefer two, the irresistible Oshún and Oyá, the mighty owner of the cemetery. Oyá is not as beautiful as Oshún, but her fiery temper fascinates Changó, who often takes her along during his most ferocious battles. Some *santeros* claim that it was Oyá, the owner of the flame, who gave to Changó the power of fire. Although Oyá and Oshún often quarrel over Changó's favors, they are good friends and "eat" together during the ritual sacrifices. Oyá's friendship is not extended to Yemayá, who she has never forgiven for tricking her into exchanging the ownership of the ocean waters, which originally belong to Oyá, for that of the cemetery, previously owned by Yemayá. Ever since that time, the two orishas detest each other and the *santeros* are very careful not to "feed" them at the same time, as they refuse to "eat" together.

Orúnla, the heavenly diviner; Ochosi, the hunter; Babalú, the patron of the sick; Aganyú, the powerful father of Changó; Inle, the divine physician; and Oggún, the iron forger, have all been at one time or another Oshún's husbands or lovers. Only Obatalá, her father, and her "confidant" Elegguá have not been linked romantically with the voluptuous orisha.

Oshún's power over men is deeply connected with her ownership of honey, a covert symbol of her sexuality. In a well-known *patakí*, Oggún was living in the woods, *eggó*. Without iron there can be no progress, and as long as Oggún, who owns the metal, stayed in the woods, mankind's evolution was at a standstill. Olofi, very worried about this state of affairs, sent Elegguá to Oggún with an order to come out into civilization. But Oggún refused to leave the woods. All the other orishas also tried to convince the savage Oggún to join them, but Oggún would not even let them into his house. Finally Oshún filled a gourd with honey, tied five silk handkerchiefs around her waist, and went into the woods in pursuit of the wild and irascible Oggún.

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As soon as Oggún saw Oshún, he hid under some bushes. The goddess pretended she had not seen Oggún and began to dance, swinging her body voluptuously from side to side. As she danced, she sang one of her most beautiful love melodies and fanned the air with her five handkerchiefs. The five gold *manillas*—bracelets—that she constantly wears jingled agreeably on her slim wrists.

Fascinated with Oshún's beauty and her music, Oggún forgot his determination to hide from human eyes, and lifted his head from behind the bushes. Swift as lightning, Oshún dipped her fingers into the gourd and spread a handful of honey over Oggún's mouth. The unsociable orisha licked the honey with delight and, like a timid deer, ventured a few steps out from the bushes. Oshún made believe she had not noticed Oggún's actions. Very nonchalantly, she swung her skirts and handkerchiefs and, continuing with her dancing and singing, moved away from Oggún. The love-struck orisha followed her like a lamb, without realizing she was leading him out of the woods. Every so often, Oshún would turn around and anoint Oggún's lips with honey.

The process took her five days, but finally she came out of the woods with Oggún blindly in tow. There was a great party in the city of Ife, where all the orishas lived, for the iron forger's return meant the continued advancement of civilization. But according to the legend, Oggún did not really change. Though he did not return to the woods, he continued to be the same blood-thirsty, ill-tempered, violent deity. From time to time, when the mood suits him, he will cause a train derailment or car accident, often helped by Eshu Ogguanilebbe, his inseparable companion. But Oshún remains forever his favorite *akpetebí*, and for her he will do anything.

In another *patakí*, it is Changó who decides to turn his back on humanity, climbs up to the top of his favorite palm tree, and refuses to come down again. Once more Oshún entices the orisha down by standing at the foot of the palm tree and very slowly removing her upper garment. When Changó sees Oshún

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naked to the waist and smiling seductively at him, he slides off the tree with the speed of lightning, and follows Oshún out of the woods and back to the city of Ife.

The stories about Oshún and her love adventures are many, but santeros remind us that it is quite wrong to think of Oshún always as a flirtatious, frivolous deity. She has many serious aspects as well, enough to make one suspect that her apparent flightiness is a pose she adopts when it suits her purposes. *Yeyé-Cari àbèberiyè moroladde codyu alamadde otto*:—the powers of Oshún are unlimited.

Oshún's honey—*ofí*—must always be tested when it is offered to her. The legend says that someone tried to poison her once by introducing a deadly philter into her honey. Ever since then the orisha demands that her *ofí* be tested in her presence to ensure that it is not poisoned.

María believed that the Oshún who lived in the hidden cave in La Esperanza was very old and very wise.

"Oshún Funké knows all the secrets of the universe. She teaches. That whole *eggó* is hers. She runs underneath and controls everything. When you stand out there, you can feel her near. All your hair stand on end."

And indeed, every time I went to the karst country with María, I felt uneasy, as if I were in the presence of something vast and indescribable. Anyone who visits that brooding and mysterious part of the island is left with the same impression of extraordinary power. Today the presence of the observatory, with its giant radar where scientists hope they will someday receive an extraterrestrial message, makes the area twice as awesome. María would undoubtedly place the entire project at Oshún Funké's feet, instead of those of Cornell University, which sponsors it.

"It's Oshún Funké," she would say, "teaching the world some of the things she knows about the universe . . ."

Sometimes, after leaving La Esperanza, María and I would go the Central Cambalache, a sugarcane refinery on the other side of town, where we could drink a tall, icy glass of *melao de anís*—molasses—diluted in water. This drink and tamarind

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were María's favorite refreshments, and I tried to indulge her as often as possible.

On our way to the Central we passed first a large pineapple field. When the pineapples were ready to be picked, the field resembled an immense checkerboard dotted with intricately carved topazes. The golden fruit glistened under the sun, crowned by the emerald thatch of its spikes. During harvest times, we would stop by the roadside and talk with the pineapple pickers. We would invariably end up with the back of the car filled with delicious fruit, for which the pickers would accept no payment.

Farther on we would come to the sugar fields, which were still cut by the jíbaro with the machete. Most of the cutting was done early during the day in order to avoid the blistering rays of the tropical sun; but in the middle of the *zafra*, the height of the sugarcane season, cutting sometimes extended until dusk. The men worked in gangs, with the best five or six cutters—the "front train"—opening the row of cane. The most skillful cutter was first in front and was appropriately called *la puerta*. In the jíbaro community, it conferred status to be a member of the "front train," because some of these men could cut over two tons of cane a day. Even today, the importance of a skilled cutter cannot be minimized because there are many fields where the curving of the ground precludes the use of sophisticated machinery.

Because the poisonous centipede abounds among cane, the men tied a piece of cord around their pants' bottoms, securing them to their ankles. Many of them worked naked from the waist up, in a futile effort to get relief from the scorching heat. The copious sweat that was the result of their labor acted as a natural protection against the sun's rays. Most of the men wore the *pava*, a large straw hat which is a traditional symbol of the jíbaro and of Puerto Rico.

The men worked in shifts, alternating their work and rest periods. On the other side of the road, the otherwise empty landscape was interrupted by an occasional blaze of color. Brazen and irrepressible, like a sudden burst of flame, the *flanboyán*—

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Puerto Rico's national tree, known commonly as the royal poinciana—invaded one's senses almost to the exclusion of everything else. There, under the generous scarlet canopy of the great flamboyán, gently cushioned by the vivid carpet of fallen blossoms, the jíbaro took his well-deserved rest. Like a modern-day Omar Khayyám seated under his tent of flamboyán blossoms, he weaved the fantasy of his hopes and dreams in the form of multiple stanzas which he called *décimas*. These, later set to music, became the ultimate expression of Puerto Rican ideals.

The pineapple and sugarcane fields, the weary jíbaro and his rude implements of labor, were all, according to María, the concern of still another Yoruba deity, Orisha-Oko. This saint, syncretized in Santería as St. Isidro Labrador, is the patron of agriculture and is symbolized by a pair of oxen pulling a plow.

"Without Orisha-Oko nobody eats," María used to tell me. "He gives good crops or takes them away. When earth is dry or it's too hot or too cold and nothing grows or grows bad, it's time to pray to Orisha-Oko."

This deity, said to give great stability to those who receive him, is a very powerful orisha whose mysteries can be given only to initiated santeros. Naturally I am not familiar with this ceremony, said to be extremely beautiful. I have, however, seen the small silver oxen and plow, topped by a tiny umbrella, which is the amulet representing the orisha. The otán, or stone, where the orisha "lives" must be found on a recently tilled field. Orisha-Oko is not "crowned" on the head of a person, like most of the other orishas. Like Olocun, who is the depths of the ocean, Orisha-Oko, who represents the earth, is too vast to fit in a human head. Only those olochas who are told during their initiation that they must receive the god of agriculture are allowed to enter into his mysteries.

The spring before I started college, my circle of friends started growing and I was allowed to go out alone more often. The week of Easter I went to Spain with one of my aunts to see the Holy Week observance in Seville. Perhaps because I was at such a

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sensitive age, the vivid re-creation of Christ's sufferings, especially during the magnificent Good Friday procession, tormented me deeply. Lifelike statues of Roman soldiers scourged and crucified Jesus all over again, the Virgin Mary cried tears of diamonds, and the body of Jesus was paraded in a glass sepulchre with a carved wooden base overlaid in gold leaf. His recumbent figure seemed to lie in uneasy slumber, the pallid cheeks overshadowed in grief. Marching behind this dolorous splendor, the hooded figures of the priests added a grim touch to the spectacle. Jesus died again in front of my eyes that week, and I found the sight devastatingly cruel.

