

THE DILOGGÚN



The Orishas, Proverbs, Sacrifices,
and Prohibitions of Cuban Santería

ÓCHA'NI LELE

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Destiny Books
Rochester, Vermont

Destiny Books
One Park Street
Rochester, Vermont 05767
www.InnerTraditions.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lele, Ócha'ni, 1966–

The Diloggún : the orishas, proverbs, sacrifices, and prohibitions of Cuban Santería / Ócha'ni Lele.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

eISBN-13: 978-159477862-9

1. Orishas—Cuba. 2. Santería—Cuba. 3. Divination—Cuba. I. Title.

BL2530.C9L93 2003

299'.674—dc21

2003053174

Text design and layout by Virginia Scott Bowman

This book was typeset in Janson with Greymantle as the display typeface



*For Ogúndei, Evaristo Perez, ibaé. We all miss you.
For Cynthia Perry. Thank you for believing in me.
For my godfather, Banacek Matos. Thank you . . .
for everything you gave me.*



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is said that Olódumare spread his knowledge and wisdom throughout the world so that each person could have a small part. Since 1989 I have immersed myself in the culture of orisha worship, and no matter how much I learn I realize that there is so much more to be learned. A book as vast as this represents countless hours of travel, questioning, study, note taking, and work. I am indebted to the many people who have encouraged, supported, and instructed me; I need to acknowledge them all here.

I am indebted to those who gave me my foundation in the religion, setting me on the path that led to the completion of my research: Auria Gonzalez (omo-Oshún), Rigoberto Rodriguez (omo-Oshún, ibaé), and Juan Gonzalez (omo-Yemayá, ibaé), gentle tutors who taught me the basic oral meanings of the parent odu and their special rituals. To my many sponsors and godparents in the religion, I am always in your debt: my first godmother, Baba Lade; my first yubonna, Odofemi; and my ex- and onetime oriaté, Afolabi. Although I am no longer a godchild in that house, the training and teaching that I received as I was given my elekes, warriors, Olokun, Ibeyi, santo lavado (Obatalá), and nganga (the cauldron of Palo Mayombe) were instrumental in this volume's research. I spent many months in Michigan questioning, observing, and learning; it was through participation in that ilé ocha that I learned the manipulations of obí and diloggún, the oracles of the orishas. I also need to thank Akin Babatunde, Ogúndei (ibaé), Paul Bennet,

Reynaldo Ruiz, Omolotiwa, Dr. Mary Curry (ibaé), and Christine Jaffe for all their support and help throughout these writing projects. Special thanks and love also go out to Omolotiwa, Oshunguere, Oshunare, and Adeobe for accepting me with open arms when I literally “showed up” on their front doorstep. Thank you! You have all been the most incredible and gracious hosts!

Although Palo Mayombe is a religion separate from Lucumí practice, my experiences in this Congolese faith were instrumental to my spiritual development and, hence, my work as an author. I need to thank all those in my munanso who gave me foundation and initiation: my Tata, Tiembla Tierra Sambia Empungo (Banacek Matos); my Yayi, Chola Cuatro Vientos (Keisha Lago); and the witnesses to my rayado, Lucero Malembo Malongo, Lucero Tata Entoto, Siete Sayas Sirena de Madrugada (Dr. Miriam Bonet), and Matojo que Crece. They gave me strength when I felt that I had none, courage when I was afraid, and foundation when the very walls around me were crumbling. How can I thank these people enough for giving me back my life? I cannot. I also need to thank Eva Shangó (Obadeoba), an espiritista with the most incredible egun and muertos, for helping me give my own spiritual court strength, light, and elevation. Her work as an espiritista is incredible, and I owe my own spiritual development as an espiritista to much of her work. Elba Oshún (Oniosún), her “partner” in the religion, has been very sweet and very kind,

and I thank her for her work as well in elevating my spiritual court. Finally, I need to thank Naomi Alejandro (siete rayos), Madre Nganga from the rama Vititi Congo, for her many hours of visits and discussions on the religion Palo Mayombe. She was a fountain of knowledge, one that I drank from quite frequently.

I also want to thank the following people for their support over the years:

- Susannah Noel, the editor for my first book, *The Secrets of Afro-Cuban Divination*. I learned so much by working with her on my first major project. Susannah, you have no idea how your ripping and shredding of my first manuscript molded my work to date as an author. Just don't do it again—ever!
- Doris Troy, the editor for my second book *Obí, Oracle of Cuban Santería*. She picked up where Susannah left off and helped my writing acquire the final bit of polish it needed. Doris, you did a beautiful job with that volume, and I thank you for it!
- Laura Schlivek, my project editor throughout all my work with Inner Traditions. Laura, you are incredible, providing me with encouragement and motivation when I am about to give up. Thank you for your mentoring.
- Jon Graham, my acquisitions manager at Inner Traditions. When no one else there believed in my proposals, you did, and I am grateful for your belief in my work. I am sure that the orishas thank you as well for ensuring that the beauty and complexity of our faith is out there for the world to read about and understand.

- Nancy Ringer, who attacked and edited this project with an almost religious zeal. You did a wonderful job, Nancy.
- Cynthia Perry, my benefactor and patron, the one person who believed in me and my work so much that she was willing to give up everything to ensure that my dreams came true. Cindy, how can I thank you for being there when times were rough? How can I thank you for continuing to push me toward my dreams and goals? I cannot. But at least you know that you have my undying love and gratitude.
- Mark Benezra, owner of Original Publications, for allowing me to quote freely from Awó Fá'Lokun Fatunmbi's *Awó: Ifá and the Theology of Orisha Divination*. As always, on a personal level I must thank him for his time and encouragement early in my writing career. The man is nothing short of brilliant, and he was, in the day, a cherished mentor.
- Marjorie Stevens and Ann Refoe, two teachers who realized that I had talent as a writer and encouraged me to write "feverishly." Teachers are the most important influence in our lives, and they can never be given enough praise. To both of you, know that whenever my pen hits paper, you are both there in my prayers and thoughts.

The blessings and love that I have to give go out to you all. I thank each of you for believing in me when I did not believe in myself. ¡Aché! To all of you!



CONTENTS

	AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LUCUMÍ RELIGION	1
ONE	MANIPULATING THE DILOGGÚN, THE ORACLE OF THE ORISHAS	9
TWO	THE FAMILY OF OKANA	42
THREE	THE FAMILY OF EJI OKO	88
FOUR	THE FAMILY OF OGUNDÁ	134
FIVE	THE FAMILY OF IROSUN	174
SIX	THE FAMILY OF OCHÉ	212
SEVEN	THE FAMILY OF OBARA	259
EIGHT	THE FAMILY OF ODÍ	299
NINE	THE FAMILY OF EJI OGBE	348
TEN	THE FAMILY OF OSÁ	395
ELEVEN	THE FAMILY OF OFÚN	440
TWELVE	THE FAMILY OF OWANI	492
THIRTEEN	THE FAMILY OF EJILA SHEBORA	537
	APPENDIX: THE ODU BEYOND EJILA SHEBORA	583
	GLOSSARY	589
	SUGGESTED READING	609
	INDEX	611



AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LUCUMÍ RELIGION

Although the Lucumí faith is a modern religion flourishing on American soil, it is heavily rooted in the past, a surviving spiritual evolution of ancient Yoruba beliefs. The Yoruba were a proud nation of warriors who occupied southwestern Nigeria, an area in which their modern-day descendants still thrive. These Africans developed a religious city-state system whose brilliance in some ways exceeded that of the classical Greek and Roman empires, for while those ancient European civilizations are no more, the Yoruba culture lives on. History tells us that the Yoruba nation was founded by a holy man, Odúduwa, who established the first holy city at Ilé Ifé. As the ethnic group spread, entire city-states sprang up around the worship of various *orishas*, or gods. Ilé Ifé belonged to Obatalá, Oyó to Shangó, Ilobu to Inle, Ketu to Ochosi, Inisa to Otún, and Ilesa (Ijesa region, Iwo and Edo) to Logun Ede. Each city-state had its own priesthood devoted to the orisha protecting the city. Thus, initiates in Ilé Ifé were brought into the mysteries of Obatalá, whereas those who entered the priesthood in Oyó received Shangó, and Ketu priests were bound to Ochosi. Uniting all these city-states, no matter the god served, were three concepts: Odúduwa, the common ancestor; Elegguá, the orisha who opens the doors from our world to that of the divine; and Olódumare, the supreme god. While the people of each individual province had their own orisha to worship, with Odúduwa in their blood, Elegguá at their feet, and Olódumare in their heaven, all were one nation.

