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**PART I** Crossing Cultures and  
Transnational Exchanges

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# 1 Witches, Female Priests and Sacred Manoeuvres: (De)Stabilising Gender and Sexuality in a Cuban Religion of African Origin

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Following independence from Spain in 1898, Cuban elites increasingly became concerned with the large minority of African and African descended people suddenly declared equal under the law and through a powerful discourse of racial democracy.<sup>1</sup> Accusing black Cubans of being ill prepared for such modern responsibilities as citizenship, they blamed Spanish colonialism and slavery for the atavistic African practices that had accompanied the founding of the nation. While this ‘cultural backwardness’ had many expressions, one of the most insidious was the variety of religious practices collectively referred to as *brujería*, or witchcraft. Noise and hygiene were among the most oft articulated threats to morality, but underlying these anxieties was the distressing conviction that witches and warlocks used their cultural practices to encourage and provide a haven for ‘sexual vices’.<sup>2</sup> Intellectuals created a framework for evaluating and legislating against such activity throughout most of the century, recommending police repression and social condemnation as the most effective means of curing the national body of its affliction.

Although framed as attempts to understand African religions, racist treatises on these traditions produced of some of the most enduring affronts to these traditions that adherents have only recently begun to challenge and overcome.<sup>3</sup> Focusing on the Yoruba religious complex known as Regla de Ocha-Ifá, this article demonstrates that adherents to these religions were aware of these interpretive snares and used them to manoeuvre through elite censure and sacred mythology.<sup>4</sup> Performative reinterpretations of Ocha-Ifá reflecting deliberate, gendered strategising aimed at reducing and assuaging the repressive measures of the state are indicative of the acuity with which adepts were able to assess distinct sociopolitical contexts and reconceptualise their beliefs and tenets to overcome them. In this endeavour, Ifá and one *babalawo* in particular, Víctor Betancourt, appropriated and accommodated these pervasive racial and gender stereotypes to strengthen the position of Ifá in Cuban society.

### Ocha-Ifá: African roots, Cuban praxis

Ocha-Ifá arrived in Cuba from West Africa via the nineteenth-century slave trade. Religious praxis was, and continues to be, based on an elaborate series of orally transmitted myths and proverbs that prescribe, prohibit and rationalise behaviour and distinct levels of participation in both religious and secular life. A religious complex concerned with solving the problems of the present, Ocha-Ifá entails direct and indirect divination via the *orishas*, or deities linked to the powers of nature, which control human destiny. Indirect divination involves interpreting patterns of pieces of coconut, palm nuts or metal disks as they are tossed onto a mat as the *orisha*'s message. Direct divination occurs through spirit possession of a medium. Only Ocha employs this method of divination, which is often described through the analogy of horse and rider.<sup>5</sup> Originally practised only by non-whites, by the late twentieth century Ocha-Ifá counted a significant number of white Cubans among its adherents.

In exchange for guiding and protecting humans from danger, the *orishas* demand worship and offerings.<sup>6</sup> Worship may take many forms such as dressing in the colours representing a particular deity, caring for sacred objects, greeting the material representation of the *orisha*, and holding drumming ceremonies. Offerings, however, are foods specific to each deity and always involve the sacrifice of an animal and the spilling of its blood, both of which are believed to reinvigorate the *orisha* and its power.

Gender played a central role in organising and defining praxis throughout the twentieth century, although research is only beginning to address its significance.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, analyses of nineteenth-century Yoruba sociopolitical organisation in West Africa have offered some insight into gendered ritual relationships in Cuban praxis. Anthropologist J. Lorand Matory argues that gender was the paradigm of all relationships among eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Yoruba.<sup>8</sup> Sociologist Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí argues, in contrast, that gender did not exist in the pre-colonial Òyó Empire and that hierarchy and sociopolitical power were based exclusively on seniority.<sup>9</sup> Both of these scholars caution against universalising analyses of gender and, perhaps more importantly, contend that the Yoruba understood gender as being much more fluid and complex than western, colonising cultures could comprehend.