Upon our return from Spain, we found my father waiting for us at the airport. He was unusually quiet. While we were waiting for our luggage, he took my aunt aside and spoke to her alone for a few minutes. When they finally rejoined me, I could see my aunt making a visible effort not to cry. My first thought was that something had happened to my mother, but when I questioned my father, he shook his head silently. Suddenly, inexplicably, I knew it was Maria. My father and I do not always need words to communicate with each other. Now he moved forward immediately and held me close for a few moments, then walked away abruptly and went to pick up our luggage.

Our return trip is still clear in my mind. I sat huddled in a corner of the car, lost in a pain I had never known before. My father explained briefly that soon after we had left for Spain, Maria had caught a sudden chill that developed into pneumonia. She had been buried the day before. He tried to console me with the knowledge that she had soon lapsed into unconsciousness and had not suffered a painful death, but I kept torturing myself with the irrational thought that perhaps she might not have died had I been there. Grief is the least rational of all feelings, and I simply felt I had somehow failed Maria.

Her death plunged our house into deep mourning. During nine consecutive evenings my parents and I went to the little house she had shared with Don Flor, to join her friends and

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family in the rosaries said in her memory. Don Flor bore his loss with characteristic fortitude, and the resignation I saw in his face was the last lesson I was to receive from him. Six months later, he died in his sleep.

The school term in Puerto Rico ends in May and begins again in August. Concerning my forthcoming university stay, I still had to register, choose my first-year program, and find a respectable place to live. These activities plus my regular school-work helped me adjust to María's permanent absence. I found that talking about María was extremely painful and I began to avoid any reminiscing about her with anyone who had known her. She, who had been such a happy person, would not have wanted me to think of her in sorrow. Whenever thoughts of her came to me they were invariably joyful ones. Sometimes, when I was alone, I thought I heard her laughter or felt her light touch upon my shoulders. I'd turn around expecting her to be standing by my side, and was always disappointed to find she wasn't. But the fleeting sadness never lasted because somehow I knew she was always near, even though I could not see her. Often I had the feeling that a part of her was still with me and would remain with me forever.

One day in late July, my mother packed my new white suitcase with my new clothes and one of the linen sets María had sewn and embroidered for me. She had painstakingly hand-sewn six sets of fine linen in white and various pastel colors; the sheets, pillowcases and towels all ended in matching lace which she had crocheted, and they were all embroidered with my initials. My mother had bought the materials for María, who could ill afford the expense, but she had refused to accept any payment for her prolonged labors.

A few days before the beginning of my first term, my father drove me to the girls' student hall that had been chosen as my home on campus. Since he was not allowed upstairs into the students' quarters, he sat with me for some time in the reception room, and proceeded to repeat once more the long list of warn-

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ings and admonitions I had been hearing for the past year. Finally, with obvious reluctance, he stood up and we embraced for a long time. When he drove away, I watched him from my upstairs window until the car was lost in the distance.

For the first time in my life, I was completely on my own.

6

FIRE AND LIGHTNING

During my freshman year, I became deeply interested in the humanities. My professor of philosophy was a persuasive orator who worshiped Hume, Kant, and Schopenhauer, and taught his students that the existence of God and other supernatural beings was not only unprovable but unknowable. He navigated the chasm between Spinoza's rationalism and Hume's empirical skepticism with remarkable smoothness, thereby avoiding a head-on collision with the religious sensibilities of his students, most of whom were practicing Catholics.

Although the course was a general overview of Western philosophy, Professor Machado's brilliant rhetoric made it a perfect working mold for the reshaping of his young students' minds. We soon learned to assert—with Hume—that all thinking or imagining is made of ideas, which in turn are the product of perceptions received by our senses.

"To Hume there was no such thing as mind," the professor told us, waving a fist in the air to emphasize his words. "To him, 'mind' was simply a collection of ideas and not an entity in itself. He even denied the connection between cause and effect, a concept upon which rationalism and the entire edifice of scientific thought had been built. And he did it with such unassailable logic that the shocked orthodox world had to stand up and listen."

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Here Professor Machado stopped, fist on hip, and twirled his mustache with great satisfaction, as if Hume's achievement had been his own. He waited a little to make sure the class had assimilated his words, and continued.

"And how did he do it? By correctly stating that we never perceive causes, only effects. We simply *infer* the cause from the effect, which Hume said was wrong because we cannot experience causes. But most important, Hume asserted that whatever we can 'picture' in thinking can be experienced. Conversely, what cannot be imagined cannot be experienced. This means that it is not—I repeat, it is *not* possible"—here the professor pounded his right fist on his left palm—"to have an idea or concept of self, mind, or soul because there are no impressions about them, and therefore no experiences upon which to base them. Anything that cannot be experienced cannot be imagined, and therefore cannot exist. And who can experience what the soul is, what the world of the spirit must be like, what God in his infinite essence must be? Since no one can—Hume argued—then none of these things exist."

The impeccable reasoning behind Hume's arguments—and Professor Machado's colorful but effective delivery—found a reluctant echo in my mind. For the first time in my life I had come face to face with logic, faith's most implacable enemy.

Fortunately, Professor Machado also admired the works of Kant and Schopenhauer, both of whom had been Christians and had accepted the existence of God. Although I soon grew to detest Schopenhauer's unbearable arrogance and misogynist tendencies, I welcomed Kant's ideas as a drowning person welcomes a floating tree branch. I strongly suspect that the orthodox of Hume's times must have felt the same sense of relief at Kant's efforts to slay the dragon of skepticism. But Hume would not be dismissed so easily. During one of our biweekly sessions, Professor Machado explained why.

"Kant," he said, "accepted Hume's belief that all knowledge arises from experience, but he contended that we must distinguish between what gives us knowledge and how that

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knowledge is manifested. This was important because it differed from Hume's notion that all experience, and therefore all knowledge, must come from outside. Kant believed that we have ideas that come from within. This is knowledge independent of experience, and he called it *a priori*. What is derived sensorially, through experience, is knowledge *a posteriori*. Experience is therefore shaped by *a priori* concepts, which can be likened to understanding and intuition, among other qualities of mind. This sounds more difficult than it really is, and if you use your brains as you're supposed to, you'll understand."

Nobody dared ask him to clarify his statement because we knew he would go over it many times until he was sure we understood his meaning. He walked around the room several times, puffing on his pipe, hands behind his back, waiting once more for his words to sink in. After a few minutes he continued his dissertation.

"Kant also asserted that there are 'things outside the mind,' what he called 'things in themselves,' which affect and influence the causes of our experience. He called them *noumena*, as opposed to *phenomena*, which was the name he gave to the appearances of things. But—and here is the important part of this argument—once Kant had staged this careful scenario and had his audience ready for the performance, he presented the world with his magnum opus, the great thesis that states that, contrary to what Locke, Hume, and empiricism in general believed, the mind of man is not an empty clay tablet upon which outer experiences write their whimsical tales, nor an abstract name for a series of connected ideas. Rather, the mind is an organ that classifies the multitude of sensorial experiences into ideas and gives them significance through coherent thoughts. What all this means is that man is capable of independent reasoning, of intuition, and that there is room for believing that there are things outside our realm of experience which are beyond our grasp and understanding, but which are real nevertheless. These truths are derived from the way our minds operate. This is indeed brilliant, and Kant apparently accomplished what he set out to do, namely to quench

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Hume's skepticism. Furthermore, his thinking presupposed the existence of God, even though his existence in Kant's view could not be proven by reason. But one part of Hume's argument was still unassailable—namely that anything that could not be tested, proven through experience, simply could not exist."

At this point I raised a timid hand.

"Professor?" I said. When he nodded encouragingly, I went on, feeling a bit more reassured. "Hume claimed that all the ideas in our minds are the result of experience through perceptions of the outside world. Well, it occurs to me that God is an idea in our minds, as are the concepts of soul and self. The fact that we have these ideas must mean that they must be the result of some sort of perception—which in turn means they must exist."

Professor Machado smiled and nodded approvingly. "Well thought," he said, "in a truly Kantian way. What you have said is profound, but not new. You have discovered the one weak link in Hume's armor, which means you will forever stand by Kant's side in this dilemma."

"I do prefer Kant to Hume," I said quietly. "Kant is more humane, has a greater vision. Hume is too arrogant, he's too sure he has all the answers—like Schopenhauer," I added impulsively, immediately regretting the unnecessary comment.

Professor Machado pounced on my remark. He welcomed and encouraged controversy in his class. "Why don't you like Schopenhauer?" he asked, hiding a smile behind his handlebar mustache. "He also liked Kant and believed in God."

"Maybe," I said, just a touch of defiance in my voice. "But he was still a horrible man. Since he couldn't be happy—because of his rotten character—he went around insisting that the whole world had to be miserable like him."

Professor Machado laughed at this uncharitable, if accurate, version of the philosophy of the unfortunate Schopenhauer, and the rest of the class laughed with him. When the laughter had subsided, the professor resumed once more his usual gravity.