The religion, whether one speaks of the ancient Yoruba, the modern Yoruba, or the Lucumí, teaches that the ultimate creative force, Olódumare, divided itself into innumerable aspects—the orishas. Only by worshiping and studying each orisha can one slowly acquire greater knowledge of the vast divine whole. Each orisha is a living, spiritual personification of limited *aché* (a word translating loosely as “power, grace, and life”). The *aché* of an orisha depends on the aspect of Olódumare from which it spawned. Obatalá, a deity who can be either male or female, comes from the most vast and wise aspects of Olódumare; he is also known as the “King of White Cloth,” the cloth being the pure white light from which all things coalesced. Yemayá is the sweet, life-giving, mothering principle of unknowable deity; like a mother, she is swift to protect and defend her children. Ochosi, the hunter, hunts not only to feed Olódumare but also to feed his people; he taught humans how to hunt for food and was born of the aspect of Olódumare that represents the principle “To live, life must feed on life.” Olokun, the hermaphroditic deity ruling the depths of the ocean, draws her *aché* from the part of Olódumare that is secret, mysterious, and unknown; hence her home is in the depths of the ocean, where none may descend while living in the flesh. Ainá, mistress of flame and constant companion to Shangó, is the limitless fire of Olódumare’s existence.

Modern African Yoruba religion and the Cuban-American Lucumí faith share the same basic beliefs,

though both are as far removed from the principles of ancient Yoruba worship as they are in distance from each other. While New World slavery was an unforgivable heresy of Christian people, it was the catalyst for the Lucumí evolution; had it not been for the slave trade, our gods would never have come to American soils. The Middle Passage from Africa to Cuba brought together diverse ethnic groups, many of which had had no prior contact with one another. The few African nations that had been acquainted with their neighbors were not always on good terms; they warred, and this weakened each group, making them prone to European conquest and kidnapping. Of all the New World territories involved in slave importation, Cuba boasted the longest history. While slaves were imported to Brazil in 1538 and to the colonies of North America in 1619, in Cuba they arrived as early as 1521. The Cuban influx was tremendous: In the 241-year period from 1521 through 1762, an average of five hundred Africans per year were brought to the island as slaves, totaling 120,500 blacks. These, and their captive-born descendants, were forced to work for a greedy population, a light-skinned race too lazy to labor and produce for itself. Of all the New World regions, Cubans held on to the slavery system the longest; not until 1870, twenty years after the abolition of slavery in Brazil and ten years after abolition in the United States, did slavery come to an end in Cuba. The Lucumí faith was molded during this 349-year period in Cuba.

Realize, however, that the gestation period for the emerging Lucumí practices was prolonged. Only a minority of the Africans captured in the early years of the slave trade were Yoruba, and religious practices of those Yorubans did not survive much beyond the first generation in Cuba. The Portuguese, British, French, Dutch, and Spanish traders raided vast areas, not focusing on any one tribe. Blacks were brought from both coasts and the central region. The borders of the raiding region ran south to Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Angola and extended north to Kenya and Senegal. Because of its strength, the Yoruba nation was initially avoided; those few brought as slaves were political prisoners of other tribes. Widespread raiding of the

Yoruba began in 1763, however, with the highest numbers being captured through 1774. For eleven years, the Yoruba comprised a dominant proportion of new Cuban slaves, and they and their descendants increased their ethnic presence on the island. After 1774, the number of first-generation Yoruba slaves dwindled, but slavers continued to capture them until 1789. During this twenty-six-year period (1763–89), 15,600 slaves flooded Cuban ports, most of them Yoruba. By 1789 the Yoruba were among the largest, “freshest” African populations on the island. With a number of descendants who remembered fragments of the oldest Yoruba religious traditions and first-generation “imports” who were familiar with current religious practices, the radical changes in slavery made during the year 1789 gave the Yoruba population an overall cultural advantage that other groups would not share.

For it was in 1789 that Charles IV, king of Spain, issued “The Royal Document on the Trades and Occupations of Slaves.” The official Spanish opinion on the value, lives, and worth of slaves had never before been determined; Charles defined their duty by royal decree: From the age of seventeen through the age of sixty, all blacks in good health were to toil ceaselessly in Cuban fields, producing for the master class at all costs. Manual labor was for the black hands. White hands were not to be soiled; instead, they were to handle the mental tasks of continuing society. The royal decree also defined the master class’s duty to its servants: Being good Catholics, all who used slave labor were to teach their charges the one true, holy religion of the Roman Catholic Church. While Christians believed that blacks were subhuman, Church doctrine taught that they still had souls; the masters could own their slaves’ bodies, but only God could claim what lay beneath their flesh. The slaves’ souls were to be nurtured in the name of Mother Rome. Because all was done in the name of God, the document forbade slave labor on the high holy days of the Church, especially the feast days of Spanish saints. On these holy days, blacks were to attend mass and receive communion; thus would they find salvation and be free in the afterlife. Every day after laboring long hours in the field, the slaves were to recite the rosary in their

homes. The royal decree promised rewards for the slaves: In return for total submission to both the masters and the Church, they would be given free time to entertain and work for themselves.

Although meant to ensure total domination over both the bodies and the souls of black slaves, Charles's decree would, in time, have the reverse effect. It became the foundation that nurtured, rather than destroyed, African traditional religion.

Arising from the foundation of "The Royal Document on the Trades and Occupations of Slaves," the framework for the continuation of native African religions was built by two men, Father Juan Matienzo and Bishop Pedro Agustín Morrell de Santa Cruz. Both had great zeal for black religious education.

Father Matienzo authored guidelines for each slave's religious upbringing. He believed that blacks were mentally comparable to children and could learn something new only by comparing it to something familiar. He knew the trauma of forced separation from their homelands broke their spirit and realized that their longing for the old ways burned in their hearts. Matienzo sought to use this trauma and yearning to build a bridge from the Africans' paganism to the holy Catholic Church. He encouraged both fellow priests and laymen to allow slaves to retain some of their native customs while worshipping the white supreme God. He theorized that slow acclimation and carefully calculated abdication of superstitious practices would lead each African to salvation. Having attained salvation, one by one the Africans would abandon their heathen practices.

Unknown to him, Matienzo's work failed miserably. For with their mouths the African slaves prayed openly on the rosary to the Virgin Mary and the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but in their hearts they longed for their native gods, crying to them for peace and release from their prisons. Some slaves, say the Lucumí elders, did look upon the saints with an open mind, but instead of a holy Christian persona, they saw in the faces of the saints their own tears and, behind these, the faces of their own orishas staring back. At this point, the elders say, the holy Catholic saints looked down in pity and despair at what their own people were doing, and the orishas, in their infinite wisdom, worked through the saints to carry their

followers through the hardships of slavery. When the first Yoruba prayed on the rosary, Cuban society felt the first stirring of Santería in its midst.*

Along with Father Matienzo, Bishop Pedro Agustín Morrell de Santa Cruz crusaded for black spiritual redemption. For his work, he borrowed a custom originating in fourteenth-century Seville, Spain, and an organization known as the *cofradía*, or the religious brotherhood for laymen. In Spain, each *cofradía* was dedicated to a specific saint and headed by the priests of the local church dedicated to that holy persona. Every week, members of the *cofradía* met in their church; the brotherhood provided religious instruction, fellowship, and support for both lifetime Catholics and new converts.

Through centuries of usage in Spain, the concept had proved valuable for the conversion of souls; it was a peaceful, although subversive, way to immerse the newly converted into Catholic culture. Bishop Morrell rationalized that the success of the *cofradía* in Spain could translate into success with the conversion of slaves, and if the slaves were truly converted to the Holy Mother Church, they would be more easily controlled and more productive to Spanish society. Because most Cuban churches were built in the cities themselves, the organization of the *cofradía* became an urban phenomenon, licensed and overseen by the existing municipalities and parishes. Soon, each church sponsored one in the name of its patron saint.