It was not uncommon in nineteenth-century Yorubaland for men to assume some roles identified as female, especially as possession priests of certain *orishas*, or for women to assume more masculine roles, such as hunters.<sup>10</sup> This behaviour did not provoke social disapproval, but individuals usually cross-dressed, adopting the cultural genitals of the opposite sex in order to perform the gender corresponding to their public activities.<sup>11</sup> In Cuba, cross gender behaviour and cross dressing was punishable by law.<sup>12</sup> Rather than discarding Yoruba gender metaphors for social organisation, therefore, practitioners wove them into religious praxis so that the *orisha*, not the medium, contravened certain comportments, thereby subverting Cuban gender identities that were believed to follow naturally from anatomical sex.

Networks of fictive kinship forged through initiation into the religion preserved several aspects of Yoruba social life. The ritually experienced who trained a novice in *orisha* worship became the individual's *padrinos*, or godparents. And while the newly initiated person was considered their *ahijado(a)*, or godchild, s/he was also considered the *iyáwò*, or bride, of the *orisha* to whom s/he was initiated. 'Iyáwò' was recoded to mean 'child' in contemporary Cuba, but its origin reveals the relationship

between practitioners and *orishas*. Speculation has led researchers to argue that as the bride, all new initiates were gendered female in relationship to their divine husbands who could have been male or female *orishas* that spiritually penetrated their human 'mounts' during possession. The husband-bride relationship in this argument represents metaphorical copulation.<sup>13</sup>

Following certain elements of Oyèwùmí's argument, however, the concept of *iyáwò* suggests that the husband-bride relationship represented an insider-outsider relationship through which each party exercised certain obligations and responsibilities. Brides, in virilocal marriages, were always outsiders in their husbands' families, but insiders in their own.<sup>14</sup> In Cuba, as the *iyáwò* status lasted only a short period following initiation and incorporation into a religious family, the relationship was more likely to have been constructed around the fictive kin group, and unrelated to copulation. After fulfilling certain initiatory criteria within a defined period of time, an individual became an insider and was no longer referred to as *iyáwò* but as a full member of the religious family, which was organised hierarchically based on number of years initiated in the religion. Status was acquired over time.

Recoding notwithstanding, *orisha* worship both in Africa and Cuba centred on establishing and maintaining control over the material world via the spiritual. Possession by an *orisha*, therefore, put an individual in direct contact with an entity that could advise on personal, social and political matters. Mediums behaved like the *orisha* in possession of their bodies and often conducted themselves in ways that western observers described as sexual. Many *orishas*, for example, were connected to fertility, which was equated with political and social stability, as well as human and agricultural reproduction. Religious festivals generally took place in these symbolic contexts.<sup>15</sup> Oyèwùmí has demonstrated that certain concepts, such as fatherhood, were also symbolically rather than sexually produced. She explains that biological contribution to conception of a child was unnecessary for men to become fathers; rather, marriage to the biological mother of the child and public declarations of paternity established fatherhood and perpetuated the lineage.<sup>16</sup> As in ceremonies designed to stabilise and perpetuate social relations, sex and sexuality, in western conceptualisation of the terms, had little to do with procreation or reproduction. The opposite was true in Cuban society, where sexuality was considered sinful and immoral and could only be sanctified through marriage for the purpose of procreation.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of these significant gender differences between the Yoruba and Cubans, colonial authorities in Cuba initially concerned themselves with the potential for rebellion that African religions represented, rather than their sexuality, although Spain periodically manipulated the image of black men raping white women as a means to maintain gender, class and racial divisions to thwart independence movements.<sup>18</sup> Although permitted on Sundays and holidays, colonial authorities limited observance of African traditions to the *cabildos de nación*, small, legally inscribed religious chapters under the supervision of the Catholic Church that restricted membership to Africans of the same ethnicity as a way to maintain ethnic tensions and reduce the likelihood of unified rebellions. The Spanish hoped that, under the tutelage of the Church, Africans would become more Catholic; however, feeble efforts at catechisation and the demands of a plantation society limited the impact of the Church.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, slaves practised their religious traditions during the little free time they had, with periodic repression or control from the plantation owners throughout the colonial period.<sup>20</sup>