"It seems you are a young person with some strong ideas

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of your own. Which is fine," he added with a smile, "because it means you're doing your homework. But it's important that all of you understand the significance of Schopenhauer's contribution to human thought."

He relit his pipe and continued. "Schopenhauer was indeed an unhappy man," he said thoughtfully, "and had every reason to be because by the time he was twenty-one, his father had died, his mother—who hated him—had disowned him, and he was all alone in the world. Naturally his philosophy reflects his inner torment, but it also reflects his great genius. True, he was vain and conceited and believed himself to be the greatest intellect of his time, but his claims do not offend people so much as knowing he was probably right. As we have already seen from previous discussions, Schopenhauer agreed with Kant that the experienced world consists of phenomena. But unlike Kant, he equated the noumena—the causes of the phenomena—with man's will. This will is evil and is to be blamed for all the suffering in the world. Knowledge, which is acquired through will, is also evil because it informs us of the terrible conditions under which we live in this world. But this pessimism—born of Schopenhauer's unhappy life—did not succeed in destroying his idealism. Part of his great legacy is that he revealed that thought is not an abstract concept, but a useful instrument through which we can control our actions. Most important, he taught us that it is vital for man to recognize the force of his instincts and that he's motivated by his desires to pursue each course of action. In spite of his desperate loneliness, he saw the value of art and recognized that beauty is the ultimate good. Schopenhauer was an unpopular hero, an antihero if you will, but a hero nevertheless because he dared tell the world some very unwelcome but undeniable truths. And for *that* we have to respect him."

But Professor Machado's defense of the much-maligned German philosopher did not succeed in endearing Schopenhauer to me in the slightest. Not until many years later, when I reread *The World as Will and Idea* did I fully comprehend Schopenhauer's message and see what Machado had tried in vain to teach

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me. Much of my latter interest in oriental mysticism, especially Zen Buddhism, was sparked by Schopenhauer's belief in the Hindu concept of Nirvana as the ultimate goal of all personal development. But at the age of sixteen, my romantic idealism did not take kindly to pessimistic or negative pronouncements. I wanted too much to live, to *know*, and Schopenhauer's philosophy denied me all that.

Even so, Professor Machado's erudition exacted a heavy toll upon my faith. Prodded by his vigorous dialectic, I slowly shed some of my most basic religious beliefs. With Kant and Spinoza, I came to accept that the existence of God cannot be proven by reason and can only be accepted through faith. By the end of my first year in college, I had concluded that logic supercedes all other values. Religion and superstition—as I now called María's teachings—were not based on logical foundations and therefore had to be discarded.

The decision to give up all my religious upbringing was not an easy one, and I felt as if I were uprooting my soul together with my beliefs. I spent the better part of that first year crying bitterly over my self-imposed renunciation. But I also felt that my decision was necessary. Eventually I outgrew the pain and broke away from religion. Had María still been with me, perhaps I might have had difficulty in abandoning her teachings. But her death had been a turning point in my life. I felt that a part of me had died with her, and the rebirth in my personality demanded a completely new direction. My mother's Catholic beliefs were not strong enough to withstand the onslaught of incipient existentialism. I was left alone to face the world with nothing stronger than my youth and my idealism.

The next two years passed with hardly any changes. Then something happened that forced me to reassess my values all over again.

During my junior year, one of my friends invited me to a party located a few miles from the university. Her brother agreed to pick me up at the student hall where I was lodging, and bring me back when the party was over.

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Unfortunately, the day of the party was damp and stormy. Hurricane alerts were posted throughout the island. Undaunted, I went ahead with my preparations for the party, but by the time my escort arrived, it was raining heavily and visibility was poor.

We drove for nearly an hour through nearly total darkness and torrential rain. Several times we took a wrong turn and had to stop the car to get back on the road. During one of those wrong turns, the car skidded on the wet asphalt and plunged down a ravine.

The final impact left me momentarily dazed but unhurt. When I recovered myself, I saw my friend's brother was unconscious and possibly badly injured. I had no idea where we were. The darkness was absolute. But I knew we needed help as soon as possible. Groping for the door handle, I finally managed to get out of the car.

The instant I stepped into the night, I was drenched in icy rain. The wind was so strong I could hardly manage to stand, and I had to remove my shoes to avoid slipping in the mud. I ventured a few steps forward, but the wind made me lose balance, pitching me head first on to the ground. The rain was so heavy I could hardly keep my eyes open. I made several attempts to get up, but the slippery mud prevented me from getting back on my feet. Shivering with cold, I huddled on the ground, too tired to persevere. I could see no way out as long as the rain and the darkness continued.

In my growing despair, my thoughts went back to the safety of my childhood. During heavy storms, María would hover around me, always with the same request: "Go ahead, *florecita*. Ask Changó to stop the rain. He'll do it for you."

I would laugh and call out at the top of my lungs for Changó to stop the rain. For me it was a game, and when the rain stopped shortly after my request, I was never surprised. But now, as I sat in the midst of the slashing rain and the darkness, I realized it was no longer a game.

Would it still work? Could I still conjure the simple,

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innocent childhood faith that I had abandoned in my search for reality? How could I make something happen if I didn't believe in it? Unless . . . unless that something was part of an independent reality that existed *whether or not* I believed in it!

I had nothing to lose by trying. If I failed, I would simply be back where I started from. If I succeeded, I would save myself and my companion—and also find proof of a reality entirely independent of my own.

With great effort I stood up, using both arms to protect my face from the violence of the rain. Struggling to keep my balance, I looked up to the sky, half drowned in the unending waters.

"Changó," I cried out with all my remaining strength, "can you hear me? Once you told me to call if I ever needed you. I need you now. Stop the rain. Show me the way to safety. Changó, can you hear me? Changó!"

In the distance, I heard a soft peal of thunder. I listened anxiously, and the thunder reverberated once more, this time closer. My heart started to beat faster in my chest, and suddenly I caught myself wishing that my call would go unanswered. I simply did not know if I could face an answer.

The thunder continued to grow closer. Suddenly a blinding flash crossed the sky. I watched aghast as a lightning bolt slashed through the darkness and fell directly in front of me. Small pools of water sizzled at the contact and the wet grass was burned to the ground. Almost simultaneously, the rain and the wind diminished in intensity, until only a few drops were falling softly over me.

The deafening roar that followed the lightning gave way in me to a strange composure. All my fears and misgivings seemed to disappear, and I felt a great serenity. When a second bolt of lightning fell, a little farther away, I was neither shocked nor frightened. I simply followed its direction.

In this fashion I walked out of the dark ravine, following the fiery path, as lightning bolt upon lightning bolt guided my steps.

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Several hours later, my companion and I were both receiving proper medical attention. For him, the adventure was over. For me, it was only beginning.

Many years passed after I met Changó in the ravine, and my life underwent many natural changes. I finished my studies at the University of Puerto Rico, specializing in psychology and anthropology, and soon thereafter I moved to New York to do postgraduate work at Columbia University. I never again returned to live in Puerto Rico. New York helped me survive a stormy marriage, the birth of two children, and an inevitable divorce. Then, in the early nineteen-seventies, I accepted a post as an associate English editor with the United Nations in Vienna, where I lived for several years. Through it all I continued to delve into the mysteries of Santería, as well as into other phases of the occult. At this time, I was not an active follower of Santería, merely an interested observer, but I did experiment—quite successfully—with some of the cult's magical practices. I soon discovered that I had a natural talent to "make things happen" through concentration and other simple rituals. Sometimes I used natural objects such as herbs, roots, fruits, and flowers for my magical experiments. Colored candles, incenses, and natural oils were also quite effective in helping me alter the natural course of things.

So successful was I with my magical practices that I soon graduated to more complicated rituals, some based on the practices of Santería and others on kabbalistic symbolism. Through my researches into the occult I had learned that the Jewish magic based on the Kabbalah has very strong links with the practices of Santería. These links could be traced to the fact that both systems had African roots, particularly in Egypt, where both the Jews and the Yorubas had sojourned in ancient times. The results of these researches were published in my first three books, *Santería: African Magic in Latin America*, *A Kabbalah for the Modern World*; and *The Complete Book of Spells, Ceremonies and Magic*.

In all my books, I have tried to present psychic phenomena as fact instead of fiction, and to divest "the occult" of

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its tarnished image of mere superstition and ignorance. I believe we function on a variety of mental "planes," and that psychic abilities are an intrinsic part of our human nature, which is now barely beginning to be developed.

