When the Saints Go Riding in: Santeria in Cuba and the United States

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This paper is a study of Santeria, a religion that developed in Cuba from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries as a syncretism of African religions, Roman Catholicism, and French spiritism. Still an important religious influence in Cuba today, its beliefs and practices have diffused to many other countries including the United States.

The argument presented in the paper is that Santeria can be understood as a "textual" rewriting and rereading of the biographies, the histories, and the social contexts of its adherents. Using the oppositional, revisionary, and subversive hermeneutical principles inherited as part of their West African cultural heritage, the creators and followers of Santeria developed their religion as a counterhegemonic challenge to the social, economic, and political order that controlled their lives.

> In the "Black Americas" — from the Pacific lowlands of Colombia and Ecuador, to Brazil, to Haiti, Cuba and Puerto Rico — illuminating ethnic power often arises in mythical and religious contexts, taking the form of two forces derived from African deities: Ogun is iron, Shango is fire.
>
> Norman E. Whitten, Jr. and Arlene Torres (1992: 22)

> Rewriting "paganism" is a particular mode of "signifyin(g)" in Africanist discourse. Like toasting, Santeria, and "mumbo jumbo" in the New World, it represents black discourse in relation to something else, as marked oppositional, subversive, and powerful in its ability to restructure official, "white" discourse.
>
> Andrew Apter (1992: 210)

> Signifyin(g) revision is a rhetorical transfer that . . . functions to redress an imbalance of power.
>
> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988: 124)

The question of the role of religion in the development and maintenance of culture and social structure and its relationship to social change has had a long and controversial history in the social sciences. Proponents on the one side, following Karl Marx, have argued that religion contributes to the development of false consciousness and to a spiritual and otherworldly emphasis that results in a passive attitude toward existing social, economic, and political realities and/or provides for an escape from them altogether. In the words of Karl Marx, religion is the "opium of the people" (Marx and Engels 1964: 42). Proponents on the other side have argued that religion makes positive contributions to cultural and social-structural development and maintenance and that on many occasions religion provides a counterhegemonic challenge and resistance to the existing social, economic, and political order and functions as an important source of social change.

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This paper addresses the question of the relationship of religion to cultural and social-structural development, maintenance, and change by focusing on one particular religion: Santeria. Originating in Cuba, Santeria developed out of the encounter of the religious beliefs and practices of African slaves, the Roman Catholic Church, and French spiritism as interpreted by Allan Kardec. What emerged from the encounter of these three traditions was a new syncretized[1] religion that was neither African, Roman Catholic nor spiritist but which borrowed elements from all three.

Santeria is still practiced by a large number of Cubans on the island today, as well as by many who emigrated from Cuba. In the United States, Santeria has taken root primarily in Miami, Tampa, and New York City, but also in Newark, Detroit, Chicago, Atlanta, Gary (Indiana), Savannah (Georgia), several cities of California, and in other undocumented urban locations.

The argument I develop in this paper is that Santeria, both in Cuba and the United States, can be understood as a "textual" revision, or re-vision, of the biographies, the histories, and the social contexts of the people who adhered to its beliefs and practices. The "text" resulting from this reinterpretation, as is true of other parts of the black tradition, is "double-voiced" (Gates 1988: xxv). It is important to understand this hermeneutical principle of double-voiceness because it has been used by the adherents of Santeria, along with others in the black tradition, in their efforts to mount a counterhegemonic challenge to the existing social, economic, and political order. However, before I present that argument, I will review the history of Santeria's development as well as discuss its major beliefs and practices.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SANTERIA IN CUBA

In 1492, when Columbus "discovered" Cuba, the island was inhabited by between 100,000 and 200,000 Ciboney and Arawak "Indians." However, within decades of the Spaniards' settlement of the island, the original inhabitants were nearly all decimated as the result of disease, physical attacks, and cultural genocide. As a consequence, in order to meet their labor needs, the Spaniards forcefully brought Africans as Indian replacements.

In 1511, less than two decades after the arrival of Columbus, the first Africans were brought to Cuba as slaves from the island of Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic). Ten years later, 1521, the first slaves were brought directly from Africa, and, for the next 350 years, until the late 1870s, the slave trade continued. Slavery was finally officially abolished in Cuba in 1886.