Though the municipality licensed it and the church parish directed it, for the *cofradía* to have full impact, it was essential that it be governed by laymen. Lay leadership had brought success in Spain, and Bishop Morrell believed it would work in Cuba

*Throughout this book, I will refer to this religion as both Santería and the Lucumí faith. The term Santería, which translates as "worship of the saints," is actually a misnomer. Slave traders and masters applied this term in distaste for how the Africans seemingly worshiped and revered the holy Catholic saints over God himself. In truth, the Catholic saints are not worshiped in this religion, although they do have the adherents' reverence for helping to save the worship of orishas from extinction. Many believers, however, retain their Catholic ties to some degree, using the term *Santería* for their beliefs affectionately. When I use *Santería*, I use it with this same affectionate spirit, and not as the slur that white and Hispanic slavers intended.

as well. Because blacks did not trust their masters, and with good reason, priests turned over the governing of each brotherhood to the most prominent and well-respected Africans among the slaves. These Africans, of course, had proved themselves to the parish by taking the sacraments and praying daily on the rosary. Leading a *cofradia* meant more freedom for a slave, so these positions were sought eagerly. Little did the masters know, however, that the most respected men and women among the slaves were the priests and priestesses of each ethnic group's tribes.

The heads of the *cofradias* were known as godfathers and godmothers of those they represented. It was here, in the *cofradia*, that the custom of referring to one's Lucumí priestess or priest as one's godmother or godfather began. The first job of the godparent was religious instruction, assisting in catechism. Part of that instruction was to teach the converts about the holy saints. Openly, godparents taught the traditional beliefs about the saints. Secretly, they taught African myths about the sacred spirits and showed how they shared attributes with the saints.

Very quickly, the various ethnic groups brought together in a *cofradia* saw that all their spirits were related, although at the same time vastly different, and that they could, in secret, hide the worship of their spirits behind the guise of the saints. Thus began the amalgamation and sharing of religious beliefs between the once conflicting tribes; the *cofradias* also initiated the syncretization of African spirits with the saints of the Catholic Church. The final job of the *cofradia's* godparents was to represent their charges at baptism, and this spawned the Lucumí custom of being baptized a Catholic before being allowed entrance into an *ilé ocha*, or spiritual house

*The Catholic baptism is becoming a dying practice among the new generation of Lucumí priests. In the days before the faith came to the United States, not only would the initiate be baptized in the church before the weeklong consecration as an orisha priest or priestess, but also, after the consecration was completed, the godparent would take the *iyawó* (the "bride," or new initiate) into a church so he or she could pay homage to the saints who helped save the faith from extinction. At this time, the *iyawó* would light a candle for the saints and pray while the godparent explained which orisha's worship was hidden behind that person's face.

of an orisha.* The slave masters and Catholic clergy rejoiced, for it seemed that the Africans were catching on to the new religion very quickly. They gathered earlier on Sundays than did most whites for church services, and they stayed together until the late hours of the night, praying and praising the saints and God, although oftentimes in their native tongues. The celebrations of Catholic feast days for the saints became more colorful, flavored with African soul and spice; every slave who could attend and worshiped with great zeal. Because the program seemed to work so well, the *cofradias* were given more prominence and more freedom. The Holy Mother Church believed it was winning more souls for God.

During this time, four major ethnic groups were represented among the Cuban slaves: the Bantu, the Yoruba, the Ibibio/Ibó/Ijaw, and the Fon (Arara). While Bishop Morrell introduced the *cofradia*, Father Matienzo still insisted on letting the Africans continue their simplest ethnic customs. To do this, *cabildos*, or ethnic clubs, were established under the rule of the *cofradia*. The reorganization of *cofradias* along tribal lines, so the clergy theorized, would bring greater depth to the new Catholic devotees. *Cabildos* were licensed by cities through the church and allowed the various ethnic groups to study Catholicism together as a single ethnic group. Every Sunday and on the holy feast days the *cabildos* met to dance, sing, and worship God. The most popular of these were *Cabildo Arara Sabalu Africano*, *Cabildo Arara Dahome*, and *Cabildo Arara Cuevano*, all for the Arara tribes; *Cabildo Macongo* and *Cabildo Mumbale*, for the Bantu; and, most important for us, the Lucumí peoples, *Cabildo Africano Lucumí*. It was in *Africano Lucumí* that the Yoruba came together every Sunday to worship their orishas through the guises of the saints. They used the *cabildo* to keep their own religion alive secretly, for to be found out would mean an end to their religious freedom.† In *Cabildo Africano Lucumí*, the orisha *Obatalá* became known as Our Lady of Mercy, *Oshún* became Our Lady of Charity, *Yemayá*

†This fear for loss of the slaves' newfound religious freedom gave birth to the ironclad tradition of Lucumí secrecy. To survive, we had to hide. This, fortunately, is something we no longer endure.

syncretized with the Virgin of Regla, Babaluyiye was Saint Lazarus, Oyá was known as Saint Teresa, and Shangó became Saint Barbara. The African feast days of the orishas were changed to match the feast days of the Catholic saints. And it was at this time that the slave masters nicknamed their charges' worship Santería. But while the Africans' seeming distortion of Catholicism to focus on the saints worried the slave masters, it also allayed their fears, for they believed that, in time, the blacks would "get it right" and worship the one true God.

As the Lucumí cabildos grew more joyous and bold in their celebrations, the master class came to regard them as a necessary nuisance. On Sunday nights and holy feast days, cabildo members met until late in the night, with seemingly ceaseless chanting and singing, continual drumming, and garrulous praising of saints in both Spanish and broken Yoruba. By 1800, while the actual *cofradías* still met in their allotted churches, the cabildos were banished outside the city walls. The master class saw this as a blessing, for no longer were they subjected to the noise. The evolving Lucumí adherents also saw this as a blessing, for no longer were they subjected to curious eyes or the danger of discovery. With this even greater freedom, the liturgies we came to know as Lucumí were solidified. While the previous years had brought changes and fragmentation, the continued influx of slaves into this more open cabildo society brought cohesion and solidification. During the country's last period of slavery, 1821–70, 16,700 more slaves per year were brought into the country. The Yoruba were a minority among these, but their numbers were still sufficient to renew and replenish the faith. Nigerian-initiated priests and priestesses of the orishas came together in large numbers, many having exposure to one another for the first time. To strengthen the faith and save it from future degeneration, the modern initiations of giving *elekes* (a series of ornate beaded necklaces presented in a special baptism ceremony), giving *warriors* (the compilation of the orishas Elegguá, Ogún, Ochosi, and Ósun presented to worshipers), and *asiento* (the Cuban-styled initiation that includes the giving of multiple orishas) were crafted. The new rituals of

obí (coconut divination) and *diloggún* (cowrie-shell divination) were devised. By 1870, we had arrived: We were known even among the master class as the Lucumí, and we continue to flourish today.

Lucumí traditions are communal; one cannot be a priest alone, nor can one work the religion alone. Anyone who claims to be a *santero* (priest) or *santera* (priestess) arrives at that title through the toil and labor of his or her elders, and the names, both common and Lucumí, of those elders are not held in secret but recited proudly. Those who are knowledgeable and well versed in Lucumí traditions can recite from memory the lineage of their teachers reaching back decades.* Beyond the recitation of lineage and the personal acknowledgment of elders, initiates have one final document proving their initiation and lineage: the *libreta* (notebook) given to the *iyawó* after the ceremonies of the *asiento* are completed. Although the *libreta* contains sensitive information concerning a priest or priestess's *itá* (the life reading given to a new initiate at a divination ceremony) that need not be shared with others, the first few pages themselves are open to inspection by any who ask respectfully. On the first pages of this document are recorded the priest or priestess's full name, the date of his or her initiation, the signature of the godparent, the signature of the *yubonna* (the godparent's assistant in all ceremonies), and the signatures of all those who attended and put *aché* on the *iyawó*'s head.† Those who sign the book, and the initiate's own godparents, are easily verified; being a religion of community,

*By reciting these lineages, Lucumí priests and priestesses can determine their relationships to each other within the religion. It is said that although our ranks increase geometrically, someone will "know someone who knows someone" or we will discover a common spiritual ancestor. Religiously, it is a very small world! Unfortunately, because of the politics behind the slave trade, not many initiates today can trace their lineage more than one or two generations into Africa. This, one day, might be an exciting area of research for someone with more time on his or her hands than myself.