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, as abolition became inevitable, the Spanish crown attempted to abolish the *cabildos* and replace them with mutual aid societies that would better serve the needs of a society based on free, rather than slave, labour. Many simply renamed their *cabildos* and began to admit other African ethnic groups and their descendants, while maintaining the basic character of a religious entity.<sup>21</sup> In both cases, slaves and free blacks hosting religious celebrations in their homes had to request permission to do so and were kept under surveillance. Non-participants in these festivities repeatedly lodged complaints with authorities concerning noise and large gatherings of people in the street late at night, with varying degrees of success in enforcing the peace.<sup>22</sup> While these grievances served to intensify racial divisions in society by characterising African cultural practices as raucous and disorganised, they had yet to reorient the focus of aggression to sexual morality. Republican authorities maintained this policy of scrutinising African religious activities after independence from Spain in 1898, referring to these practices, and a number of popular beliefs and superstitions of European origin, as witchcraft.

### Witches, warlocks and the spectre of history

In late 1904, however, the murder of a white toddler named Zoila near the city of Havana radically altered public perception of witchcraft. Two black men were accused of killing the child and extracting her heart to heal the ailing children of a black woman.<sup>23</sup> The crime sections of Havana newspapers had regularly reported on witchcraft until this time, providing details of the alleged offences and the parties involved. Witchcraft itself, however, was not a crime; the transgression emerged from the relationship between the witch or warlock and the client and frequently revolved around fraudulent charms or spells.<sup>24</sup> This time, in addition to connecting witchcraft to murder, newspapers also proffered opinions concerning the role of slavery in creating such an 'ignorant' and 'savage' persona, instantly transforming adherents to African-derived religions into criminals.<sup>25</sup> While this characterisation of black men as cannibals in search of white children served primarily to repress lower-class Africans and their descendants with little or no formal education, defaming African culture helped to justify the inferior position of all non-whites in Cuban society.<sup>26</sup>

Following the execution of the accused in Zoila's murder, a young lawyer published a criminological study of one of the condemned warlocks. Fernando Ortiz's *Hampa afro-cubana: Los negros brujos (Apuntes para un estudio de etnología criminal)* [Afro-Cuban Underworld: The Black Warlocks. Notes for a Study of Criminal Ethnology] further stigmatised practitioners of African religions by arguing that, although the murder of Zoila was an exceptional case, warlocks were nonetheless immoral, delinquent commoners who should be confined to penal colonies where they would be isolated from other prisoners to avoid provoking the degeneration of criminals who could be otherwise rehabilitated.<sup>27</sup> Not only considered dangerous to society as a whole, unlike other convicts, the warlocks could not overcome their alleged intrinsic condition. This characterisation of witchcraft as a contagious pathology served to tarnish the image of black men by providing the ruling elite with the sense of moral and cultural superiority it needed to obstruct their social and political aspirations.<sup>28</sup>

While *Hampa afro-cubana* sought to identify black men as criminals and as menacing threats to bourgeois republican order, it also employed sexuality to further

stigmatise and oppress the population of African descent, making women complicit in its degeneration. Just as black warlocks had emerged in Cuban society, Ortiz affirmed, black witches could be found, although they were much fewer in number than warlocks and occupied secondary religious roles because, as in Africa, women were subordinated to men.<sup>29</sup> In their relationships, he continued, warlocks and witches were ‘exceedingly lascivious’ and the source of all types of criminal sexual behaviour including polygamy, prostitution, sexual corruption and abortion.<sup>30</sup> This list of activities that Ortiz attributed to African witchcraft corresponded to European notions of witches consorting with the devil to inflict harm on individuals and society.<sup>31</sup> Europeans, however, usually accused women of possessing and wielding this type of power, so it is significant that Ortiz identified it as primarily the purview of African men.