According to Curtin (1969: 88), out of the total of an estimated 10 million Africans shipped to the New World as slaves, approximately 702,000 were sent to Cuba, a figure that represents 7.3% of the total Atlantic slave trade. In comparison, only 427,000 slaves, or 4.5% of the total, were brought to the United States (Curtin 1969: 88; Knight 1970).

As was true in all countries where the slaves were taken, the slave masters in Cuba discouraged, and often prohibited, the practice of African religions. But traditional aspects of culture, especially religion, are not easily destroyed. This was certainly true for Cuba, where the slaves devised a means by which to keep their traditional religions alive.

Early on, the slaves became aware of the parallels that existed between their African religions and the new religion of Catholicism they confronted. Both religions had high gods who were perceived as creators and sustainers of the world. And both religions had a host of intermediaries that stood between the high gods and the humans who worshiped them. The Catholics had saints and the Africans had *orishas*. So, under the constraints of their oppression, the slaves began to fuse the intermediaries of the two religions and to identify a specific *orisha* with a corresponding specific saint. Out of this syncretism there developed a highly complex form of religion known as Santeria, or the way of the saints.

Although the first slaves arrived in Cuba as early as the sixteenth century, it was the slaves brought to Cuba in the nineteenth century, especially the Yoruba from southwestern Nigeria and, to a lesser extent, the Bantu from the Congo, who were the major carriers of the African religious beliefs and practices that contributed to the development of Santeria.

In addition to the Yoruban and Roman Catholic roots of Santeria, there was a third root, French spiritism, which developed in France in the 1850s under the leadership of Allan Kardec (1804–1869) (born as Hypolite Leon Denizard Rivail). According to Kardec, spirits exist in a hierarchy and are constantly seeking light (enlightenment) from the moment they cease being material. Through the action of a medium, a spirit can be given light, and once invoked and enlightened the spirit can ascend to the next spiritual level (Perez y Mena 1991: 40).

Kardec's books were translated from French to other languages, including Spanish and Portuguese, and by the 1890s, in spite of strong prohibitions from the Roman Catholic church, his ideas began to have an impact on Latin American religious thought and practice, especially in Brazil, Argentina, Cuba, and Puerto Rico (where it is known as *Espiritismo*). In Cuba, spiritism became melded with the existing beliefs and practices of Santeria and in the process Santeria became a new syncretized religion.

Orishas *and Saints*

The Yoruba in Africa from which the slaves were taken were a very religious people. They believed in a high god, Olodumare, who ruled in supreme fashion, but they believed that he was far removed from everyday human affairs. Contact with the supernatural world was important, but since the high god was so transcendent, such contact could be made only with the aid of divine intermediaries. These intermediaries, known as *orishas,* became central in Yoruba religion.

In traditional Yoruba religion the estimates of the number of *orishas* range from 400 to 1700 (Bascom 1969: 77; Murphy 1988: 12). However, in Cuba today, only sixteen major *orishas* are recognized and, even then, some more than others. Table 1 (adapted from Murphy 1988: 42–43) lists the major *orishas* recognized in Cuba along with the corresponding Catholic saint and principle.

TABLE 1

ORISHAS AND SAINTS

Orisha	Saint	Principle
Agayu	Christopher	fatherhood
Babaluaye	Lazarus	illness
Eleggua	Nino de Atocha, Anthony of Padua	way-opener, messenger, trickster
Ibeji (twins)	Cosmus and Damien	children
Inle	Rafael	medicine
Obatala	Mercedes	clarity
Ogun	Peter	iron
Olokun	Regla	profundity
Orula	Francis	wisdom, destiny
Osanyin	Joseph	herbs
Oshosi	Norbert	hunt, protection
Oshun	Caridad	eros, rivers
Oya	Candelaria	death
Shango	Barbara	force, thunder
Yemaya	Regla	maternity, seas

Rituals

As in other religions, the ritualistic practices within Santeria exhibit variability. Different historical and geographical experiences have given rise to different emphases and rules of ritual organization. However, a common set of rituals and a core of shared meanings concerning their importance can be identified.

Divination. A basic Santeria ritual is divination. At the ontological level divination is an expression of the power of *ashe* (the life force of God), and at the practical level divination is utilized to deal with everyday problems. The adherents of Santeria, some of whom are poor and lack money to pay physicians or counselors, others who are middle class, go to the *santeros* (priests) or the *babalawo* (high priest) to get advice and to seek solutions for their problems of health, money, work, friendship, or love.