†The godparent gives each priest or priestess who works at a *iyawó*'s initiation an envelope with a small *derecho* (the sacred fee for the energy they bring). Before the godparent hands out this envelope, however, each working priest or priestess is required to sign the initiate's *libreta*, including the *oriaté* (an expert in Lucumí rituals). Therefore, if there are no signatures, there is no proof of initiation.

it is expected that an initiate will retain ties with some or all of these people for life. Quite simply, priests or priestesses without libretas, with libretas containing unverifiable signatures, or who cannot state the names of their godparents should be treated cautiously.* The Lucumí religion itself may be described as a process of spiritual evolution. One cannot simply pick up a Lucumí manual and become a practitioner, although books themselves can be useful guides to one's religious life. Those outside our faith are known as *aleyos*, or strangers; they have little faith and no involvement, but sometimes, out of desperation, they come to the priesthood for help when life becomes unbearable. In time, some *aleyos* might come to worship and adore the orishas, taking the *elekes* initiation.† Here, the *aleyo* begins by acknowledging the ancestors, the past from which he is born. Then he is stripped and bathed in an herbal elixir known as *omiero*. (In a manner similar to baptism, the *omiero* bath washes away the *aleyo's* past sins and transgressions, which stood in the way of his evolution.) Once bathed, he is dressed in white; with two or more priests or priestesses (normally, the godparent, the *yubonna*, and an *oriaté*) in attendance, the *aleyo* is presented with four beaded necklaces: the *elekes* of Obatalá, Yemayá, Oshún, and Shangó. The godparent chants, the priests or priestesses sing, and one by one the necklaces are draped over the believer's neck. He is now an *aborisha*, a believer and worshiper of the orishas, and the priest or priestess who puts the beads around his neck becomes the *aborisha's* godparent. The shrines in the godparent's home are the sanctuaries of the orishas; it becomes the *aborisha's*

*I have put this information here for a very specific reason; once, someone very close and dear to me was defrauded of money by a priest who was, quite simply, a fake. Although the amount of money she paid for useless ritual services was minimal, the repercussions this event caused in my own family were irreparable. Forewarned is forearmed. Note that there is another way to verify the legitimacy of a *santero's* orishas: If the *asiento* is done correctly and properly, a special piece is included with each orisha's *diloggún*. The revelation of the identity of this special piece, however, is not to be found in this book.

†To honor our history in Cuba, some *ilé ocha* still require baptism as a Catholic before the reception of the *elekes*. This, again, is a dying practice among Lucumí adherents.

church, and it is to these orishas that he comes to worship.

After the vestment of the *elekes*, for most the next step in the religion is the reception of the warriors. The warriors are a conglomeration of four titanic orishas: *Elegguá* (fate or destiny), *Ogún* (the warrior and the lord of iron), *Ochosi* (the hunter), and *Ósun* (who watches over the initiate's head, or spiritual consciousness). *Elegguá* can take on many different forms; however, in almost all manifestations he comes as a cement head adorned with cowries. The specific *Elegguá* received by the *aborisha* is determined by a reading with the *diloggún*. *Ogún's* mysteries come with a cauldron containing several iron tools; among these is a metal crossbow and arrow, the symbol for the orisha *Ochosi*. *Ósun's* mysteries are kept inside a small metal cup adorned on top with a metal rooster and having four bells hanging from its edges. With the reception of these four powerful spirits, the *aborisha* finally begins his or her true walk in the religion. The godparent giving these orishas explains, upon their reception, how the initiate is to care for them and details the many chants, prayers, and *eboses* (offerings) that may be made to appease and work with them. It is said that those in possession of the warriors are in total control of their own destinies.

While there are other initiations an *aborisha* might take, such as that of *Olokun* (the primordial hermaphroditic ocean orisha), *Orisha Oko* (who represents the fertility of the earth), and *santo lavado* (the washing of one's guardian orisha), for most the next step in the religion is the weeklong ceremony known as *ocha* (also known as *kariocha* or *asiento*). The rites of *ocha*, which have been passed down orally, are a series of ceremonies that initiate an *aborisha* into the mysteries of his or her guardian or crowning orisha‡ and through which the *aborisha* is consecrated as a priest. Most initiates receive not only their guardian orisha but also the following orishas: *Elegguá*,

‡The concept of a guardian or crowning orisha is central to the Lucumí faith. It is believed that each person is ruled by one orisha, and when the ritual of *asiento* is given, that one spirit is put to the initiate's head and is worn, briefly, as a crown. Afterward, the initiate becomes a *iyawó* (bride) of that spirit and is properly initiated into the mysteries.

Obatalá, Ogún, Oshún, Oyá, Shangó, and Yemayá. In the ceremony of ocha, the initiate's head (spiritual consciousness) is reborn through the godparent's work, and the initiate's orishas are born anew from the godparent's *soperas* (the bowls wherein the sacred stones and implements of each orisha are kept). Once all this is done, the initiate becomes a iyawó, a bride of the spirits, and has finally settled into his or her new life. The state of being a iyawó lasts for a year and seven days; when this time has passed, the initiate is considered a priest or priestess.

The cost of the asiento ceremonies increases yearly with inflation. Bolts of cloth, several tureens, dozens of freshly picked herbs, many animals, countless implements (made of gold, silver, bronze, copper, and wood), and various other expenses are necessary for the rites of ocha. It is not unusual for the adherent to save four thousand to ten thousand dollars to cover the extensive costs of catering, clothing, work, and other items that go into "making the saint."

While these are the basic initiations that one follows when becoming involved in the Lucumí faith, at each level the goal is the same: worship of the orishas. As it is practiced today, Santería can be divided into two active aspects that feed on each other: worship and divination. Worship takes many forms. Daily worship in the home consists of the priest or priestess and the aborisha pouring water and giving prayers to Olódumare, Elegguá, the *egun* (ancestral spirits), and the guardian orisha. These offerings are intended to cool the divinities, and they, in turn, cool the worshiper so that the day is blessed. On Mondays, Elegguá (fate, destiny, the opener of all roads) is propitiated and plied with offerings of wine, rum, and cigars. On a weekly basis, one's patron orisha is refreshed with special oils, prayers, and libations.* Orisha priests and priestesses will present a wide array of meats, drinks, and thanksgiving offerings throughout the year on behalf of other aborishas and initiates. Votive offerings are made

*Aborishas, adherents who are not priests or priestesses, try to visit the godparent weekly to bring offerings to the godparent's crowning orisha. If the guardian orisha of the aborisha is known, weekly worship of that spirit takes place in the godparent's home as well.

infrequently, as are propitiatory sacrifices. Finally, there is the yearly or anniversary offering of the *ilé ocha*, when initiates and godchildren come together to drum, dance, chant, and sing on the holy day of any one spirit. Worship easily becomes a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly affair for the faith's adherents.

The second aspect of Santería, divination, is grossly misunderstood, sometimes even by those who adhere to its practices. People in all ages and cultures have sought shades of the future, desiring knowledge of what is to come. Pagan practices have always incorporated the art of divination in their religions; from the Greek oracle at Delphi to the Ogham of the Celts, divination has been a part of, not separate from, religion. In today's New Age movement, however, divination is often an act performed outside one's spiritual faith. No longer are gods, goddesses, or spirits consulted. Some people patronize fortune-tellers and psychics in the hope of gleaning the inner intentions of a lost lover, while others seek a quick peek at future careers and prosperity. Although some use spirit guides in their consultations, and this is closer to the African spiritual systems that survived, many still credit the entire act of divining to the higher, inner self, and this is anathema to African beliefs.

