"Fit for a Queen": Analysis of a Consecration Outfit in the Cult of Yemayá[1]

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Santería is the religion of the Yoruba people as it evolved in Cuba during and after the slave trade. Practitioners of Santería believe in one God, *Olorun*, who is the beginning and end of creation. Under him, there is a pantheon of beings called *orishas* who are in charge of maintaining the universe and its operation. All of the orishas, or *santos* as they are also known, have rites, ceremonies, offerings, taboos, and complete ritualistic universes appropriate to their nature. The priest, as a specialist, guides and creates the physical manifestations of worship. The vast array of ceremonial objects is particularly noticeable during the consecration of a priest or priestess. The universe comes alive during such ceremonies, and it is the duty of the consecrating priest to provide the proper stage for such a performance. In this essay, I will analyze one particular aspect of such an event, the consecration outfit.

The consecration outfit is a garment created for the second day of ceremonies during which the initiate wears the symbols of the orisha and becomes the living representation of the deity. Such garments must include the color or colors sacred to the orisha, and the number and implements associated with the personality of the divinity. The materials and decorations must impart a visual picture of the divinity to the beholder. In other words, the consecration outfit creates the orisha in the body of the initiate.

The outfit serves several purposes. One is to identify the newly initiated with the orisha to whom he or she is consecrated. The new priest is thought to manifest specific characteristics of that particular

orisha. The outfit is a way of elevating the new priest to the level of the orisha and having him share in the dignity and power intrinsic to the divine being. For the new priest, it is an opportunity to experience the sacredness of this newly acquired status. Another factor is the opportunity of incarnating the divinity for others as well.

A second major function is to display aesthetic values intrinsic to the cult. To be considered successful, a priest must know not only the particular ceremonies and organization of the ritual elements but must also be able to communicate them through the diverse objects and media. "To speak without a voice" is an essential attribute of a priest. This particular concept in the religion requires a priest to create a frame for the ceremony. All the elements, colors, and textures blend to create a harmonious environment. Furthermore, the priests accent the ceremonial objects with decorative elements that remind the participants of the orisha to be honored. This includes wearing a certain garment with the color or decorations of the orisha and also giving away mementos that relate to the orisha.

This study is based on my fieldwork in the Los Angeles area from 1983 to 1986 and on my experiences as a priest. When I performed a consecration for *Oshún*, I used the symbol of a fish as a souvenir since Oshún is a river deity. In the case of *Yemayá*, ocean motifs replace the former. When all the elements are working for the priest, there is an immersion, and the participants is physically and aesthetically aware of the ceremony. When the process is successful, the priest is said to be speaking without a voice. The ceremonial outfit is not isolated from the sacred space; it epitomizes all the objects that are associated directly or indirectly with the orisha by showing its proper place in the theology of the said divinity.

A third purpose is to educate visually by summarizing the most important events in the life of the deity. Special care is taken to expose the *yabo*, or new priest, to the different aspects of the religion. A variety of media are used to assist the initiating priest in the education and enculturation process. This particular task is especially important in the continental United States since people here come into the Santería tradition from diverse cultural backgrounds. The educational process that traditionally occurs over a lifetime has to be communicated in a shorter span of time. The creative process is then challenged by the prevailing historical features and changes the way aesthetic elements and ceremonial items are arranged in any given ceremony. The consecration outfit is probably the ceremonial element that poses the greatest challenge to any priest, and the one that undergoes more dramatic and radical changes in order to satisfy the needs of the ever-growing multi-cultural nature of the religion.

Two basic questions about the consecration outfit come to mind: What is the motivation for creating these garments? Must the pattern for the outfit conform strictly to a long established tradition, or is there room for change? If the consecration outfit can be changed to reflect Santería's new cultural pluralism, the changes must be in keeping with the needs of the initiate and the religion. Creating these garments in such a changing environment entails developing new forms or modifying traditional ones by design or accident. In any case, innovation is significant for the religion and the initiate. The consecration outfit must be consistent with the traditional views as defined by the oracular tradition and by the elders of the community, while also reflecting sensitivity to new surroundings and to participants in the religion.

Traditional Santería beliefs are based on two important principles: tradition and the ancestors. Tradition, as any follower of Santería understands it, means following the patterns of behavior stated by the oracle and sanctioned by the elders of the community. The oracle in question is the sixteen cowries.[2] This oracle is one of the two major oracles of the religion, and it contains in its corpus a summary of the culture. Every important question is presented to the deities through the oracle for answer and guidance. Each one of the *odu*, or divination verses, explains and justifies the ceremonies and processes of the religion. Another aspect of this sanctioning is that every act of the follower should reflect moral and religious values as prescribed by the religion. When one is consecrated and learns the identity of his or her orisha, a series of teachings begins that communicates the character traits of the orisha to the initiate. For example, a person who is going to be consecrated in the cult of Yemayá will be instructed in the characteristics of that orisha. Furthermore, imparting values such as motherhood, the nurturing nature of the orisha, determination, abundance of her element (the sea), and formality are all part of the preliminary stages of the ceremony. Once the initiate is familiar with the nature of the deity and places the inner persona in the mythical universe of the orisha, she or he is on the way to becoming an active participant in the ceremony.