Various methods of divination are used. In Africa, among the Yoruba, the most common forms involve the manipulation of palm nuts, cowrie shells or kola nut valves. In Cuba, coconuts and seashells are utilized. Another form, available only to *babalawos* (all men), is a necklace about 50 inches long and broken at regular intervals with a mixture of concave and convex tortoise shell disks, or a chain of concave and convex oval-shaped tin pieces. When the necklace or chain is thrown, the pieces fall either up or down, and are read as one would read "heads" or "tails" from the toss of a coin. The number of possible permutations resulting from the casting of a 16-unit, 2-part divination necklace is 256 (Murphy 1988: 64).

Each permutation is associated with a set of verses. This means that each *babalawo* must memorize thousands of verses, and hundreds of prayers, songs, and praise names of the *orishas* (Murphy 1988: 62). In addition, the *babalawos* must know the appropriate myth or folktale associated with each verse as well as a suitable prescription for the client's problem (Bascom 1952: 174; 1980).

Sacrifices and Offering. In divination, the *orishas* reveal themselves to human beings, diagnosing their needs and providing solutions to their problems. In sacrifices and offerings, humans respond, expressing gratitude and praise and imploring that the *orishas* continue their efficacious work.

Specific food offerings are recognized as appropriate for each *orisha.* For example, for Eleggua one would offer a white chicken, a rooster, an opossum, or rum; for Obatala, a female goat or pigeons; for Ogun, male roosters or dogs; for Oshun, a female white hen, goat, or sheep; for Shango, a male rooster, sheep, goat, pig, or bull; and for Yemaya, a duck, turtle, or goat.

The food offerings are eaten by the participants but only after the *orishas* have consumed the invisible *ashe* of the sacrifices. The blood of the animals, in turn, is sprinkled or poured on the sacred stones, which are recognized as the "heads" of the *orishas,* or, when used in the initiation rites of new adherents, directly upon the heads of the initiates.

Whether vegetable or animal offering, what is important is the reciprocal nature of the offering — the *orishas* are fed and, in return, the devotees share in the *orishas' ashe.*

Drum and Dance Festivals. The drum and dance festivals in Santeria are known as *bembe.* These festivals are held in the basements, open patios, or living quarters of the *santero* or *santera's* house. The purpose of the *bembe* is to honor the *orishas* by playing specific drum rhythms, performing specific dance postures, and acting out in pantomime the behavior of the *orishas.* Not all the *orishas* are honored at each *bembe;* only those important in the lives of the participants.

A specific drum rhythm and dance posture is associated with each *orisha.* For example, the dances for Ogun, the *orisha* of iron, pantomime the use of shovels, machetes, picks, hammers, chains, keys, etc. The dances for Ochosi, the *orisha* of the hunt, include the shouts of a hunter and the actions of using a bow and arrow. And the dances for Shango, the *orisha* of force, thunder, and sexuality, are warlike or erotic. In one type of Shango dance, the

Shango dancer "manifests himself like a bull as he butts with his head. He opens his eyes widely, sticks out his tongue as a symbol of fire, shakes his sacred axe and holds his testicles in his hands." (Simpson 1978: 89)

The drum rhythms and the dance postures are not ends in themselves, but are utilized to attain a sacred state of consciousness, manifested as a trance state or spirit possession (Gonzalez-Wippler 1982: 124–45). From the perspective of the adherents, spirit possession is desirable because it opens the channels of *ashe* as the dancers merge with divine rhythms (Murphy 1988: 137). At a more practical level, spirit possession is important because during the trance state the *orisha* approaches others present at the *bembe* and gives them advice, warnings, and admonitions.

The trance experience is often discussed with reference to the metaphor of riding a horse in the sense that the *orisha* mounts the head of the medium. The *orisha* (the rider) mounts the horse (the individual) and as a good rider is expected to do, controls the behavior of his mount.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SANTERIA IN THE UNITED STATES

The total number of Cubans living in the United States in 1990 was 1,044,000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1994: 30). Although there were migrations from Cuba to the United States prior to the 1959 revolution, most of the Cubans living in the United States today came during or since 1959, with the bulk coming between 1959 and 1980.

Although there is evidence that Santeria was present in the United States prior to 1959 (including a few practicing *santeros*) and that some of the middle- and upper-class immigrants who came in the 1960s were followers of Santeria, it was largely the 125,000 who arrived in the 1980 Mariel boat lift, many of whom were from the working and lower classes, who brought with them the beliefs and rituals that have provided the basis for Santeria as practiced in the United States today.