It is the love of our African souls, our ancestors, our roots, and our orishas that brings us each, in time, to the Lucumí religion. Yet it is the desire to worship the orishas better, to care for them as they wish to be cared for, that brings us to the oracles. Through the *odu*, the "random" patterns produced by sixteen cowrie shells on the mat, we learn of each spirit's will. Our destiny, goals, loves, and losses are displayed with each sacred mandala. Divination is an act that feeds our worship, and the worship then given fulfills the prophecies of divination. This book concerns itself with that aspect of the orisha traditions that was nourished by the Caribbean's lush, tropical climate—the true art of divination.

Because our religion survived centuries of slavery through the safeguard of seclusion and stone-silence, as I present this book I realize that many see this writing as the breaking of an ancient, secret code. Although traditional Yoruba religion is very open

about its practices and tenets, even about the secrets of its odu, the Lucumí religion still shrouds itself in darkness and mystery. The silence is unbreakable, sometimes even among adherents. While silence was a valid survival mechanism through the heresy of slavery, the mystery it engenders causes us further loss and fragmentation; those elders who hold the secrets of our religion are slowly dying out, and without careful instruction, many of our mysteries are in danger of loss. This same secrecy allows those without *santo* on their heads (those who have not been initiated) to move in our midst, taking advantage of those seeking the true religion of the orishas by claiming initiation they do not have. This was the true goal of slavery: to destroy our culture and make us subservient to a ruling class; by hiding, we open ourselves to our own loss and destruction. Our own internal growth threatens our ranks as well. The Lucumí faith itself is legal now (since the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the case of the Church of the Lucumí vs. the city of Hialeah, Florida); it attracts a hugely diverse new following, and older heads cannot keep up with the demands of training a new priesthood. I will agree with my critics that my book cannot and should not take the place of a living teacher for initiates, but I offer it as a detailed reference to help serious students (and some elders) retain the enormous volume of infor-

mation required of them when accessing the oracle known as the diloggún.

Although this volume might seem massive, it should not be approached as a definitive treatise on the many patterns that can fall when using the diloggún. This work is certainly more comprehensive than my previous work, including 1,200 pages of manuscript and over 400,000 words on the subject. It will fill yet another void of knowledge among orisha adherents in the New World. However, even something of this scope cannot be exhaustive. Although oral, our holy book is vast, larger in scope than that of any other world religion, and it is far more ancient than any other living faith. These writings are but a minute part of those things I have learned from my elders, and while this book seems large, in truth the odu are even larger. I, a single man, cannot capture all the myth, magic, history, or teachings in my writings. This book can serve as a resource, but ultimately one must depend on one's elders and godparents as guides in the religious world. That is how I learned, not from books, and that is how others should learn as well. Between my writings and our elders' teachings, the true secrets and mysteries of our faith will be captured for future generations. Ultimately, that is the true vision of my work: preservation and continuation for our future. May this vision never die.



MANIPULATING THE DILOGGÚN, THE ORACLE OF THE ORISHAS

An Introduction to the Diloggún

While many consider the diloggún to be merely an oracle, in truth it is a unique spiritual process of rituals, liturgies, and discoveries. The diloggún is based on an oracular system used in Nigeria, the holy land and origin of the Yoruba tribes, the predecessors of the Lucumí. There, before humans knew of orishas or odu, there was only Orúnmila. Born from Olódumare herself, Orúnmila was the great witness to creation and knew all things. He incarnated among mortals, bringing his infinite knowledge of odu and divination to earth. Orúnmila's teachings are known as *Ifá*. The sacred science of *Ifá* was first passed to Asheda (the first *babalawo*, or *Ifá* priest) and then to Akoda (the second *babalawo*). Together, these two men spread Orúnmila's cult of divination among the Yoruba, and from it the original sixteen-cowrie-shell oracle evolved.

Yet the forced transplantation of Africans to Cuba brought the necessity for change. Political factors behind slave trading ensured that many *babalawos* were left in Nigeria, and without the cult of *Ifá*, orisha worshipers in the New World lacked an advanced oracle. With only a broken knowledge of the 256 odu, the sixteen-cowrie-shell system in the New World grew slowly and painfully. It remained incomplete until the arrival in the early 1900s of four titanic priests and priestesses: Mama

Monserrate, Octavio Sama, Timotea Albear, and Ferminita Gomez.*

Although the dates of her birth, initiation, and death are not remembered in our lineage of the religion, we know that Mama Monserrate rose to power among the priesthood sometime in the late 1800s to the early 1900s, amid a period of religious oppression by the Catholic Church. For thirty years (roughly 1880–1910), it became the Church's mission to stamp out all surviving remnants of African culture on the island of Cuba; to be a *santero* or *santera* was considered a criminal act. In spite of this, Monserrate immersed herself in the culture and was crowned with (initiated to) the orisha Aganyú. Her name in Lucumí became Obatero. We know little about her mundane life; however, we do know from oral history that Obatero spoke rarely on religious matters, even within the *igbodu* (the sacred room where the orishas are born and initiates are crowned). However, when Obatero's mouth opened,

*My information on the history of the religion and our oracle, the diloggún, is based on the oral history of my elders. In places, this information might differ from the scant documentation left by historians. Remembering that all history is written by the victors, in spite of what may exist in official documentation, I trust the oral version of these histories more than the written record. It is left up to the reader to do his or her own research among both written scholars and oral versions remaining in his or her own line of the religion. Somewhere between the two, perhaps the truth will be found.

all were silent. Her peers respected her words as if they were dictates from the orishas themselves. Although she was influential in her time, it would be decades after her death before others credited her as the true initiator of our faith in Matanzas, Cuba.* For by her hands were many heads crowned, and by her teaching did the codification of the Lucumí faith begin. Under Mama Monserrate's crown, Cuban priests began to establish Lucumí as a liturgy unto itself, although the system was still experimental and developing with each religious function. Obatero was illiterate, but those who could read and write took copious notes of her style, and these fragmented libretas formed the foundation for many of our religious practices. Of all the heads (initiates) born from this priestess, only two were destined for a greatness beyond her own: Octavio Sama, known in Lucumí as Obadimelli, and Ferminita Gomez, known as Ochabi.

Octavio Sama's name, like Mama Monserrate's, is all but lost except in myth and oral history. He is known to most religious lines of the Lucumí faith, but each branch has its own stories about this powerful man's priesthood. In my own line, it is said that Octavio came to Cuba as a slave with his mother. In his homeland, Octavio was preparing for initiation to Ifá and, as is the custom there, spent years of his youth working to master the verses of Ifá. His initiation, however, would never take place, for the slave traders ripped him from his homeland before it could happen. In Cuba, Monserrate saw Octavio's potential and crowned him with the orisha Oshún by Cuban rites. Once Oshún was installed in his head, however, the orisha Aganyú took possession of him. Although the ceremony was finished and Oshún was in Octavio's head, Monserrate put Aganyú on Octavio's shoulder. Octavio's initiation gave birth to the custom of crowning Aganyú through Oshún (a process known as *Oshún oro Aganyú*).

After his crowning, Octavio's aché seasoned.

*The Spanish word *matanza* translates to "slaughter" or "carnage." Many credit the naming of this part of Cuba, Matanzas, to the number of slaves put to death there.

With Oshún on his head but possessed by Aganyú,[†] he became known as the "man with two crowns." He was a genius, blessed with superior skills at divination. His itá forbade his initiation to Ifá, so as a iyawó Octavio applied his knowledge of Ifá's 256 odu to the sixteen signs of the African diloggún. During his priesthood, he completed a reformation of the entire system, creating the 256 patterns of diloggún divination used in Lucumí ritual.[‡] Unlike his godmother, Mama Monserrate, Sama had a basic education and was able to write fragmented notes about the system he perfected. These libretas have been saved, copied, and photocopied; most are passed down by elder initiates and oriatés today.

In time, Octavio crowned another Cuban, Nicolas Valentin Angarica.[§] Among the Lucumí, Angarica was known as Obatola, and under his godfather's guidance he became a powerful, respected oriaté in Matanzas and beyond. Though he was illiterate himself, one of his godchildren penned a book, *Manuel del Orihate*, from Obatola's basic teachings. While not the most detailed or reliable text, this tome is still copied, reproduced, and sold in *botánicas* (religious supply stores often found in Latin American communities) across the United States. Although it has many shortcomings, this book is regarded as an underground classic of our faith.