The fact that very little has been written about Santería accounts for the emphasis on rituals. Almost everyone in Santería knows the *pataki*, or sacred stories, and has a good knowledge of the traditions as defined by the oracle and the ancestors. Consequently, when a consecration takes place, the *santero*, or priest, must be able to speak without a voice by combining appropriate elements in order to tell a well-known story in a dynamic and original way but still within traditional boundaries. The resulting narrative is accepted by the

community when the elements used are repeated by others and integrated into the corpus. In this respect, Santería follows M. O. Jones's view that

> ideas communicated from one individual to another . . . serve to establish precedence for the procedure; what the individual does with the ideas and the skills that have been revealed to him is his concern, and his own discoveries and inventions may become "part of the general tradition" by being communicated to others who accept them and then communicate them to yet other individuals. (1975:71)

A priest is judged, then, not only on the lavishness of the elements used but also on the ability to convey a message. Since the message is based on personal experience, the deeper the experience in the religion, the more capable a priest is to speak without a voice. When a ceremony is staged, the santero not only tries to be acceptable in the eyes of the community but also communicates a specific view of the theology. Any idea has to be carefully communicated since the community acts as a judge; in Santería, as in any other traditional group, *vox populi vox dei* holds. Tradition, therefore, is more than ideas. If something is to survive, several elements have to be in place.

Because of its religious meaning, the consecration outfit is also highly charged with conceptual and aesthetic symbolism. Designing such an item is a challenge for it requires not only a knowledge of history, but also a sense of aesthetics. If a Santería ceremony is to be successful, the elements involved have to produce a religious and aesthetic experience; the power to manipulate these elements and to produce such an experience lies in the hands of the seamstress who makes the consecration outfit. The santero does not normally interfere with the decisions of the seamstress, who is well informed about what needs to be done to produce an acceptable outfit. It is understood, therefore that the seamstress may reconfigure components to help create an aesthetic experience. M.O. Jones states:

> What is required for an activity to have aesthetic value is that an individual be aware of and manipulate qualities appealing to the senses in a rhythmical and structured way so as to create a form ultimately serving as a standard by which perfection (or beauty) is measured. (1987:122)

The seamstress can then educate and shape the community's sense of beauty by the way she designs the outfit and presents it. Sensitive to this state of affairs, any priest communicates clearly with the seamstress so that the consecration outfit produced will be aesthetically pleasing.

The basic models for consecration dresses are taken from Iberian styles in vogue in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. All the models derive from what was considered regal and identify the black royalty with the white ruling class. Historically, certain patterns became fixed and were reproduced by different artisans with only slight variations. The availability of embroidered materials and of decoration influenced the dressmaking trade. As more affluent people came into the religion, the techniques of handling design became more refined. As Santería moved from an exclusive black and mulatto realm and became more accessible to other sectors of the population, the use of more expensive and elaborate fabrics marked this new sensitivity; the models, however, remained the same.

To illustrate the nature and importance of the consecration outfit in Santería, I focus now on a particular cult, the cult of Yemayá. Yemayá is the mother of the most important orishas. She rules over motherhood as a value, and the sea with all its abundance and ceaseless motion is her physical representation. Associated with the number seven graphically and in the oracular system, she is the great mother (*iyanla*) of men and orishas. Because of her association with the ocean, her color is blue in all its hues. This blue is accented with details of red, coral, green, and crystal.

The *traje del medio* (outfit for the middle day), as it is known, is exceptional. The new priest will only wear the outfit three times in life: on the second day of the consecration, when sitting in state to receive visiting priests and friends; on the second day of the consecration of the next priest; and at burial. The psychological impact and awe of such an outfit is known to the new priest and visitors. I will now describe an outfit that belongs to a woman who lives and works in the Los Angeles area. It exemplifies my early work as a priest and as a designer of such items.