Because of the secrecy associated with Santeria, no one knows with any certainty how many of the 1 million Cubans living in the United States today practice some form of Santeria. Also not known is the number of non-Cubans (Latinos, African Americans and Anglos) involved. Mather and Nichols (1993: 240) estimate that there are 300,000 practitioners in New York City, and Greenhouse (1993: Y9) suggests that there are 70,000 living in South Florida. In terms of the total number in the United States, one source (*XS* 1992: 13) suggests a figure of 500,000.

One of the first documented cases of a non-Hispanic African American initiated as a *santero* is Walter King (Hunt 1979; Melton 1993: 852–53; Brandon 1993: 114–15). Born into a Baptist family in Detroit in 1928, as a teenager King became disillusioned with Christianity and turned his attention to the ancient gods of Africa. In 1954, at the age of 26, he traveled to Haiti where he discovered vodun (voodoo). A year later he made a visit to Africa and upon his return founded the Order of Damballah Hwedo Ancestor Priests in Harlem.

In 1959 King traveled to Matanzas, Cuba, where he was initiated as a Santeria priest. Upon returning to Harlem he founded the Shango Temple which, a year later, he reorganized as the Yoruba Temple. At this point, he also changed his name to Oba Efuntola Oseijeman Adelabu Adefunmi I.

In the 1960s Adefunmi became active in the black power movement within which he promoted his interpretation of Santeria as an aspect of black nationalism. In response to mounting criticism from Cuban-American leaders of Santeria who disagreed with his interpretations, in 1970 Adefunmi left Harlem and moved with a small group of his followers to a rural area near Sheldon, South Carolina, where he founded the Yoruba Village of Oyotunji.

Two years later he was initiated as a *babalawo* in Nigeria. Upon his return to Oyotunji, he was proclaimed king.

Although Adefunmi formally broke with Cuban Santeria, the religion he promotes, identified as Orisha-Voodoo, depends on Santeria for its legitimacy and continuity (Canizares 1993: 122). According to Omari (1991: 70), the religion practiced at Oyotunji is a combination of "Santeria, Haitian Vodun, and the version of Yoruba religion (Lucumi) practiced in Cuba."

The bestknown Anglo American initiated into Santeria is Judith Gleason, an anthropologist who became attracted to the religion while researching Candomble in Brazil (Canizares 1993: 122–23; Cochran 1987). Initiated into Santeria in New York in 1963 by a Puerto Rican *santera,* Gleason has written two books about Santeria (Gleason 1975; 1987) and co-produced an ethnographic film about initiation into the Shango priesthood (Gleason and Mereghetti 1992) (See Murphy 1994: 95–104 for a discussion of the film).

The increase in the number of whites among the mainland adherents to Santeria is reflected in the makeup of the leadership. In the Cuban exile communities, white Cuban *babalawos* and *santeros,* many of whom are educated and upper middle class, are much more frequent than they were in Cuba. For example, in Miami, *babalawo* Carlos Ojeda is white as well as are two leading *santeros,* Ernesto Pichardo (the plaintiff in the 1993 Supreme Court case) and Cecilio Perez (Canizares 1993: 137).

As Santeria in the United States attracts new adherents, changes are occurring in the structure of the religion. For example, there is a change in the leadership pattern in that the *santeros* are taking on more of the priestly responsibilities with the *babalawos* assuming a decreasing role (Canizares 1993: 31).

In the area of beliefs, Santeria is moving away from a mythological structure to a belief system that is more in line with current psychological knowledge and with the ethical principles of Christianity (Sandoval 1977: 61). With specific reference to the *orishas,* out of the sixteen recognized in Cuba, seven are singled out and given special attention in the United States. Referred to as the Seven African Powers, they are: Obatala, Shango, Ogun, Orula, Yemaya, Oshun, and Eleggua.

The ritualistic structure of Santeria is also undergoing changes as it adapts to the United States environment. For example, in the United States *all* adherents are encouraged to undergo full initiation, whereas in Cuba only those whose heads had been claimed by an *orisha* were initiated. Furthermore, the length of time required for initiation has been shorted, from a traditional period of three years to a period as short as three months (Canizares 1993: 33). Also, fewer trance-possessions are taking place, because consecrated *bata* drums, the playing of which are essential for possession, either are not available or are not played in order to avoid negative reactions from neighbors (Canizares 1993: 33; Sandoval 1977: 61).