Interestingly enough, in 1980, the *American Journal of Psychiatry* published the results of a survey that indicate that 58 percent of the deans and psychiatry professors at medical schools believe that courses in psychic phenomena should be taught to their students. Dr. Stanley Dean, clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Miami Medical School and president of the American Association for Social Psychiatry, conducted the survey. He found that of 228 of those polled, 42 percent believe in the existence of psychic phenomena, 44 percent believe psychic factors are important in healing, and 35 percent said they had undergone a psychic or paranormal experience or knew someone who had. Dr. Dean concluded that the professors "believe in psychic phenomena and want it included in medical school curricula."^{*}

Throughout my experimentations I was always aware of the risks inherent in such practices, particularly of the danger of depending exclusively on "supranormal" activities to bring about changes in the material world. I knew I was really tapping the hidden forces of the unconscious mind; the rituals and other "magical aids" simply focused my concentration on specific objectives. Through this concentration I was releasing vast amounts of psychic energy, which I was then consciously channeling to achieve a given purpose. But in the hands of a human being, such power is a dangerous weapon. Unconscious and spontaneous energy is not always easy to manipulate. Controlled and well directed, such energies can transform the world; uncontrolled and misdirected, they can destroy it. The best way to control this energy is to find the perfect channel through which to direct it. In the orishas, the santeros have found the perfect channels.

^{*}Dean, Stanley R., et al. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 137, pp. 1247-1249. October 1980.

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I believe that in reality, the orishas are certain points of contact which the Yorubas (and later on, the santeros) were able to establish within the collective unconscious. Each orisha seems to be what Carl Gustav Jung called an archetype or autonomous complex within the human personality. Because each archetype is independent from the rest of the personality and exhibits intensely individualistic characteristics, it often behaves as if it were a separate, supernatural entity.

Jung believed that each archetype controls a different aspect of the personality and/or a different human endeavor—a definition that could just as well describe the functions of the orishas. For the perfect balance of the personality (and therefore for mental health), it is vital that each archetype be well developed and also well assimilated by the individual. When one archetype is allowed to overpower the rest of the personality (as in the case of Nietzsche's Zarathustra), the end result can be a mental disturbance or dissociation of personality—a leading symptom of psychosis.

Each orisha is an archetype or autonomous complex which has been perfectly developed and balanced into the personality of the santero. Because each human individual has specific characteristics that set him apart from others, he is said to be under the "protection" of the orisha who shares those same characteristics.

When an orisha descends to take possession of a santero or a believer, that particular archetype's overpowering psychic energies are temporarily unleashed within the conscious personality. That person then displays strange powers and unusual precognitive abilities, the natural attributes of an archetype formed of pure psychic energy directed into a specific channel.

The current of deep affection and sympathy established between the orisha Changó and myself was the result of a great many similarities between us. Changó's fiery temper, mischievous sense of humor, and tenderness hidden under a cool exterior are all characteristics I share. The love he showed for me was a recognition that I was a part of him, and he a part of me.

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The powers Changó vested in me are natural attributes which are part of his particular differentiated energies. There is nothing unnatural about my being able to stop the rain or control fire. These (and many other powers which I do not possess) are simply part of the autonomous complex known as Changó.

Still, it is easier to ignore the psychological implications of the Santería phenomena and accept them at face value. Personally, I prefer to think of Changó as an *orisha*, a saint, or, in María's words, "a force of the good God."

7

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The aura of secrecy surrounding Santería's initiatory rites does not exist in Nigeria, the country of origin of the Yoruba people. Modern-day Yorubas quite openly practice their ancient religion, which is often mixed with Christian beliefs.

Many santeros believe that the mystery which is such an intrinsic part of Santería is the result of the religious intransigence the African slaves met in the New World. Faced with constant persecution, they were forced to shroud their rituals in secrecy for their religion to survive. As if the santeros were still haunted by religious intolerance, all the major initiations of Santería still demand the greatest secrecy on the part of the initiate.

When I received the *elekes*, or necklaces, of Santería, I became part of this secret tradition.

"What you're going to witness now is for your eyes and your eyes only," my *madrina* told me. "Don't ever tell anyone the details of this ceremony, or you will have the *orishas* to answer to."

"What can happen to me if I divulge the secret of the necklaces, *madrina*?"

"I really couldn't tell you," she said. "But if you break the oath, you'll find out soon enough."

The initiation took place several years ago, and I have

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never broken that oath. Nor do I intend to do so here. All I can say is that the ceremony was one of the most beautiful experiences of my life, and that it gave me an inner strength I did not have before and which has never abandoned me.

The necklaces I received that day were those of Elegguá, Obatalá, Changó, Yemayá, and Oshún. Red and black beads comprised Elegguá's necklace, all white beads Obatalá's, red and white beads Changó's, blue and crystal beads Yemayá's, and red and yellow beads Oshún's. The color of the beads sometimes varies, depending on the aspect or "path" of the orisha which pertains to the initiate. This can be ascertained only by means of the cowrie shells, which can also determine which orisha claims the initiate's head. This is only a preliminary finding, however, as only the babalawo can say without any doubt which orisha is any given person's guardian angel.

The *caracoles*, or cowrie shells, are Santería's most important divination system. At one time they belonged to Orúnla. But when Yemayá showed that she could read them better than he, Orúnla refused to read them again. All the orishas can read the caracoles, and when the santero is initiated into the religion, he receives eighteen shells for every orisha—except Elegguá, who receives twenty-one shells, one for each of his aspects. Learning how to read the caracoles is a long process, and only those santeros who receive permission from the orishas are allowed this privilege.

Though there are eighteen cowrie shells in the oracle, the santeros use only sixteen for divination. To aid in divination, several other elements are added: a small dark stone called *otá*, a longish white shell called *ayé*, a small seed called *awé ayó*, a small doll's head called *ero aworaw*, and a small ball of cascarilla or *efún*. These five elements are collectively known as *igbo*.

The santeros file the cowrie shells specially so that they are open on one side and on the other display a narrow ridge of tiny serrated teeth very much resembling a small mouth—the part of the shell that is said to "speak" during the consultation.

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When the santero throws down the shells to read them, some fall "mouth" side up, others facedown. Each pattern, or *ordun*, has a name, like those of the coconut, and also a story or *patakí* attached to it. Several orishas always "speak" through each pattern. Who speaks and what he says depends on the consultant himself, because the santero gives that person two *igbo* and asks him to hold one in each hand, without revealing which hand holds which element. Depending upon the pattern, the santero will choose the consultant's left or right hand, which will then reveal the *igbo* that will decipher the oracle's message. It is a very complicated and lengthy procedure requiring a prodigious memory, for the interpreter must remember not only which *igbo* to use, but also which orishas are speaking, and which *patakí* corresponds to which pattern. Because each pattern depends on the *igbo* held by either left or right hand, and there are five *igbos*, the oracle's possibilities are innumerable.

Because of Orúnla's mishap with Yemayá, the *babalawos* (who are the sons of Orúnla) do not read the cowrie shells. Instead, they use the *okuelé*, a chain connected by eight uneven medallions that are made sometimes of metal, sometimes of tortoise or coconut shells. As the supreme oracle in Santería, the *babalawo* must be consulted for all major ceremonies, but he is also available for regular consultations, as long as one is recommended by a santero.

A santera of my acquaintance once told me how a *babalawo* saved her life.

"He started by describing my place of work in every detail as if he had seen it," she told me. "Then he went on to say that it was on a twelfth floor and that in the back there was an old elevator used to transport heavy packages. I told him I was quite familiar with the elevator, as I sometimes used it when the regular elevators were too busy. He shook his head and warned me against using it again. Within a few days it was going to fall and I could get killed.

"I was impressed with the reading and decided to follow his advice. But force of habit was so strong that I soon forgot

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about his warning. A few days later, I was in a hurry to get home and decided to use the back elevator. As I stood waiting for it, I remembered the babalawo's words and decided not to take it after all. Just then, I heard it clanking its way up. The doors opened in front of me. I swear, instead of the elevator's door, I saw the jaws of death! I stepped back with a shiver and started to turn away. At that moment a delivery boy came running down the corridor, yelling at me to hold the elevator for him. As he was going inside the cage, I stopped him. The doors closed within inches of his face. He stared at me as if I were crazy. But just at that moment we felt a powerful vibration. Seconds later, we heard a loud crash as the elevator plummeted to the ground from the twelfth floor. I wish you could have seen the face of that delivery boy. He looked like death, and so did I."

Although my madrina cannot claim the knowledgeability of the babalawo, her registros with the cowrie shells are almost as impressive. I remember the first day she read the shells for me.

"You ate pumpkin for lunch today, didn't you?" she asked, puffing lazily on her cigar.

I stared at her in disbelief. "How do you know that?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders and pointed at the cowrie shells. "Personally, I don't know anything," she said. "Oshún told me that. She says you must never eat pumpkin in any form because you're her daughter and pumpkins belong to her. That is where she keeps her gold and where she prepares her spells, her bilongos. If you eat pumpkin, she'll make sure you will never have any money, and love will flee from your life. Do you want that to happen?"

"Of course not," I said, with a twinge of uneasiness. "But what about the pumpkin pie I ate today?"

"You didn't know, so that doesn't count," she said. "Just don't eat it from now on."

"You say I'm Oshún's daughter," I said. "I remember that when I was a little girl, Changó told me the same thing."

My madrina looked up at me. Her hands went still over

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the cowrie shells. "How did this happen?" she asked with a frown.

I told her the story of the first tambor I had attended with María and what Changó had said that day.

"This María . . . was she a santera?"

"No, she just believed very much in Santería, and she had the collares and the Warriors."

"Who gave her these initiations?" insisted my madrina.