The person dressed in a consecration outfit is no longer the same but becomes the orisha whose garments he or she is wearing. The interplay of colors and decoration gives the initiate a divine dimension. In order for a consecration ceremony to be considered aesthetically pleasing, it has to be a reflection of the values assigned to the orisha honored at the moment, a judgment in itself. These values have to be expressed in the selection of such elements as objects, offerings, and the like. Specifically, this means that an altar for *Shangó*, god of lightning, should reflect his masculine qualities and capture his sense of boasting. On the other hand, an altar for Oshún, goddess of love, sweetness, and, sensuality must convey these distinctive values. Any evaluation of a public or private ceremony will come in the form of a qualitative judgment. This judgment will be positive if all the

elements are in harmony with the intended purpose (education, communication of stories, transmission of values, and character of the orishas). To express this, a priest has to know both the old traditions and the new, emergent ones. A priest on the east coast of the United States is not likely to make the same aesthetic judgment as his counterpart on the west coast. This may be because of environmental details, the diversity of the ethnic components, or the taste of the community that is to witness the ceremony. All of these criteria influence the ceremony. People who are witnessing this transformation are going to judge how assertive the priest was in choosing material, textures, and colors. They will want to know if the story transmitted through the outfit is easy to derive from the above elements. The informed onlooker will ask what road (a particular manifestation of the orisha) is depicted in the outfit, and whether the model meets the standards of tradition? Here, taste is interchangeable with aesthetic judgment.

The basic dress pattern for a female yabo, or young bride (priests are believed to be brides of the orisha, regardless of gender), is a basic "princess" or "A-line" dress with an open crown as an accessory. The crown has to include the number associated with the orisha and some aesthetic decoration to that effect; for example, a crown for Yemayá might have seven points and seven seashells. If the seamstress simply keeps the original traditional aesthetic which the community considered pleasing—such as the basic A-shape of the outfit and the proper blue and silver color combinations—this is not sufficient fot the outfit to be considered a classic example of the dressmaking craft by Santería standards. This is because the elements are not in true harmony with the deity's character, and no knowledge can be inferred by looking at the garment. We have to remember that Santería is an oral tradition. In my opinion as a priest, an orisha like Yemayá, so rich in narrative and imagery, should inspire a better outfit.

The seamstress with whom I worked on the outfit discussed here has manufactured many A-line dresses for initiations. Because of our long-standing relationship, I chose to have her produce my modified design. When the new dress was worn, the community was unable to identify the seamstress: Her pattern had remained the same during twenty years of sewing in Los Angeles; this new outfit, however, was very innovative when viewed against this often repeated standard. When I designed this dress, the main consideration was the road of Yemayá and the way to characterize it properly.

My choice was *Asesu*, a road of Yemayá associated with the shore of the sea and the foam. This information is conveyed traditionally using baby blue materials. The material on my design is blue organdy

with silver embroidery. To represent the water and to convey the message of the foam, seven layers of darker blue lace and a train were added. The embroidery was to accent the multi-colored effect of the sea foam when in the air with the sun reflecting upon it. The crown also underwent changes: Traditionally it is open; I had never considered this a good choice of form, however, because it showed the bare head of the newly initiated which was shaved for the ceremony. I was concerned that since the particulars of the ceremony took place in secret, the designs painted on the head should certainly be covered. The crown that I designed was closed at the top with material from the dress to help conceal the sacred designs from the eyes of the non-initiated attending the public presentation of the yabo during the *dia del medio* celebration.

It was not easy to convince the seamstress to agree with my design changes. Her reaction to my intrusion on her field was not positive. Her reasons were: "[This] is going to take a lot of material. It will require a lot of time to finish it," and the crowning one, "This is going to cost you a lot of money." After much negotiating, she did complete the outfit. In the process, I conceded to leave the selection of fabric and particular tonality of light blue to her; to be honest, I was not too happy with this agreement, but it proved beneficial.

As a result of these changes, when the dia del medio came, and people saw the transformation of the yabo, the comments were many and favorable. The choice of material was deemed appropriate, as were the colors and the combination of elements such as embroidery, lace, and a fan. All these things relayed the message of Yemayá Asesu and the pataki associated with it. The visitors commented on the way the dress fit the yabo: She did not look strange, and the clothes seemed appropriate for her age; she was fifty-four when consecrated.

The visiting priest complimented me on the design but also added that the crown, though appropriate and very "Yemayá like," probably would not be used again by others because it posed storage problems. Traditionally the crowns, as stated earlier, are open. When the ceremony is over, they are placed on top of the godparent's orisha until the time comes for someone else to be initiated. After that moment, the crowns are stored away until the time comes to use them again at the funeral ceremony. The statement of the visiting priest's statement proved correct. Since this event, three other people have been consecrated, and their crowns followed the older pattern. Because I do not give up easily, I created the new crowns in such a way that they store easily, but I did not alter my basic design. When stored, they are easily placed in a line one behind the other, giving a sense of continuity to the religious family. When considering the train, he also

voiced concern about the difficulty in storage. Negative comments revolved around the problem posed by storing such a bulky garment. The closet space in any home is designed to store less imposing outfits. If we consider that a successful priest will consecrate several people during his lifetime, the number of outfits to be stored can be enormous. The closet also serves as a showcase. When a priest wants to show how successful his practice has been, the number of outfits speaks for itself. The outfits in my home have been arranged chronologically, that is, in the order each outfit was used. Showing them gives visitors an idea of how models and ideas have changed over time.