Stigmatising all African religious celebrations as orgies, Ortiz offered as proof graphic descriptions of naked female bodies writhing in ecstasy to the frenzied beat of African drums.<sup>32</sup> In addition to linking witches and warlocks to diverse sexual offences, the hystericised bodies and images of unconventional sex served to gender practitioners of African religions as morally repugnant sexual deviants. *Hampa afro-cubana* sexualised African women, denying them womanhood and other attributes of motherhood that Cuban society demanded of women.<sup>33</sup> The resulting impact of the book was to classify African religions and their adherents as transgressors of white bourgeois social, sexual and gender boundaries that idealised monogamy, marriage, sexual honour and motherhood.<sup>34</sup>

The Cuban state never implemented Ortiz’s recommendation of imprisoning and segregating warlocks, but *Hampa afro-cubana* did provide the ideological basis for legislation aimed at repressing African cultural expressions. Between 1906 and 1920, several municipal governments issued ordinances banning drumming, street processions and carnival groups, in which participants ‘perform[ed] contortions with their bodies that [we]re offensive to morality’.<sup>35</sup> Municipal and secret police detected and raided the homes of adherents to these religions and confiscated sacred objects in an effort to eliminate their practice. White authorities subjected black men and women to legal proceedings to determine the intention of their activities, prying into the minutiae of their intimate lives in the process.<sup>36</sup> Although very few trials resulted in convictions, the devout were vulnerable to constant surveillance and arbitrary arrest for most of the twentieth century.

Ocha-Ifá not only survived these frequent assaults, it began to spread to other regions of the country and attract more followers, even among the white population, yet Cuban authorities did not generally distinguish one religion from the other, referring to and treating all as witchcraft. Adherents reinterpreted sacred myths and modified their religious praxis as a response to these threats to their wellbeing and to ensure the continuation of their traditions. The re-identification of *cabildos* as mutual aid and recreational societies was the primary vehicle for this ritual reorganisation and dissemination of Ocha-Ifá, demonstrating the tenacity of adherents to protect and preserve their traditions. Where, in 1898, individual practitioners of Yoruba traditions had only worshipped the *orisha* to which they had been initiated, by 1920, they worshipped all twenty-four that had survived in Cuba and began calling their religion the Regla de Ocha (rule of the *orishas*) and the Regla de Ifá (rule of Ifá).<sup>37</sup>

Lest we assume this amalgamation of cults was a peaceful and unanimous decision among *orisha* devotees, it is essential to note that the process was fraught with tensions

based on ethnic variations in practice as well as gender. One well-known Changó (*orisha* of thunder and lightning) priestess of Óyò Yoruba traditions, Latuán, who arrived in Cuba through Matanzas in 1863, a date that has led some to believe she was smuggled onto the island, was able to access the Ogún (*orisha* of war) cult, a non-possession *orisha* under the domain of men from Ibadan, only by threatening to exclude them from her religious community if they refused.<sup>38</sup> Ogún was recognised in the royal city of Óyò, but not venerated as he had been in Ibadan; therefore, Latuán lacked both the knowledge and skills necessary for his worship.<sup>39</sup> The men acceded to her demands, and since then Ogún has been an *orisha* that possesses his initiates in Cuba, while in Nigeria he has remained a non-possession *orisha*. This anecdote not only illustrates conscious and strategic ritual manoeuvres, it also demonstrates the complexities of religious power as they arrived and played out in the Cuban context. Religious authority was not the exclusive domain of men – women wielded considerable power, especially where spirit-possession was concerned, and were protagonists in the modification of some of the fundamental ritual precepts. Significantly, only the possession *orishas* survived the changes to Ocha in the twentieth century.