"Her own madrina, a Cuban santera who was a descendant of the Lucumis, the Cuban Yorubas."

"I see," said my madrina, nodding her head. "There are still descendants of African slaves in Puerto Rico, aren't there?"

"Yes, mostly in the little town of Loíza Aldea. María herself had some family in Loíza. Her mother was Yoruba."

"That explains a lot," said my madrina. "Do you know which orisha claimed María as a daughter?"

I recalled María's preference for the color white. "Obatalá," I said.

"That explains the strong link between you and her. Obatalá is also your father," said my madrina.

"But I thought you said I was the daughter of Oshún."

"Oshún is your mother and your guardian angel—the one in charge of your destiny. But Obatalá is your father," she explained. "We all have a father and a mother among the orishas."

"And what about Changó?" I asked her. "What is the link with him?"

"You are the daughter of Oshún," she answered. "And Changó loves her very much. He favors all her children. But for you he obviously has special affection. Pray to him always, and buy him apples and bananas, his favorite fruits. That way he will always protect you."

I told her of my experiences with Changó in Vienna.

"Once," I told her, "after asking him for a special favor, I came face to face with a black soldier in the corner of a Viennese street. The soldier was dressed in green fatigues, which soldiers

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wear only within their camps. He looked directly at me with a wide, knowing smile, and I just knew that was no ordinary soldier. There are no American army camps in Austria, and there are no black soldiers in the Austrian army. I know this sounds irrational, but could that have been Changó?"

"Why do you call it irrational?" she asked, looking at me askance. "Every day we see and do irrational things and think nothing of it. Don't you think radio waves and television are irrational? Or do you think seeing people and buildings and wild animals moving inside a box is *natural*?"

"But that's part of science technology," I said. "It's all based on natural laws."

"So are the orishas based on natural laws," she answered. "God—Olofi—is in nature. So are the orishas. And there are laws, mysteries in nature, which we know nothing about. The only thing we know for sure in this world is that everything is possible. Of course that could have been Changó. Why not? He chose to show himself to you as a soldier because he is a Warrior. He was dressed in fatigues because he was at war, working for you. That was his message. He had heard your prayer and he wanted you to know he was working for you. Did you get what you asked him for?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I did," I said. "But it happened in such a natural way that I never even connected him with it. I thought it was a coincidence; that it would have happened that way anyway."

"There are no coincidences in this world," she said firmly. "Everything that happens has already been preordained."

"But that precludes free will," I said dubiously. "Didn't God make us free to choose what we want in life?"

"Of course," she smiled.

"Then how can everything be preordained?"

"Because he already knows what we're going to choose. He wouldn't be God otherwise."

This belief is not the exclusive property of Santería. Jung

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once stated that man only *believes* he wills and chooses, and does not notice that he is already possessed by the autonomous complex which he calls God. This complex is an expression of the life energy in the psyche. Jung also theorized that the phenomena we call coincidences are in reality the result of the interrelation of cosmic forces in the space-time continuum, where past, present, and future blend into eternity. Jung called these "coincidences" synchronized events that are preplanned by the deep unconscious.

Several months after giving me the necklaces, my *madrina* telephoned me and asked me to come to her house. Although I had not yet received the Warriors, I possessed a stone image of *Elegguá* that I had purchased on impulse some years before. My *madrina* believed that because this image "had never been fed," it had no powers and could only cause me trouble. (Santeros insist that keeping any unconsecrated image or fetish in a house will create psychic disturbances for its owner.)

When I arrived at my *madrina's* house, she was already dressed and waiting for me. After we greeted each other and I paid *foribale* in front of her *canastillero*, we went to her kitchen for some tea.

"Are you busy today?" she asked, stirring her tea absently.

"Not particularly," I said. "Why?"

"Because I would like to feed your *Elegguá* today."

I put down my tea mug and looked at her inquiringly. "*Madrina*," I said, "that *Elegguá* has no foundation. It's just an image I bought because I liked it. How can you 'feed' it?"

She continued to sip her tea, but the frown creasing her forehead told me she wasn't as calm as she seemed. Finally, she pushed her mug away with a sign and lit a cigar. I watched her silently, waiting for her to speak.

Dña Pepita, who had introduced us, had warned me several times never to press or contradict her. "She's an old *santera*," *Dña Pepita* told me. "She has more than twenty-five years as an *iyalocha*. That means she lives by the old Yoruba

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traditions. I have seen her slap one of her ahijados, a fifty-year-old man, because he broke one of the regulations of the religion. And the ahijado fell down on his knees and started to cry, asking her forgiveness. So remember, this is one of the oldest, most famous, and most respected *santeras mayores*. You don't question, you don't argue. You just do. In Santería, if you don't obey and you don't respect, you have no protection—from the *santeros* or from the *orishas*."

"You always question what I tell you," my *madrina* said finally. "Why? Don't you trust me?"

Her cigar had gone out. She frowned and relit it with an embossed gold lighter. I always found it difficult to associate her pale slender hands, with the exquisitely manicured nails, with the often strenuous tasks of Santería. Her face, finely creased with the care and toil of many years, had the same delicate fragility. But behind it lay enormous courage and willpower.

"You know I trust you, *madrina*," I smiled. "But how can I learn if I don't ask questions?"

She snorted, but her face relaxed, and I knew she was not so upset anymore.

"How do you propose to feed my *Elegguá*?" I ventured cautiously. "The image is in my house. If you had told me over the telephone you planned to feed it, I would have brought it with me."

"I didn't tell you to bring it," she said, "because he must be fed in your house. I know this *Elegguá* has no foundation, but it belongs to you. Someday, when you receive the Warriors, this same image can be used to contain *Elegguá's* secrets. Wouldn't you like to consecrate it now, so *Elegguá* can begin to help you right away?"

Though I did not dare tell her, I wasn't sure I would ever receive the Warriors. I was not sure I wanted to make the total commitment that Santería demands of its practitioners. But I knew my *madrina* would have never been able to understand my hesitation.

"If *Elegguá* has to be fed, I'd prefer to do it here," I said

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evasively. "Besides, I have made no preparation for this sort of thing."

"There's no need for special preparations," she said. A certain ring of finality in her voice told me her mind was made up. "Where do you keep this image?"

"In my bedroom," I said, feeling decidedly uncomfortable at the idea of an animal sacrifice taking place in my house. "I only keep it there out of devotion to Elegguá. It's not the most comfortable place in the world to sacrifice to him."

"Any place is the proper place to show respect to a saint," she said severely. "What I want to know is if you're willing to do as you're told."

"Of course I'll do what you tell me, *madrina*. I know you know best."

I was still full of misgivings, but did not want to stop my apprenticeship with her. After all, what difference could it make to "feed" Elegguá in my house rather than hers? But there was a difference—as I was soon to find out.

Apparently pleased, my *madrina* stood up and began to clear the table. I tried to help her, but she motioned me away with a gesture. "Wait for me outside," she said. "I'll join you presently."

By "outside," she meant the hall where the *canastillero* was kept. While I waited for her, I walked around looking at the *orishas'* various implements. Close to the front door was the cabinet where she kept her Warriors and Elegguá. Next to that was another, enclosing the attributes and *otanes* of Babalú-Ayé, syncretized as St. Lazarus, patron of the sick. The *batea*, or large wooden bowl with Changó's *otanes*, sat squarely over a large drum painted in red and white—a symbol of Changó's love of music and dancing. Draped loosely over the drum was Changó's *collar de mazo*, one of the large, multiple-strand necklaces the *santero* receives the day of the *asiento*. Next to the *batea* were a tiny pair of shoes, a small car, a pair of *maracas*, and several large wooden axes painted in red and white, all attributes of the god of lightning.

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To the left of Changó's batea was a large urn in blue and silver shades, draped in a thin fishnet, all embroidered with fine cultured pearls. A large starfish and an extensive variety of sea shells and huge corals surrounded this urn, the symbol of Olocun, the aspect of Yemayá that represents the depths of the ocean. Olocun sometimes appears in dreams as a beautiful black woman, with a round face and very long, straight eyelashes. On each of her cheeks are painted the *yeza*, the three horizontal lines distinctive of Yoruba females.

Olocun is sometimes represented as a male and other times as a female orisha; some santeros say that this saint is a hermaphrodite. She is much feared and respected, and only a few old santeros dare to dance her special rhythms, with their faces covered with a mask so that she will not kill them. The acquisition of Olocun's urn, one of the most beautiful initiations of Santería, is said to give the recipient great stability. But not just anyone can have her; only those who receive her special *letra* (a special pattern in the babalawo's okuelé) are allowed to be initiated into her mysteries.

María thought it foolhardy to dance to Olocun: "It's like trying to fit all ocean water in human head," she used to tell me. "But head's too small, Olocun don't fit. Then she gets angry, and tears head off!" Every time she mentioned this formidable orisha, María touched her fingers to the floor and kissed the dust she gathered. "To show respect, florecita," she would say. "Very bad to offend Olocun. She can kill."

I had completed the circuit of the long hall, going past the canastillero with the soperas of Obatalá, Oshún, Yemayá, and Oyá, and was standing once more in front of the door. On a small shelf in a corner near the ceiling stood a small silver rooster balanced atop a silver chalice. I was curiously inspecting it when my madrina joined me, ready to leave.