Another major change is that Santeria, especially in New York City and the urban areas of northern New Jersey, is becoming more and more syncretized with Puerto Rican spiritism (Perez y Mena 1991; Brandon 1993). Brandon has coined a new term, *Santerismo* (the elision of the words Santeria and Espiritismo) for this new syncretized form (Brandon 1993: 107–14).

It is important to note that the recent changes within Santeria in the United States are of a paradoxical nature. On the one hand, Santeria is developing forms that have a more universal appeal. For example, Canizares (1993) points out that as more non–Cubans, both black and white and from a variety of social classes, are attracted to Santeria, and as the practitioners rely less on the use of Spanish, and as the belief that *babalawos* can be consecrated only on Cuban soil weakens, Santeria is losing some of its "ethnocentric, cliquish character" (Canizares 1993: 125).

The move in the direction of universalism is also evident in the mainstreaming of the Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye in Miami. Following the June 1993 Supreme Court decision that ruled in the church's favor, the church's leaders are making plans for a unified, Western-style church organization. As expressed by Ernesto Pichardo, president of the church, "Santeria had for years been depicted as the secretive, occult, violent, organized-crime religion . . . To make it in this society, you have to be institutionalized. You have to be a force that protects its own interests" (Miller 1994).

On the other hand, there is a growing conservatism within Santeria, as reflected in the importance given to learning African languages and in interpreting the rituals in more traditional Yoruban ways. This conservative trend is evident in the beliefs and practices of the Oyotunji Village in Sheldon, South Carolina (Hunt 1979; Omari 1991) and in the publications of the Yoruba Theological Archministry in Brooklyn, New York (Edwards and Mason 1985; Mason 1985, 1992).

SANTERIA AS COUNTERHEGEMONIC REVISION

Santeria, as it was created and re-created in Cuba and the United States, can only be understood adequately within the context of colonialism and oppression. Both in the colonial and postcolonial worlds, the slaves and their descendants were/are faced with the problem of coming to terms with the fact that they were/are existing in social, economic, and political worlds in which the mechanisms of power and control were/are beyond their reach and which were/are used directly or indirectly against them. In this hegemonic context, Santeria arose and is maintained in its changing forms as an effort by its adherents to fashion an understanding of, and to gain mastery over, their world. Out of the recognition of their plight, and the creative tensions to which it led, there have developed "forms of *experimental practice* that are at once techniques of empowerment and the signs of collective representation." (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:31, emphasis theirs) Among the creators and followers of Santeria, the form that this experimental practice took was the rewriting and revising of their personal and social "texts" using their own principles of interpretation while, at the same time, challenging the hermeneutics of their oppressors.

However, it should be understood that the oppositional, revisionary, and subversive dimensions of Santeria did not arise solely as a response to the colonial and imperial contexts in which the slaves and ex-slaves found themselves. Rather, these dimensions were intrinsic to the "indigenous, critical hermeneutics" of Yoruba religion (Apter 1992: 210).

In Apter's 1992 publication, based on his fieldwork in Nigeria, he empirically documents the counterhegemonic nature of Yoruba religion. What Apter has done in analyzing Yoruba religion in Nigeria needs to be replicated among the different forms of the Yoruba religious legacy in the New World. What follows is a review of the beginnings of such a replication, especially as exemplified in the research of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Also, numerous suggestions are made as to the direction such an analysis should take. (See Baer and Singer 1992 for a discussion of the counterhegemonic dimensions of African-American religion in general.)

According to Gates (1983, 1984, 1988), Yoruba religion can be understood as a paradigm for the New World cultures that developed in the African Diaspora. And, within Yoruba religion in general, Gates singles out the myths of the *orisha* Esu-Elegbara (Echu-Elegua or Eleggua) as representative prototypes of New World black cultures:

> Of the music, myths, and forms of performance that the African brought to the Western Hemisphere . . . one specific trickster figure [Esu-Elegbara] . . . recurs with startling frequency in black mythology in Africa, the Caribbean, and South America. This figure appears in black cultures with such frequency that we can think of it as a repeated theme or topos. (Gates 1988: 4)

In Africa, in addition to his appearance as Esu-Elegbara among the Yoruba of Nigeria, he appears as Legba among the Fon in Benin. And in the New World, he is known as Exu in Brazil, Echu-Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba in Haiti, and Papa La Bas among the practitioners of Hoodoo in the United States (Gates 1988: 5).