The initiate's age was also a consideration when designing the outfit. This matter was dealt with by adding elements of decoration that were of importance to the yabo. The new priestess commented that the outfit reminded her of the dresses that the "ladies of my country wore when I was young." The relating of past experiences to the present is common; and those that have fond memories of the past often associate them with what is worn. Charles E. Martin encountered a similar phenomenon among Appalachian people who used catalogue pages to decorate their houses: "Older people, who used it and understood its aesthetic, functional, and symbolic value are still drawn towards it" (Martin 1983:26).

In conclusion, the observers comments on the outfit were noteworthy. The changes I made were judged to be within the boundaries of tradition and also to tell the appropriate story. To this day, some of my innovations—namely the closed crown—have been copied. A priestess from Venezuela, present at the consecration which included my altered outfit, has adopted the idea and the new closed crowns are part of the consecration outfits in her *ilé* (religious house). It is remains to be seen if other priests will follow this style. Even though most of my fellow priests expressed satisfaction with the beauty of the outfit, the general feeling was that the outfit created storage problems that were too significant to ignore. When Santería was limited to the islands, a room was prepared for worship. All needs were covered by defining the sacred space and providing it with the necessary elements. In crowded urban areas of the United States, space is less readily available.

When I moved to Los Angeles and began my practice, the task of defining sacred space was cumbersome, since the house in which I lived was not comparable to the one in an ilé. The solution was to reorganize the space in order to adapt the house for the added purpose. The same approach is possible when it comes to storing the outfits. It is my feeling that the storage place is as much a part of the

sacred space as any other element of the ilé. This position is shared by other priests who are beginning to reconceptualize and redefine sacred space responsive to the needs of Los Angeles. The sheer amount of materials and decorative elements available in Los Angeles makes it very hard not to get carried away when designing these outfits. The same thing is true for altars, and there is a consensus that they should be made as ostentatiously as possible.

The basic change in the consecration outfit is not in its manufacture but rather in its design. Traditionally the seamstress is the one who defines and decides what is to be made. In the particular case discussed above, I made the design, and the seamstress made the garment. This change in the equation should bring a radical new approach to making the outfits, since it gives the priest more input. From my point of view, the seamstress will no longer be the sole participant in the decision making process in outfit creation. It is a practice that has shifted the creativity in the making of outfits. As a priest, my relationship with the seamstress has become very cordial—after this outfit for Yemayá we have worked in three others—and now it is easier to combine our expertise when we work. At this point, I have not seen any of my ideas integrated to her own designs. A very important factor of this relationship is the mutual trust we have developed, even though she still points out how long it takes to work on my designs! Seamstresses have such an overwhelming amount of work that they often standardize their designs, and everyone ends up with the same model in different colors. It is important to remark on the importance of colors for Santería. Each one of the orishas owns a color by which he or she is represented, these canonical colors are used in every aspect of worship. When a seamstress is designing an outfit, the first consideration is color: white for *Obatalá*, red and white for Shangó, blue for Yemayá, yellow for Oshún, etc. The different shades, decoration, and embellishments of the outfit must follow a very strict color code. The color of one orisha cannot be employed for another. The priest, by becoming more active, brings new ideas into the process by producing new forms and re-evaluating existing ones. Verni Greenfield, paraphrasing Edward D. Ives, states, "Creativity is in evidence when 'individuals bring into existence objects, performances, ideas, or solutions that did not exist before, whether or not these behaviors and products are literally innovative'" (1986:95).

The outfit described in this paper signals the transformation of the new priestess into the queenly orisha Yemayá, a change accomplished by "telling the story" of a particular avatar and invoking her qualities through specific elements of decoration. I challenged the long established pattern by using multiple elements that conveyed the

personality of the deity. I dealt with the crown in a similar manner. It was transformed to accommodate my concern about exposing secrets to non-initiates. In conclusion, there is room for innovation in the art of dressmaking in Santería. Limitations have stemmed from the control by the seamstresses of the important elements of composition. Given the opportunity, most priests in Santería will participate in the design process. Other considerations, such as storage space for these items, has to be dealt with in the way of fashion, adapting to the ever-growing need of the religion. Although not everyone in Santería feels creative enough to design an outfit, more priests are becoming involved in this important aspect of the initiation. If this trend continues, more and more people in the religious community will be involved in designing outfits "for the queen."

Notes

[1] I dedicate this article to my wife Dorothy, also a priestess of Yemayá. A shortened version of this paper was presented at the 1990 California Folklore Society meeting in Santa Rosa, California. I am deeply indebted to Prof. M. O. Jones for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this paper. Also I would like to thank Prof. Robert A. Georges for his invaluable help editing the present version.

[2] For an in-depth look at the oracle, see Bascom 1980.

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