"What is the meaning of this rooster, madrina?" I asked.

"That is Osun," she said, opening the door. "He's the guardian of the house and of my life. Whenever danger is near, Osun falls from the shelf to the floor, or simply turns over. This

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gives me time to find out through the caracoles what the danger is and take the appropriate measures."

Something in my eyes must have betrayed my disbelief. She smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

"When you have lived as long as I have," she said, "and have had the experiences I've had with the saints, you will have no more doubts." She pushed me gently out of the house, and closed the door behind her.

"I've been thinking," she said as I helped her into the car. "Maybe I should give you a *palo* today. It's a beautiful day, perfect for that kind of thing."

I looked at her inquiringly. "What's a *palo*, *madrina*?"

"That's a piece of branch you pick up in the woods and consecrate it to the *ikú*, the dead," she said. "In Santería, one must pay respect to the dead before the saints. The *ikú* are all the dead people in your family, your ancestors. If you pray to your *ikú* and make sure they are all well advanced in the spiritual world, they will give you their protection and provide the foundation upon which you can receive Santería's initiations. If you do this, you will see how all your personal affairs will straighten themselves out, and you will accomplish everything you set out to do."

I had never been able to reconcile myself with ancestor worship, one of Santería's most important aspects. I believed in praying to the dead, and had often had masses said for deceased members of my family. But asking the dead for help smacked to me of necromancy, and sent shivers down my spine.

"I'm not sure I want the *palo*, *madrina*," I said cautiously, not wanting to offend her. "Can't I just work with the *orishas* without involving myself with the dead?"

She sighed impatiently. "But you are involved with the dead. We all are, whether we believe in Santería or not," she said. "That's what people don't understand. The souls of the dead gravitate naturally to the members of their families on earth, hoping they will receive help in the form of candles and prayers. When this help is not forthcoming, the souls become earth-

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bound, inflicting unconscious harm on their former relatives. A great deal of mankind's problems and tragedies could be alleviated if people took better care of their dead. When you asked me to be your *madrina*," she added quietly, "you promised you would trust me and follow my advice, no matter what. If you refuse to do this, I will consider your apprenticeship ended, and you will be free to leave my house."

I knew the house she was referring to was not the place where she lived, but rather the large conglomeration of *iyalochas* and *babalochas* of which she was the center.

"But I don't want to leave your house," I said.

"It's not a question of what you want," she answered. "You must learn to work with the dead and lose your fear of them, or you cannot remain in *Santería*. Now if you don't want to receive the *palo*, please take me back home, and we will not discuss it any further."

"We're closer to my house than yours," I told her. "Let's go there instead."

"Will you accept the *palo*?" she insisted.

"Yes, *madrina*, I will."

"Then first let's drive to a chicken farm, where we can buy two chickens—one for *Elegguá* and one to consecrate the *palo*," she said, settling herself more comfortably in her seat.

Obediently I drove to a place near my house where live poultry could be bought and watched as she carefully chose two small, very young male chickens with black-and-white mottled feathers.

"This is the type of chicken one sacrifices to *Elegguá*," she explained. "Remember, they must be male; never offer *Elegguá* female chickens. He will not accept them."

We drove on to a wooded park nearby that was, as I mentioned to my *madrina*, very popular with joggers and cyclists.

"Don't worry," she said with quiet assurance. "They will not see us. Once we are in the woods, *Osain*, the owner of the forests, will protect us from human eyes."

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"I really hope so, *madrina*," I said. "Woods in New York can be very dangerous for women."

We parked the car on one of the park's lanes and walked to the edge of the woods. The month was November, and the ground was richly carpeted with dry leaves in a fantastic array of colors. Burnt sienna, bright ochre, magenta, vermillion, russet—all the magical hues of the artist's palette rustled under our feet. My *madrina* opened her capacious handbag and took out two pennies.

"This is Osain's *derecho*," she explained. "Remember, each time you come to the woods to do any work, you must pay him his dues."

She placed the money on the damp grass and said a short prayer in Yoruba.

"Osain awaniye elese ko ewe lere miye oyare obe biye . . .
Powerful Osain, who heals with his herbs, we pray that your herbs be favorable to us, and bring us good health and many blessings . . ."

I did not tell my *madrina* that when I was a child, María had taught me this same prayer, or one very similar. She had also taught me of the *derecho* one must always leave at the edge of the woods, and how to recognize the various *ewe*, or herbs, of Osain.

This one-eyed, one-armed, one-legged saint, without whom *Santería* could not exist, was left in this incomplete condition after a fiery struggle with another *orisha*. Some *santeros* believe that Changó, angered by Osain's interest in Oyá (one of Changó's paramours), blasted Osain with a bolt of lightning, leaving him lame and blind forever. But another legend claims that Changó and Osain are very good friends who would never hurt each other; and that it was Orúnla, the owner of the Table of Ifá, who maimed Osain. According to this second version, Changó taught Orúnla how to prepare an *ebbó* with twelve fire torches and twelve flintstones (*oddunrís*). This spell resulted in a bolt of lightning that set fire to the woods, trapping Osain within. Whenever there is a forest fire, *santeros* say that Osain and Orúnla are at each other's throats all over again.

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In the woods, we immediately came to a small hill, thinly covered with trees.

"Whenever you see a hill in the woods, remember it is sacred to Olofi," said my madrina. "All mountains and hills are his, but those in the woods are particularly blessed."

She bent down and picked up a round, smooth stone. "How beautiful!" she exclaimed. "See how perfectly smooth and sculptured it is. Such stones are not common, but here they are plentiful." She bent down again, dislodged several other stones with some difficulty, and handed them over to me. "These are the true jewels of the earth, untouched by human hands," she said. "More precious than diamonds and emeralds because they have the strength of the orishas. With these you can build empires, if you only know how to use them." She paused for a moment, then added, "And if you listen to me, I'll tell you how."

"What should I do with them, madrina?" I asked her.

"Keep them until it is time to consecrate them to Changó," she answered. "I'll tell you when."

Opening her handbag again, she pulled out a small bottle of rum and a plastic bag filled with a mixture of popcorn, toasted corn, and bits of smoked fish and dried possum. She handed both to me, and paused momentarily to light a fresh cigar.

"I will walk in front of you now," she told me. "But when we return, you must walk in front of me. Follow me, throwing handfuls of the corn mixture to both sides of the woods as we move along. The food is for Osain and the ikú who live in the forest, so the earth will be richer and more fertile with our offering. As you walk along, keep looking at the ground until you see a broken branch that appeals to you. When you do, pick it up at once. It is your palo."

She took the rum from my hands and started to walk into the woods. Every once in a while, she would take a mouthful of rum, pursing her lips tightly and forcing the liquid out, to spray the trees and the shrubbery with a fine mist. (This technique is harder than it sounds, and took me a long time to perfect.)

As she walked, smoking and spraying, my madrina

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chanted to the woods in Yoruba, ancient songs which had been heard by the earth since primordial times. Very slowly, but unmistakably, the atmosphere around us began to change. The light breeze that had been running through the trees suddenly stopped. The air seemed heavy and motionless, as if it had a form. The leaves were immobile, as if frozen in time, and I could see dozens of birds among the tree branches, all curiously silent and observant, listening intently to the plaintive singing in the ancient, primeval tongue.

Following my *madrina's* admonition, I walked behind her, dispersing the corn mixture to the left and to the right of our trail, looking for a suitable tree branch. Among the bright leaves, the dull glint of silver suddenly caught my eye. I stirred the leaves with the tip of my boot and uncovered a natural crook, formed by a twisted tree branch, weathered to a silver patina. I picked it up and called out to my *madrina* that I had found the *palo* we were searching for.

She waited for me to join her and reached out for the crook.

"That's a real beauty," she said admiringly, "and it has the blessing of *Osain* because it is a twisted tree branch with a handle—his traditional symbol in *Santería*."

"What do we do now?" I asked.

"We thank *Osain* for his blessings and leave nine pennies where you found the branch as a *derecho* for the dead, for whom it is intended." She took the nine pennies from her handbag and gave them to me. While I deposited them among the leaves, she said the last prayer to *Osain*.

We returned the same way we came, this time with me in the lead.

"Use the *palo* as a shepherd's staff," my *madrina* told me. "Lean on it, get used to its feel, for it will always be yours, and it will always provide you with strength and comfort, especially when things look darkest."

We left the park, drove directly to my house, and had a late lunch. Then my *madrina* sat in my study and proceeded to

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adorn the palo with ribbons and tiny bells she had brought from her house. She refused to accept any payment for them or for the chickens, which she had bought with her own money.

"You just pay the derecho," she said. "That's three-fifteen for Elegguá and two dollars for the dead. That sacred money must always be paid for the ebbó to be successful."

She had brought nine different shades of ribbons, about half an inch in width. These she tied laboriously to the palo, one after the other, forming a silky row that reached nearly to the ground. She attached the bells to the ends of the ribbons and when she was finished jingled the crook by tapping it lightly against the floor. She then handed it to me.