During Octavio Sama's work as an oriaté, he befriended another slave brought from Nigeria named Timotea Albear. In Lucumí, she was known

[†]When Octavio Sama moved to Havana in the late 1920s, he took the secrets for the direct crowning of Aganyú with him. It is believed that Mama Monserrate did not continue the custom of directly crowning with Aganyú in Matanzas, because no other priest or priestess of Aganyú was made by her hands during her lifetime. Most of the remaining Aganyú initiations done in Matanzas after Mama Monserrate's death were performed via Oshún oro Aganyú.

[‡]Another ancestor of note is Eduardo Salako, who lived and died in Matanzas. While he had little to do with the structure of the diloggún (the focus of this book), Salako, under Mama Monserrate, became a major architect of many of our religious practices. He was a member of the Lucumí Society in Matanzas, which, we believe, owes its existence to the work of Monserrate as well.

[§]Nicolas Angarica was born sometime in 1901. His date of death is unknown to us; however, *Manual del Orihate* was published in 1952, and we know Angarica was not alive at that time.

as Ayái La Tuan. Timotea, a priestess of Shangó, had completed the initiation rites while still a child in Africa. Although Octavio spent his childhood in Africa studying the odu of Ifá, Ayái's specialty had been cowrie-shell divination. Some elders say that this priestess had already begun to divine using composite castings of the shells. When Timotea and Octavio met, her skills were already beyond those of most male oriatés in Cuba, and with Octavio's guidance, she became proficient in the new form of Lucumí diloggún. In time, Timotea was regarded as the first female oriaté of the Lucumí faith.* This, however, was not her most important contribution to Lucumí history. During her priesthood in Cuba, the religion was growing, yet it was also in danger of fragmentation. To keep the cults of all our spirits alive, Timotea created our method of asiento, the giving of multiple orishas when an initiate is crowned. She was a true pioneer in the New World and finished most of the Lucumí codification.†

Ferminita Gomez (also called Ochabi) was the second most influential godchild of Mama Monserrate. Of all the women crowned in the early 1900s, none was more influential or powerful than she. Before her crowning, Ferminita was marked a child of Oshún by her godparents, Adele and Kudasi (their real names are lost to us). Though Ferminita had prepared to be a child of Oshún, Yemayá took possession of Ferminita before the ceremony could begin and demanded to be installed in Ferminita's head. The igbodu was in an uproar; this was Yemayá's first possession in Cuba, and neither Adele nor Kudasi could crown her children. Only one woman was available who knew the secrets for crowning Yemayá: Mama Monserrate. She was called in to finish the work, and Ferminita

*Timotea Albear married Bernabe Menocal, a famous babalawo, and moved to Havana; there, she was regarded as the first great Havana oriaté. She died sometime in 1935. Her children, and her children's children, still practice the religion; some migrated to the States in the early 1950s.

†Note that while Albear's contributions to Lucumí liturgy were phenomenal, she was by no means the only influential oriaté initiated and tutored by the prolific Octavio Sama. Others who came along from Octavio's work include Tomas Romero, Liberato Valdez, and Nicolas Angarica, among others less noted.

became her godchild. After the asiento, Ferminita's itá told that she was to receive a very special orisha: Olokun. Olokun was given to her by the hands of Yeye t'Olokun, a babalawo crowned directly in Africa with this orisha *before* he was initiated to Ifá. Ferminita firmly established Olokun's worship throughout Matanzas and the rest of Cuba; Olokun still lives with her descendants of both spirit and blood. Beyond Olokun, Ferminita's most important contributions to us were her clearly written libretas, which detail the Lucumí practices prevalent in Matanzas during her lifetime. Copies of her pages are jealously guarded, even today.‡

Many say that the religion was codified in Havana; in truth, though, the earliest traces of Lucumí codification are found in Matanzas. From Matanzas, the bare bones of our religion, the rituals in practice, were spread throughout Cuba, fleshed out further by the elders' aché. However, we owe our oracle, our asiento, and our liturgy to the work of these four amazing priestesses and priests: Obatero (Mama Monserrate), Obadimelli (Octavio Sama), Ayái La Tuan (Timotea Albear), and Ochabi (Ferminita Gomez). Through their work, especially the knowledge and aché of Obadimelli, the final reformations to our divination system were completed and a new oracle was born to the religion: the diloggún.

The word *diloggún* itself may be described in two fashions. First, when speaking of diloggún, one may be referring to the cowrie shells of a particular orisha, which a Lucumí priest or priestess receives upon initiation. As described in the introduction, in the ocha ritual an adherent is crowned with the guardian or crowning orisha and also receives several other orishas. An orisha is composed of three material elements: *otanes* (stones), implements, and diloggún. The otanes form the body of the deity; they are stones upon which sacrificial offerings to the orisha are given. The implements are the metal or wooden tools sacred to the orisha, the symbols

‡Though I am not able to retain a copy of Ferminita's libretas myself, I have been given several opportunities to read and study her writings. They are an unmatched contribution to our religious practices.

by which it does its work on earth. The diloggún, or cowrie shells, are the most important aspect of an orisha, for within these cowrie shells resides the soul of the deity. All the spirits have eighteen shells in their diloggún, except for Elegguá, who has twenty-one shells, because twenty-one is his sacred number and is shared with no other spirit.

The second way of defining *diloggún* is as the set of sixteen shells an *italero* selects for use in divination, and for the purposes of this book, this is the usage I intend when I speak of casting or reading the diloggún. The shells are believed not only to house the soul of an orisha but also to be its mouthpiece; through the shells and the sacred alphabet of the diloggún, an orisha is able to speak to a priest. In its natural state, a cowrie shell has on one side a smooth, rounded back and on the other side an elongated, serrated opening resembling a mouth. Before initiation, the initiate's godparent painstakingly sorts through bags of cowrie shells, picking the largest, strongest, and most beautiful to house the orisha's soul. With a knife or file, the godparent removes the rounded back of the cowrie; the rounded hump is "popped off" so that the back is flat. The godparent files down the new surface so that it has no ragged edges. During the rites of ocha, the otanes, implements, and shells are consecrated, born from the godparent's own orishas with the aid of the herbal elixir *omiero*. Once born, the orishas can speak through the shells.

To read or cast the diloggún, the diviner selects sixteen shells at random from an orisha's set of cowries. He sets the remaining shells to the side, with the natural "mouth" facing down. Cowries left to the side are known as *adele* (witnesses), and while they must be present for divination, they remain unused. The mechanically opened side of the shell has a value of zero; the natural mouth has a value of one. When the diloggún (the set of sixteen cowrie shells) is cast on the diviner's mat, a numerical value from zero to sixteen is obtained by adding up the values of the shells depending on which mouths face up. The number corresponds to a particular letter in the sacred alphabet of the diloggún, and the orisha invoked uses this numerically founded alphabet to speak to the priest.

To comprehend the diloggún's system, think of it as a vast, limitless book that chronicles creation, beginning with the first stirring of Olódumare. If the diloggún is the complete book, each odu is a single chapter of that book. The sixteen major chapters or divisions of the diloggún are known as the *parent odu*. Each parent odu has a name (letter) and a number associated with it. To effectively employ this oracle, one must know all sixteen names and their numerical equivalents. They are:

- 1 Okana
- 2 Eji Oko
- 3 Ogundá
- 4 Irosun
- 5 Oché
- 6 Obara
- 7 Odí
- 8 Eji Ogbe
- 9 Osá
- 10 Ofún
- 11 Owani
- 12 Ejila Shebora
- 13 Metanla
- 14 Merinla
- 15 Marunla
- 16 Merindilogún

The number of mouths displayed in a single casting of shells corresponds to the number of a parent odu (hence, if five open mouths fall on the diviner's mat, the odu Oché is open).

Just as the chapters in many books are divided into smaller sections, so each odu has smaller divisions, called the *omo odu* (children of odu). Each *omo odu* is a part of a spiritual family linked by the parent odu that gave it birth, just as each subheading of a chapter is part of the chapter's greater whole.