Gates believes that as Echu-Elegua moved from Cuba to the United States he was transformed into the secular myth of "The Signifying Monkey." He confesses that there is no convincing historical or anthropological evidence for this transformation, but, nevertheless, the two figures are related as functional equivalents. "Esu's functional equivalent in Afro-American profane discourse is the Signifying Monkey, a figure who seems to be distinctly Afro-American, probably derived from Cuban mythology which generally depicts Echu-Elegua with a monkey at his side" (Gates 1983: 688).

The Signifying Monkey is a tale about three animals "deep down in the [African] jungle." The monkey, from the safety of his tree perch, one day taunts the lion by telling him that the elephant has been spreading rumors about the lion's family. The lion, responding with a "ferocious rage," takes off into the jungle "at a terrible pace." He finds the elephant under a sycamore tree and challenges him to a fight.

> They fought all day, and they fought all night
> the lion begin to wonder if he gonna win this fight.
> They fought all night and they fought all day,
> the Lion begin to wonder if he gonna get away.

The lion finally called an end to the fight and started back through the jungle "more dead then alive." Again he encountered the monkey who renewed his signifying taunts. But then something unintended happened:

> The monkey got frantic, jumped up and down,
> his left foot missed, his skinny ass hit the ground,
> Like a streak of bolt and a flash of heat,
> the lion was on him with all four feet.

Realizing his dilemma, the monkey "copped a plea," and reminded the lion that he (the monkey) has a wife and thirteen kids.

> The Monkey looked up with tears in his eyes,
> said, "Mr. Lion, I apologize."

But the Lion refused the apology. So the monkey resorted to the use of one more trick from his trickster repertoire:

> The Monkey said, "Let me get my teeth out of the grit
> and balls out of the sand,
> and I'll fight your ass like a *real* he-man."
> So the Lion stepped back to the end of the curve,
> 'cause that was the boldest challenge he'd ever heard.
> But faster than the hand or the human eye could see,
> the Monkey was back in the coconut tree. (Lefever 1988: 16)
> (For a version of the complete tale see Jackson 1974: 171–72)

Myth as Revelatory

The myths and folktales that detail the trickster exploits of Esu and The Signifying Monkey provide multiple meanings for the people who tell them, ritualize them, and are entertained by them. For the practitioners of Santeria who keep alive the memory of Esu as well as for those who share the secular legacy of Esu in The Signifying Monkey, these trick-

ster myths and tales have become a part of their cultural repertoire. As such, they provide insight into the meaning of the competitive nature of social reality, and suggest alternative patterns of action in dealing with that social reality.

Geertz states that myths provide both a model *of* reality and a model *for* reality; myths are both a *gloss* upon the mundane world of relationships and events and a *template* that shapes such relationships and events (Geertz 1973: 124). Together, both of these models, models *of* (gloss) and models *for* (template), provide insights into real-life situations, and, as such, contribute to the construction of the individual and social identities of those who tell, retell, and keep the myths alive.

According to Apter, West Africa's contribution to the African Diaspora lies not only in specific symbols and forms but also "in the interpretive practices that generate the meanings" (1991: 256). A major example of this is the "deep knowledge" that is intrinsic to Yoruba cosmology. In a fashion similar to the "deep play" of the Balinese cockfight (Geertz 1973), the deep knowledge of the Yoruba provides a metasocial commentary on the everyday life of the Yoruba and on the lives of those who inherited the Yoruba's hermeneutical legacy. Safeguarded by secrecy and sanctioned by ritual, deep knowledge "opposes public discourse, and the authoritative taxonomies that it upholds" (Apter 1991:256). Enlightened by the secrets of the *orishas* revealed through the rituals of divination and possession, those privy to deep knowledge develop a reflexive consciousness which, in many ways, reveals deeper insights into personal and political realities than those disclosed in official discourse.

> To have "deep" ritual knowledge — access to the "essences" of cult secrets and symbols — is to possess a dangerous power which is lost if revealed. Such power is dangerous because it subverts official discourse and hierarchy: as Ogun's sword, it decapitates chiefs; as Shango's lightning, it deposes kings; as Eshu the trickish mediator, it propagates chaos and anarchy. (Apter 1992: 210)

Myth as Revisionary

According to Gates (1988: 6), Esu-Elegbara and his New World manifestations, Echu-Elegua and The Signifying Monkey, express qualities that are shared by trickster figures in general: individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure and disclosure, encasement and rupture. More specifically, with reference to The Signifying Monkey, Gates points out that, for African Americans, the Monkey provides "the Daydream of the Black Other" and "chiastic fantasies of reversal of power relationships." (Gates 1988: 59; for other discussions of the trickster in African-American culture, see Smitherman 1977 and Levine 1977).