"Here's your palo," she said, with a smile. "May it bring you many blessings."

"Thank you, madrina," I said, hugging her warmly. "It looks so pretty, I think I will keep it in my study."

"But it isn't meant for the study," she said. "It's meant for the bathroom, where one prays to and feeds the dead."

I was familiar with this custom of Santería, but had never been able to understand it.

"Why the bathroom?"

"Because it is the coldest and darkest room in a house, not unlike a tomb. And because it is the place where one cleanses the body of all its impurities."

She stood up with some effort and picked up her handbag and the palo. "Bring one of the chickens and come with me to the bathroom," she said.

This was the part I dreaded the most, but I opened the box with the chickens, picked up one at random, and followed my madrina. She leaned the palo against one of the bathroom walls, and out of her seemingly bottomless handbag pulled a box of candles, a small candlestick, a small bottle of rum, a package of panatelas, a jar of honey, another jar with the familiar corn mixture, and matches, lining them all up carefully on the floor. She stood up, asked me to stand by the bathroom door, and took the chicken from my hand. Holding the animal by its legs, she

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quickly passed it all over my body, starting from the top of my head and ending at the feet.

"Do you know why I'm doing this?" she asked me.

"To transfer any negative vibrations around me to the chicken," she answered.

She snorted and nodded. "Right. Now hold the chicken for me while I consecrate it."

I took the chicken from her hands and watched her as she lit the eternal cigar, turned it around, and inserted the lit part inside her mouth. I winced instinctively, expecting it to burn her tongue and lips. But she simply blew thick clouds of smoke through the unlit end of the cigar, which acted in every way as an open spout. When the bathroom was heavy with smoke, she put the cigar aside, and took a generous mouthful of rum and sprayed the chicken with a fine mist. She then took the chicken from my hands and held it right over the palo.

At this point she began to moyubar, invoking the dead in Yoruba.

"Iká la tigwá ayá un bai bai, anó la tigwá ayá un bai bai, eyé la tigwá ayá un bai bai, ofó la tigwá ayá un bai bai . . . owé, owé, lasakó owé ayá un bai bai . . ."

She began to name all the dead santeros mayores, one by one, as her own madrina had taught her. She then turned to me and asked me to mention all the people in my family who had died, starting with my great-great-grandparents and moving on to the present. This took some thought, but I finally accomplished it.

As soon as the lengthy prayers were over, she flipped her wrist so quickly I only caught the glint of her gold bracelets as they danced on her wrist, tearing the chicken's head with one swift motion. And then there was a stream of blood falling directly on to the crook's silvery bark and many-colored ribbons.

"Quickly, open the jar of honey and pour some of it over the palo." As she spoke, she moved the chicken's body all over the crook, to make sure it was thoroughly sprinkled with blood.

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As I poured the honey over the palo, I automatically tasted it with a forefinger, following the old tradition of Santería that says that honey belongs to Oshún. Since she was once poisoned with honey, this liquid must always be tasted during an *ebbó* so the orisha knows the honey is free of impurities.

After sprinkling the palo with blood, my *madrina* placed the chicken's body on the floor next to the palo and began pulling feathers from the bird, which she then placed over the palo. The blood and honey caused the feathers to stick to the branch, covering some but not all of the ribbons. The palo's final appearance was curiously attractive. Contrary to my worst fears, I did not recoil from it in horror but felt rather close to it, as if it embodied much positive strength.

My *madrina* told me to place a glass of cool water by the palo, and set a lighted candle on the candlestick next to the water. From her handbag she pulled out four pieces of coconut, refreshed them with cool water, and asked the *ikú* where they wished the body of the chicken to be disposed of. The answer was the woods, where the remains of the chicken would be dutifully buried the next day.

Now it was time to "feed" the dead. My *madrina* placed on the floor a small dish with the corn mixture and some of the remnants of our lunch.

"Remember, the dead don't eat like we do," she warned me. "But food is energy, and it is this energy that we are offering to our ancestors. Since the food you are offering is part of your own, it is as if you were offering them a part of your own energy supply."

"But it is all so primitive, *madrina*," I said doubtfully. "It is as if I were renouncing all civilized thought."

"You're not doing anything of the sort," she said, shaking her head. "You haven't renounced anything. You're still very much the same person you were before the ceremony. What you have done is to acknowledge the existence of a spiritual reality parallel to your physical body, and to accept the close identifica-

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tion between all natural things. The journey you have embarked on is a journey within, and because of it, you will emerge a better human being."

"But what about the chicken?" I insisted. "Isn't it cruel to deprive it of its life?"

"Do you believe in reincarnation and spiritual evolution?" she asked.

"Yes, I do," I said. "These are beliefs held by most of the world's major religions."

"Well, then, think that its sacrifice for a spiritual cause will vastly advance this chicken's spiritual evolution. Do you think it would have advanced as much—or suffered less—if it had died to grace your table and satisfy your hunger?"

"I never thought of it that way," I said. I was to remember these words many times. As I grew closer to the mysteries of Santería, I often watched ritual sacrifices and wondered at the ultimate destiny of the energies that made up the animal's spiritual essence.

"There's no cruelty in anything we do in Santería," said my madrina softly. "Our only concern is to serve God and the orishas by observing certain natural laws. Sacrifice is sometimes necessary because it too is a natural law. You will learn more as time goes on. But now it's time to feed Elegguá. He has waited long enough."

As she offered the second chicken to Elegguá, I found myself thinking of the orisha instead of the chicken. I visualized him as a pulsating energy that absorbed the animal sacrifice, transmuting it to radiant, eternal life. I knew then why the madrina wanted to sacrifice to Elegguá in my house. She wanted his essence to permeate all that surrounded me. I felt his powerful emanation touch me momentarily, filling me with a great serenity. Feeling that, I understood at last the meaning of sacrifice and the unity of things.

8

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In the spring of 1980, the ASPCA, apparently acting on a neighbor's tip, raided an apartment in the Bronx where an asiento was about to take place. According to an article in *The New York Times*,* ASPCA agents came upon "a scene of blood-spattered confusion." Several chickens and hamsters and a goat had already been sacrificed, and the raiders confiscated eighteen chickens, three goats, and several hamsters.

This report gave Santería a few months of adverse and much sensationalized publicity, when a great deal of speculation took place on the purpose of the sacrifices. The press, obviously unfamiliar with Santería, commonly used terms like "satanic cults" and "bizarre ritualistic activities."** This near-hysteria was quite understandable. Ritualistic killings and "blood sacrifices" are supposed to be the exclusive realm of horror stories and B-grade films, and are not supposed to happen in real life. It compounded the santeros' plight when a young boy was found hanging upside down from a tree in a Bronx park, with his throat cut and a bottle filled with his blood at the roots of the tree. When two bodies showed up in Manhattan, completely drained of

*See *The New York Times*, May 24, 1980, p. 27.

**See the *New York Post*, April 9, 1980.

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blood and showing all the signs of ritualistic murder, again Santería was momentarily suspect.

The santeros withstood all these suspicions with their proverbial equanimity. "It will be all right," my madrina commented. "It's all in the hands of God and the orishas. This religion did not come all the way from Africa to fall prey to religious discrimination."

Oddly enough, this statement found echoes in the attitudes of the ASPCA, who publicly expressed the sentiment that there was a "great deal of good in this religion,"⁴ and that they were not trying to persecute people for their religious beliefs. A high official of the ASPCA went so far as saying in the same newspaper interview that he only wished that "we could get together with the babalawos and talk. Maybe we could straighten this thing out."⁵

Around the same time these articles appeared, a high official of a well-known civic organization had been creating a great deal of legal difficulties for the santeros. Finally tired of his relentless persecution, a group of olochas gathered together in Upper Manhattan to discuss the situation. What their final decision was I do not know, but one of the iyalochas who had attended the meeting expressed the feelings of the olochas during a tambor shortly afterwards.

"We do not wish to break the law in any way," she told me, "and would be willing to pay a license fee for the animal sacrifices to the proper authorities, or do whatever is necessary to comply with the law. We can understand people's curiosity and concern, and we would welcome the opportunity to show the world that our religion is pure and beautiful. What we will not tolerate is the abuse and constant persecution being inflicted upon us by this particular official." She paused for some moments, then went on grimly. "And we are going to do something about it. We don't believe in putting out contracts on someone's life like the Mafia does. But we have our ways. . . ."

⁴See the *Sunday News Magazine*, August 10, 1980.

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Several weeks later I met the official in question, and he offered to drive me home. Our route took us through one of New York's major highways. All during the trip, his brand new car chugged reluctantly along the highway, threatening to stop at every turn of the road. When we finally arrived at my house, the official turned to me and said, "Please, Miss Wippler, tell the santeros to get off my back!"

I looked at him curiously.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "What have the santeros done to you?"

He covered his face with trembling hands. "Everything," he said hoarsely. "I've lost my job. My finances are a disaster, my home life is collapsing, my health is deteriorating, even my car is giving up on me. I don't know what to do anymore." He uncovered his face, and I could see the desperation in his eyes. His hand reached out and touched mine. "Please tell them to lay off me. I won't bother them anymore. I promise. Just tell them to leave me alone!"