By casting the diloggún, an *italero* (an expert in the reading of the diloggún) accesses one of these chapter subsections on behalf of a client. The diviner himself does not know, initially, which section of the book to read. He must first gently awaken the orisha whose diloggún is being cast with an invocation known as *mojubando*, a litany paying homage to Olódumare, the earth, the ancestors,

and that particular orisha. (Note that for almost all sessions, barring an itá, an italero consults with Elegguá's shells.) Speaking through the two castings of cowrie shells the italero makes, the orisha identifies which part of the diloggún applies to the client. The first casting names the parent odu, and the second the omo odu, narrowing the reading down to 1 of 256 possible combinations. The first casting is modified by the second. For example, if the italero's first casting of diloggún results in a mandala of nine open mouths on the mat, the parent odu is Osá. Casting the cowries a second time, if the italero counts three mouths, the odu Ogundá has fallen. The resulting odu is Osá Ogundá, and the italero knows he must search his memory for the meanings of that particular composite letter.

Each of the odu forms a spiritual organism, a complete entity that forebodes various blessings (known collectively as *iré*) or misfortunes (known collectively as *osogbo*). After casting a composite letter, the italero uses eight *ibó* (divination tools) to extract from it the qualities of *iré* and *osogbo*. Depending on the question asked, the *ibó* are used in a number of pairings; together, italero and client manipulate the cowries and *ibó* in tandem to determine the orientations of the odu. From these are the predictions of any one letter drawn and the eboses needed to placate volatile essences determined. Harmony is created. Evolution unfolds.

Throughout this text, I will explore not only the manipulations of this oracle but also the metaphysics and meanings behind each letter of diloggún. Remember that although the odu contain all the facets of our faith and lives, they are not stagnant, unchanging, mere collections of sacred stories and scripts conceived centuries ago. Each of the letters is alive in the universe and in our lives. They are organisms of energy, creatures of symbiosis awaiting connection with our own human energies as they are opened on the mat. A divination session, then, becomes the most important focus of Lucumí worship. The sacred shells reveal the forces at play in an adherent's life, and these energies are redefined and placated as the orisha priest manipulates the letters in an attempt to help his client evolve. Diloggún is an oracle, yes; yet it is also a long, arduous road to

change and personal transformation. It is the heart of Lucumí worship.

Opening the Diloggún

There are two styles for preparing the divination room. The most traditional uses a mat on the floor. Diviner, assistant, and attending priests and priestesses sit on the mat; in front of the diviner, seated on a low stool, is the client. Only he sits above the rest. In contrast, some diviners prepare a table with enough chairs to accommodate the client, godparent(s), diviner, and any priests or priestesses who are acting as assistants or students.* For this scenario, the diviner lays a grass mat on the working surface. The room is set up so that the client sits on one side of the table with his or her godparents, and the italero and other elders/students sit on the opposite side of the table. No matter how the diviner chooses to read, whether on a mat or on a table, a *jícara* (gourd) filled with water, a lit cigar, and a lit candle are placed on the divination surface to give *aché* and strength to the spirits consulted;† beside these are placed the diloggún of the orisha and the complete set of *ibó* used for the reading. The symbols for the eight *ibó* are *efun* (a white, powdery chalk), a black stone, two bound cowries, a seashell, a piece of bone, a guacalote seed, a doll's head, and a piece of broken china or pottery. The assistant making a record of the reading is provided with a pen and plenty of paper.

After arranging the room and seating everyone properly, the diviner's assistant records the client's full name, as it was given to him or her at birth, at the top of a piece of paper. If the client is a married woman, the assistant records her full birth name plus her married name. This information is kept

*In Lucumí worship, to properly learn the oracle one must undergo an apprenticeship with a competent italero or a period of study with an *oriaté*. Books such as this one are valuable guides and study texts for the casting of diloggún, yet they cannot replace the intimate environment provided by a novice-elder relationship.

†Not all diviners agree with this setup. No matter how the working area is prepared, at the very least the *jícara* of water, the shells, and the *ibó* are necessary. The rest of the elements laid out depends on the diviner's beliefs and preferences.

nearby so that the diviner can refer to it during the *mojuba* (prayer); naming the client in full is integral to the invocation of that person's ancestors, known as *egun*, during consultation. When the initial preparations for the room and the written record are complete, the diviner takes the *efun* and rubs it over both his hands until the palms, fingers, and thumbs are covered in white. He does this to the client as well (for one needs clean, pure hands before handling the shells of an orisha). Now, he instructs the client to take the *derecho* (the small fee, usually twenty-one dollars, that is sacred to the orishas) and fold it tightly into a small ball. The client crosses himself with the *derecho*, marking the four quarters of his body, then gives it to the diviner. This is an important moment in the reading, for with the passing of this money, the energy exchange among the client, the *italero*, and the orisha begins; from this moment the oracle is considered open and there should be no interruptions. As a final preparation, the *italero* marks a white chalk circle on the grass mat, drawing double lines through the four cardinal points: north, south, east, and west.

Before praying to the orisha, the priest holds a *jícara* of fresh water in his left hand and, using the fingers of his right, sprinkles three dashes of water before the orisha's shells with the following words.

Omi tutu; ona tutu, aché tutu. Tutu ilé. Tutu Laroye. Tutu Arikú Babawa.

Fresh water, freshen the road to the orisha, refresh my power. Freshen my home. Freshen Elegguá in his path of Eshu Laroye.* Bring us freshness that has no end.

One offers this simple libation before praying to any orisha to bring coolness and freshness to

*Eshu Laroye is one of the many avatars of Elegguá. Many orishas have different avatars, also known as paths. The avatars are related to the orishas' many incarnations on the earth; many orishas have spent mortal lives among humans. One of the mysteries of the *asiento* is that when an *aleyo* is crowned and becomes a *iyawó*, in some ways he or she also becomes an avatar of the guardian orisha. Only those avatars of significant religious, historical, or political importance are remembered specifically and become paths of that orisha. Note that while many specific avatars are agreed upon by most believers, the subject itself is one of considerable debate among the more knowledgeable *ilé ocha*.

our roads, to our *aché*, to our homes, and to Eshu Laroye, an avatar of Elegguá. Heat or stagnation in these areas could hinder the consultation. Our world is a place of hot and cold, stagnation and refreshment, growth and decline; when working with the orishas, however, we put ourselves in a place where only evolution can be found. One works to remove those things that overheat and destroy life. Eshu Laroye is both honored and refreshed by this ritual gesture. He is the companion of Oshún, the orisha who makes life worth living, and he is one of Elegguá's most mischievous paths. If we desire our prayers to reach the orishas, we must first honor and cool him so that he will help, and not hinder, our communication. It takes only a moment to do this, yet it is one of the most crucial points in our invocation.

Having refreshed ourselves, our homes, and Eshu Laroye, the ritual of *mojubando* begins. The *italero* selects sixteen of the shells and places the rest to the side with the *ibó*, facedown. While chanting, the *italero* holds these sixteen shells and adds to them the *derecho* that the client has provided for the consultation. He rubs these briskly yet gently between his hands to slowly awaken the orisha soul sleeping in the cowries. If the diviner's hands are too small to hold all the shells and the *derecha*, he may place them on the mat and rub them in a circular, clockwise motion. This gentle manipulation of the shells continues until all the prayers are complete.

Mojuba Olófin. Mojuba Olorún. Mojuba Olódumare. Mojuba Olójoni. Oní Odún Mocuedun. Olorún Alabosúdaye. Olorún Alabosúnife. Olorún Alayé. Olorún Elemí. Olódumare Oba aterere kaje. Olódumare, mojuba gbogbo ikú imbelese. Olódumare, ibaé bayé tonú. Mojuba atijó ojo. Mojuba atiwó orún. Mojuba ayái odún, oní odún, odún olá. Mojuba Orún. Mojuba Oshúkua. Mojuba ile ogere a foko jerí.