Pelton (1980), in his study of Eshu and other tricksters of West Africa, also interprets the trickster figure as revisionary. He suggests that the West African tricksters, as expressions of the creative imagination, provide insights into the mutable nature of both social and ontological reality:

> The trickster, then, symbolizes the very manner in which traditional peoples try to seize the contradictory and the anomalous. . . . His messiness and metaphysical ambiguity reveal that the "cool" society seeks to open itself to the wild, not to construct a pure and impermeable order. His presence — in story, dance, phallic image, divination, or "soul"— represents a ceaseless informing of structure with rawness and formlessness and a boundless confidence that such a process is truly constructive. Because the trickster pulls the most unyielding matter — disease, ugliness, greed, lust, lying, jealousy — into the orbit of life, and because, especially in divination, he links these anomalies in their most commonplace forms to the taxonomies of communal life, he reveals how it is precisely on the plane of the daily and the specific that time is cooled down, social order enlarged, and all experience opened to transformation. (Pelton 1980: 252)

The oppositional, revisionary, and subversive antics of Esu and The Signifying Monkey are expressions of a master trope within the black tradition which Gates (1983,

1984, 1988) identifies as Signifyin(g) and Signification (not to be confused with white forms of signifying and signification)[2] (1988:46). Implicit with many meanings, Gates uses the two concepts to refer to a technique of indirect argument or persuasion, saying one thing to mean something quite the other. "Black people have always been masters of the figurative: saying one thing to mean something quite other has been basic to black survival in oppressive Western cultures" (1984: 6).

Long (1986) quotes an African-American colloquial expression that says that "signifying is worse than lying." This is so, according to Long, because signifying "obscures and obfuscates a discourse without taking responsibility for so doing. This verbal misdirection parallels the real argument but gains its power of meaning from the structure of the discourse itself without the signification being subjected to the rules of discourse" (Long 1986: 1).

With specific reference to The Signifying Monkey as a master trope of Signifyin(g), Gates acknowledges that only a relatively small number of African-Americans are accomplished narrators of the Signifying Monkey tales or, perhaps, have even ever heard them. However, that does not preclude the fact that "a remarkably large number of Afro-Americans are familiar with, and practice, modes of Signifyin(g)" (Gates 1988: 54).

Applying this analysis specifically to Santeria, it can be said that Santeria is a complex system of Signification. In Cuba the slaves Signified on their masters, and in the United States the practitioners of Santeria have Signified/are Signifyin(g) on the dominant, controlling culture. In this sense, Santeria was/is a revisionary and counterhegemonic strategy, a view clearly stated by Apter:

> The Catholicism of Vodoun, Candomble and Santeria was not an ecumenical screen, hiding the worship of African deities from official persecution. It was the religion of the masters, revised, transformed, and appropriated by slaves to harness its power with their universes of discourse. In this way the slaves took possession of Catholicism and thereby repossessed themselves as active spiritual subjects. (Apter 1991: 254; for a similar view, see Thompson 1983: 18)

Apter goes on to reiterate that the source of the interpretative principles for this revision is West Africa: "[T]he revisionary power of the syncretic religions derives from West African hermeneutical traditions which disseminated through the slave trade and took shape in black communities to remake the New World in the idioms of the old" (Apter 1991: 255–56).

Ritual as Transformative

Victor Turner (1967, 1969, 1974) has studied in depth the transformative nature of the ritual process. Turner's point of departure for his analysis of ritual is the "liminal phase" of the rites of passage as identified by Arnold van Gennep (1960). Van Gennep had shown that all rites of passage are marked by three phases: separation, margin, and aggregation. During the first phase the individual or group is detached from some earlier fixed point in the social structure, or from some set of cultural conditions. In the second phase, the liminal (*limen*, "threshold" in Latin), the characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous. He/she has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase, the passage is completed. The ritual subject finds himself/herself once again in a relatively stable niche in the social structure, with clearly defined rights and obligations (Turner 1969: 94f).