"But how do you know the santeros have anything to do with this?" I asked him. "It could all be a coincidence." I did not believe my own words, but I wanted to allay his fears.

"It's no coincidence," he insisted. "It's them. I know! Please promise me you'll speak to them."

I remembered the iyalocha's words at the tambor and shivered a little. "I'll convey your message to the santeros," I told him. "I can't make any promises, but I'll speak with them."

When I spoke to the same iyalocha who had made the veiled threat, she shrugged her shoulders. "He'll be all right now," she told me. "We won't cause him any trouble as long as he leaves us in peace."

I do not know what happened after this, because I never heard from the man again. But the santeros, the ASPCA, and the Department of Health are at present discussing the legal problems of animal sacrifices and are reportedly making progress.

Blood sacrifice is not new. The Bible is full of instances where the Hebrews offered blood sacrifices to God. The ritual of

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circumcision and Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son are only two examples of the importance of blood to establish a covenant with the Deity. "For blood is the life," say the scriptures. In the first chapter of Leviticus, God speaks to Moses out of the tabernacle about how a burnt offering must be presented to him:

"And he shall kill the bullock before the Lord: and the priests, Aaron's sons, shall bring the blood, and sprinkle the blood round about the altar that is by the door of the tabernacle of the congregation . . ." (Leviticus 1:5)

The book of Numbers relates that when Moses had fully set up the tabernacle and anointed and sanctified it, the twelve princes who represented the twelve tribes of Israel came to bring their offerings to honor the Lord.

"And the Lord said to Moses, They shall offer their offering, each prince on his day, for the dedication of the altar . . . And he that offered his offering the first day was Nāhshon the son of Amminadab, of the tribe of Judah:

"And his offering was one silver charger, the weight thereof was a hundred and thirty shekels, one silver bowl of seventy shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary: both of them were full of fine flour mingled with oil for a meat offering:

"One spoon of ten shekels of gold, full of incense:

"One young bullock, one ram, one lamb of the first year, for a burnt offering:

"And for a sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, five lambs of the first year: this was the offering of Nāhshon, the son of Amminadab . . ." (Numbers 7:11-17)

When Jesus was born, his mother Mary, unable to bring the required lamb of the first year for her ritual cleansing, brought instead two young pigeons to the priest, one for the burnt offering and the other for a sin offering (Luke 2:22-24). These instructions are clearly delineated in Chapter 12 of Leviticus.

Jesus himself underlined the importance of blood sacrifice during the Last Supper, when he raised a goblet of wine

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and said to his disciples: "Drink ye all of it. For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:27-28). This "blood sacrifice" of Jesus is still enacted in the Catholic mass.

To ensure proper observance of the ancient laws, modern rabbis have acquired special permits that allow them to sacrifice the animals that are going to be consumed by their congregations. These animals are still slaughtered in strict accordance with the Mosaic laws.

Most of the animals sacrificed in Santería are also consumed by the santeros and their families. This meat, consecrated to the orishas, is believed to have great healing powers, and members of the religion consider themselves lucky when they can partake of it. But when an animal has been sacrificed during a ritual cleansing, it is believed to have absorbed the problems, dangers, and negative vibrations of the person who underwent the cleansing, and is disposed of without being eaten.

"Animals are being slaughtered by the millions every day for meat consumption," said my madrina, puffing as always on her cigar. "Why can't God and the orishas have a few?" She shook her head and blew out a thick cloud of smoke. "It's the hypocrisy I don't like," she added. "Those same people who cry out because the santeros give a few animals to the orishas don't shed any tears over their roast lamb or chicken cacciatore. And those animals suffer when they die. Have you ever been to a slaughterhouse? Well, I have. The stench of decaying blood is so terrible the animals sense their fate long before they are killed. The animals that are sacrificed to the orishas are killed swiftly, gently, out of respect for the saints. They don't suffer half as much."

"But they do suffer, madrina," I said quietly.

"Don't you?" she answered bluntly. "Doesn't everyone? Would you rather have spared the life of the chicken you gave to Elegguá and died instead with over three hundred people on your way back from Denmark?"

"Of course not," I said, with an uncomfortable smile.

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"And what do you think the people on that plane would have said?" she insisted. "What do you think their choice would have been?"

"Most of them might not have believed it," I said.

"That's not true," my madrina said firmly. "People believe anything when they are facing death."

Another time, upon my querying her on her constant smoking of a cigar, she returned to the question of sacrifice.

"Everything in nature is full of energy, *aché*, life," she said. "When you give some of this energy to the orishas, it is returned to you a thousandfold in whichever form you prefer. Blood is the highest concentration of energy, but not the only one. Candles, for instance, give out a great deal of energy because of the wax they're made of. When you light a candle, the energies which are part of the wax are released into the atmosphere. If the candle is dedicated to God or to one of the orishas, who are manifestations of God, the wax's energy is absorbed by the force to whom it is dedicated."

"Like the burnt sacrifices of the ancient Hebrews," I interposed.

"Yes," said my madrina approvingly. "It's the same thing with a cigar. Tobacco is a very potent plant. It has a lot of power. When you smoke a strong cigar, you are releasing a great deal of energy. If you're consciously directing the smoke to work for you, it will. A lot of other weeds do the same thing, but some, like marijuana and mescal, are bad because they cannot be directed or controlled. They usually control you."

"Are cigarettes potent enough to be used like the cigar?"

"No," she said, "because you inhale a cigarette's smoke. That way, you're not releasing any energies."

"A few years ago," I said, "Barbara Walters went to Cuba to interview Fidel Castro. When I saw the film in New York I noticed that all during their conversation, Fidel kept on smoking long havanas and blowing out large clouds of smoke which kept the room in a kind of haze. When I started watching the interview, I was decidedly anti-Castro, but by the time it was over I

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was thinking Fidel sounded very intelligent and amiable and not half the ogre I thought he was. Later on, several friends who had watched the interview expressed the same sentiment. We were still against everything he stood for, and yet were fascinated by the man. I now wonder if that cigar had anything to do with it."

My madrina had "made the saint" in Havana and her great love for Cuba did not extend to Fidel Castro.

"I saw that interview," she said. "He doesn't need to moyubar with a cigar to control people. He's got something better than that."

She then proceeded to tell me a story which I have since then heard from other sources. The story concerns Cuba's deep involvement with Santería, an involvement which has extended to Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, New York, Miami, Chicago, and all the places where large groups of exiled Cubans are found.

Many Yorubas were brought to the Caribbean islands and to South America. Because their religion required the use of herbs, plants, and trees, the jungle areas of Cuba and Brazil were ideally suited to the Yorubas and their orishas. In Brazil, the Yoruba religion became known as Macumba, Candomblé, and Santuario. In Cuba it became known as Santería and Lucumí. In both countries, the African beliefs became a very important part of the people's cultural and spiritual development. Santería is an intrinsic part of Cuban music, religious practices, and social structure. Our Lady of La Caridad del Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba, is syncretized as Oshún, one of the Yorubas' most powerful orishas. Every year, on or around September 8, there is a high mass in her honor in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. This day, marked as her day in the Catholic calendar of saints, is also observed by the santeros with special ceremonies in her honor. Even those Cubans who do not practice the religion are aware of its tremendous impact on other Cubans.

The 1958 revolution created many difficulties for Santería in Cuba. There are many rumors of persecution and abuse. One highly unlikely story claims that Fidel dressed a famed statue of Oshún with combat clothes similar to the ones he always wears.

BLOOD AND HONEY

Another story says that he appropriated the considerable treasures of the sanctuary of another popular orisha, Babalú-Ayé, syncretized as St. Lazarus and immortalized by Desi Arnaz with drum and song in *I Love Lucy*.*

One santero who arrived from Cuba in the "freedom flotilla," told me that Fidel always wears two wristwatches, reportedly to hide his initiation bracelet from curious eyes. To this santero and to many others like him, Fidel is an initiated olocha of great powers. It is also said that during Fidel's stay in the Cuban *manigua*, as he prepared for the revolution, he and his followers worshipped Elegguá, who lives in the woods and is the first warrior of the Yoruba pantheon. According to this story, all the attacks against the santeros in Cuba are a smokescreen created by Fidel to hide the fact that he himself is an avid practitioner of Santería.

Another santera who has lived in New York for many years claims to have witnessed a grand ritual during which Fidel was immersed in a bathtub filled with the blood of sacrificial animals to make him invulnerable against harm and give him total control over his enemies.

According to many santeros, the battle between Fidel Castro and former Cuban President Fulgencio Batista was fought on two levels: the physical world and the world of the orishas. Fidel won the war, but could not destroy Batista, who escaped from Cuba with millions of dollars and retired to Spain where he died of natural causes many years later. Batista, said to have been a devoted believer of Santería, allegedly owed his miraculous escape from Havana to the protection of the orishas.

A well-known story tells how the defeated Batista waited alone in the Presidential Palace after Fidel's victorious entrance into Havana. He held a loaded pistol close to his head, ready to

*This famous chant to Babalú-Ayé was recorded by Cuban singer Miguelito Valdés under the Columbia label many years before Desi sang it.