Homage is paid to the part of God closest to the earth. I pay homage to the God in the heavens, God who is eternal and everywhere. I pay homage to the one who owns this day. Today, I greet you! Olorún, who is the keeper and protector of the earth. Olorún, the one who protects the first, holy city of Ifé. Olorún,

living one and owner of the earth. Olorún, you who owns all spirits. Olódumare, the one who encompasses the entire Cosmos. Olódumare, I pay homage to all the ancestors that sit at your feet now. I praise the creative forces and those that have sacrificed their own lives for the continuity of life. I pay homage to the awakening sun, the sunrise. I pay homage to the dying sun, the sunset. I pay homage to all eternity: yesterday, today, and tomorrow. I pay homage to the sun. I pay homage to the moon. I pay homage to Mother Earth.

Beginning with the first three sentences of the *mojuba*—“*Mojuba Olófin. Mojuba Olorún. Mojuba Olódumare*”—the supplicant invokes and addresses the powers of creation, the very forces that began the universe aeons ago. Because all things human and divine are descended from and created by the collective forces known as God, before beginning to address the orisha the supplicant must give honor and respect to God. The intonation begins with *Olófin*, a force that some consider an ancient, all-powerful aspect of God—the part of creation that is closest to the earth and the most easily approachable. *Olófin* is a Lucumí contraction meaning “owner of the palace,” the palace being all of the earth, the majestic home in which dwells the spirit of the divine. Through *Olófin* we pray to *Olorún* and *Olódumare*, for those aspects of the divine are the most primal and farthest from creation. *Olorún* is yet another Lucumí contraction, meaning “the owner of heaven.” *Olorún* is seen in the daytime sky, its symbol being the sun, and although one does not worship the sun itself, praise is given to it as the symbol of *Olorún* on earth. *Olódumare*, as was mentioned in the introduction, is the ultimate creative force that gave birth to the orishas. *Olódumare* is a contraction meaning “the owner of odu and the womb.” Odu is a woman, and the womb is part of the feminine reproductive system. Thus, although *Olódumare* is beyond gender, it is not incorrect to think of it as the Great Mother, the starry night sky from which all is born.

Mojuba Orúnmila Eleri ikin. Mojuba igba Irunmole ojukotún. Mojuba igba ojukosí. Mojuba Irunmole wamale. Mojuba Akoda. Mojuba Asheda. Mojuba ejubona Mefa. Mojuba gbogbowan Obá Ilé Ifé.

Mojuba Odúduwa. Mojuba Oranmiyan. Mojuba Arabá lotu Ifé. Mojuba Olokun. Mojuba Olosa. Mojuba awon iyá afinju eje. Mojuba Ajé-ogunguluso Olambo yeye aye. Mojuba itá Merindilogún. Mojuba Orún Okó. Mojuba okún Okó. Mojuba Okiti awo Okó. Mojuba ará. Mojuba ilé. Mojuba yeye. Mojuba baba. Mojuba gbogbowan Imale lju. Ibaé tototo Olódumare y mojuba. Kinkanmaché Orún, mojuba.

I pay homage to *Orúnmila*, the witness to creation and the recorder of all the odu. I pay homage to the two hundred divinities on the left side of God. I pay homage to the two hundred divinities on the right side of God. I pay homage to the divinities that came to the earth. I pay homage to *Orúnmila*’s first student. I pay homage to *Akoda*’s first student. I respect all those who teach others the sacred path of *Ifá*. I pay homage to all the chiefs of the sacred city and cradle of civilization, *Ilé Ifé*. I pay homage to the founder of the Yoruba empire. I pay homage to *Odúduwa*’s son. I pay homage to all the diviners who live in the sacred city. I respect the spirit of the ocean that first owned all the land. I pay homage to the spirit of the lagoon that first formed as land arose from the sea. I pay homage to the council of the Mothers, the beautiful birds [the Witches] who are the Mothers of the forest. I pay homage to the spirits of the forest who have come to the aid of the Mothers of the forest again and again. I pay homage to the sixteen odu of creation, the containers of all existence. I pay homage to the stone of heaven, the immovable stone of *Olódumare*. I honor the strength of the stone and the mystery of the stone of creation. I pay homage to the body. I pay homage to the earth and the land. I pay homage to all the mothers and my Mother. I pay homage to all the fathers and my Father. I pay homage to all the invisible spirits who are present at this time. I give all my praise to the spirit of creation, and give my humble thanks. For all the blessings that come to me from heaven, I give thanks.

These litanies are not used by all *ilé ocha*. In the Lucumí religion, there is a divide, an irreconcilable chasm, between those houses that work closely with *Ifá* and the *babalawos* and those that do not. Much of this chasm stems from the work of *Ferminita Gomez* (see page 11), who some say “reclaimed” our religion

from the hands of Ifá. The priests of Orúnmila, the babalawos, however, are still indispensable to the religion. The babalawos perform many functions that an orisha priest or priestess cannot fulfill. No matter how little or how much time we spend in this religion, we all come, at some point, to the feet of Orúnmila. If a member of the Lucumí faith has received anything from the babalawos, even if it was only a reading, it is in good taste to offer these few lines of praise to the mysteries of Orúnmila. As with any other aspect of this religion, when in doubt as to what should be done, question the godparents. They know what is best for spiritual evolution.

Mojuba gbogbowan Olodó ará orún: oluwos, iyaloshas, babaloshas, omo-kolaba egun imbelese Olódumare. Mojuba gbogbowan Olodó ará orún: oluwos, iyaloshas, babaloshas, omo-kolaba egun elelegba lagba-lagba imbelese, timbelese Olódumare.*

I pay homage to those who have gone to the river and who are now citizens of heaven, the dead priests and priestesses who rest with Olódumare. I pay homage to all the oluwos, iyaloshas, babaloshas, and babalawos who have Olófin, the dead who are at the feet of God. I pay homage to those who have gone to the river and who now live in heaven with Olódumare: oluwos, iyaloshas, babaloshas, and babalawos who have Olófin, and also the dead of Elegguá who are now at the feet of God.

By now, the diviner has not only addressed the primal powers of creation but also begun to pray to the dead elders of our faith. These elders made the rites of ocha while living and have now passed beyond the land of the dead to Olódumare. They sum up the powers of heaven, the invisible realm,

**Elelegba* is a Lucumí contraction that means “the dead priests and priestesses of Elegguá.” To describe the priests and priestesses of the other orishas, use with the orisha’s name the prefix *ol* (for a name beginning with a vowel) or *olo* (for a name beginning with a consonant). Examples: olobatalá, oloshún, oloshangó, oloyá, oloyemayá, ologún, olochosi. In the case of the orishas who are not crowned on the head but are given *oro in santo* (crowned through the ritual of another orisha), the prefix *omo* is used, with a hyphen. Examples: omo-Ibeyi, omo-Ainá, omo-Inle, and so on.

those forces that we call *ará onú*, or the inhabitants of heaven. By honoring these greater powers, the italero ensures that only positive energies are called to the mat. He proceeds with all their powers and blessings behind his actions. Then the focus is narrowed a bit; the italero begins praying for and to the ancestral priests and priestesses who lived and died in the service of the orisha whose diloggún is being consulted (in this case, the children of Elegguá). One of the mysteries of this religion is that of egun and ancestral reverence; it is believed that each of us, while on earth, is the child of a specific orisha, and beyond death, our energies melt and merge into the whole of that sacred spirit. Indeed, the orishas themselves were once human, and upon their earthly demise they moved beyond the grave and back into the whole whence they came. The fact that these spirits were born to earth makes our own egun, from the most distant past, the mothers and fathers of God.

Having addressed the greater forces of creation and the body of egun that makes up a specific orisha, the supplicant then begins to narrow his focus once more. He moves into prayer for the egun of his spiritual family that gave birth to his *orí*, or consciousness. He also prays to those egun of his family line that brought his physical head/body to birth. Among our faith we say that we stand on the shoulders of those who have come before. Though it is an orisha to whom one prays, one would not be praying to this force had the ancestors not given birth to both the physical and spiritual heads. The next part of the *mojuba* pays homage to these ancestral forces, asking for their blessings, their strength, their knowledge, and their *aché* before invoking the macrocosmic forces known as the orishas. It brings our invocations full circle and narrows us down magically to this one moment when we celebrate our humanness, our weakness, and our strength, and it gives us sacred time and space in which we may call upon our gods.

Ibaé bayen tonú gbogbo egun ará orún orí emi nani [your name in ocha or your given name if ocha has not been made].

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