It is the second phase, liminality, that is singled out by Turner for his analysis of the ritual process. The liminal phase is important because it is in the ambiguous condition of liminality that a major alternative to the hierarchical social structure is created. At this point of transition, there arises a system of relationships that Turner terms "communitas." Communitas stands juxtaposed over against normal social structure. Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, at the edges of structure, or beneath structure. It is

almost everywhere held to be sacred because "it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency" (Turner 1969: 128). Because communitas has this aspect of potentiality, "it is often in the subjunctive mood" (Turner 1969: 127).

It would be wrong to focus only on Turner's analysis of the three stages of ritual, for, as he points out, many of the same dynamics are at work in two other aspects of culture: outsiderhood and structural inferiority. Turner defines the first as "the condition of being either permanently and by ascription set outside the structural arrangements of a given social system, or being situationally or temporarily set apart, or voluntarily setting oneself apart from the behavior of status-occupying, role-playing members of that system." (Turner 1974: 233) The second, structural inferiority, according to Turner, refers to "the lowest rung in a system of social stratification in which unequal rewards are accorded to functionally differentiated positions" (Turner 1974: 237).

Outsiderhood and structural inferiority, like liminality, often are interpreted as symbols of social reversal. Turner, for example, reminds us that the good Samaritan in Jesus' parable, the Jewish fiddler in Chekhov's "Rothschild's Fiddle," the fugitive slave Jim in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn,* and Sonya, the prostitute in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment,* were all "inferior" or marginal persons in their own societies, and, yet, each symbolized "the moral values of communitas as against the coercive power of supreme political rulers" (Turner 1969: 110). The same is frequently true of "inferior" or marginal groups within a society, such as the Hebrews in the ancient Near East, the Irish in early medieval Christendom, and the Swiss in modern Europe (Turner 1969: 109). And as Harding (1969) reminds us, the same is true for African Americans in the United States.

Apter points out that Turner's focus on liminality broke new ground because it identified specific relationships between symbolic processes and social dynamics. "Liminal symbols are chaotic and unhinged because they signify a state of antistructure, a condition of pure disorder and negativity which exists outside of society, in violation of social and semantic taxonomies" (Apter 1992: 215). But, in addition to providing cultural and sociological insights, Apter emphasizes that Turner's theory of liminality "identifies ritual power with critical reflection" (Apter 1992: 216). Corresponding to the efficacy of deep Yoruba knowledge, "liminality establishes conditions of 'pure possibility' which negate the official (i.e., ideological) and natural (i.e., hegemonic) orders and which generate 'novel configurations' " (Apter 1992: 216).

CONCLUSIONS

Santeria developed in Cuba from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries as a syncretism of African religions, Roman Catholicism, and French spiritism. Although still important in Cuba today, the beliefs and practices of Santeria have diffused to many other countries, including the United States.

Santeria can be understood as a "textual" rewriting and rereading of the biographies, the histories, and the social contexts of its adherents. Using the oppositional, subversive, and revisionary (as well as re-visionary) hermeneutical principles inherited as part of their West African cultural heritage, the creators and followers of Santeria developed their religion as a counterhegemonic challenge to the existing social, economic, and political order. Central to their interpretive perspective was the characteristic of double-voiceness which is paradigmatically evident in the mythologies of Esu-Elegbara and other West African tricksters as well as in the New World verbal misdirections of Signification represented so well in the tale of The Signifying Monkey.

Boldly stated, Santeria can be understood as a complex system of Signification. In Cuba the slaves Signified on their masters, and in the United States the practitioners of

Santeria have Signified/are Signifyin(g) on the dominant, controlling culture. Using the hermenutical principle or rhetorical revision, the creators, re-creators and followers of Santeria have developed a religion that dispenses positive meaning and power to their lives and, at the same time, makes available to them a complex oppositional and counterhegemonic strategy.

NOTES

[1] The concept of syncretism has been criticized as being biased toward the European contributions to so-called syncretized cultures and is being replaced by the concept of creolization. However, because the sources I cite in this paper use the concept of syncretism, I have chosen to retain its usage here. For a critique of the concept of syncretism see Apter (1991).

[2] To distinguish black and white forms, Gates uses upper case when referring to black Signifyin(g) and Signification and lower case when referring to white signifying and signification. He also writes the black term, Signifyin(g), with a bracketed final *g* to indicate that in spoken form the final *g* is usually dropped.

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