*Babalawos*, or male priests of Ifá, also subjected Ifá to these sacred manoeuvres through affective relationships with influential female possession priestesses during this period, which enabled them to assume some of the ritual roles women had once dominated.<sup>40</sup> By the 1930s, these men began providing divination assistance to Ocha houses, creating greater proximity between the two traditions.<sup>41</sup> As this new relationship between Ocha and Ifá was much stronger in the capital and province of Havana than regions like Matanzas, it may have resulted from the intense, long-term persecution in that city. Ifá, however, continued to recognise as many as 200 *orishas*, although *babalawos* were only ever initiated to one – Orula or Orúnmila – who does not possess his adepts. *Babalawos* emphasised this fact as part of a strategy to bring Ocha under greater authority of Ifá.

Ifá employs direct divination only via an oracle. While this practice was still viewed as witchcraft or magic similar to reading tea leaves, Cubans did not initially equate it with sexual deviance because it did not involve spirit possession. Once Cubans began to recognise differences between practices in the 1930s, therefore, Ifá managed to distance itself somewhat from this stain. The length of time it took to educate and train a *babalawo* also made the office a highly selective and closely guarded fraternity of men during this period and it remained reasonably so until the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Europeans and Cubans generally compared *babalawos* to Christian priests, leading to the creation of a (false) religious hierarchy in which Ifá occupied the summit.<sup>43</sup> All of these factors that elevated and rationalised Ifá were based on nineteenth-century western and Christian notions of men's and women's roles and behaviour that identified education, sobriety, philosophy, priesthood and maleness as the norm in religion, where lack of education, spirit-possession and femaleness were seen as abnormal and downright deviant. *Babalawos* readily accepted these concepts and perpetuated them through their contact with scholars, internalising and emphasising these distinctions for their own purposes.<sup>44</sup>

The 1959 Revolution presented a new set of challenges for practitioners of religions of African origin. In an effort to distance Cuba from both Spanish and American political and cultural domination, intellectuals heralded adherents of religions of African origin as the bearers of an autochthonous Cuban culture, forged through the blending of



African and European traditions.<sup>45</sup> Rituals acquired artistic value and intellectuals employed adepts, primarily of Ocha-Ifá, as dancers and musicians who joined the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional* (National Folkloric Ensemble) in the early 1960s to take Ocha-Ifá on world tours.<sup>46</sup> Choreographers minimised or concealed the alleged sexually explicit gestures adherents exhibited while performing their religion, although the revolution's concern with overthrowing the bourgeoisie and its obsession with morality permitted a degree of tolerance not often witnessed in the past.<sup>47</sup> Through the performance of religions of African origin, the Revolution incorporated adherents into new projects of national identity and exposed broader society to a religion it had learned to fear. Moreover, white Cubans increasingly were among the new initiates to Ocha-Ifá, in spite of the conviction of some African descendants that they were appropriating African culture.<sup>48</sup>

Conversely, the new government also censured Ocha-Ifá. Pre-revolutionary ideologies characterising Ocha-Ifá as witchcraft and avatars of slavery, compounded by dogma inherited from the Soviet Union concerning religion in general, continued to stigmatise practitioners as superstitious and backward anomalies of an otherwise modern society. By the late 1960s, these two trends coalesced into an anonymously authored book originating with the Cuban Communist Party titled *Sectas religiosas* (Religious Sects) that accused practitioners of using 'their religion to satisfy their sexual appetites and aberrations'.<sup>49</sup> This taxonomy was not new, although the insistence that Ocha-Ifá served as 'a haven for homosexuals, prostitutes and those too lazy to work (*vagos*)' was.<sup>50</sup> If male practitioners had not quite shed their image as warlocks capable of committing horrifying crimes, their representation as 'exceedingly lascivious' was suddenly inverted to gender them potential counter-revolutionaries.<sup>51</sup>

A chimera allegedly responsible for all types of contraventions against society, in the 1960s the Cuban State associated homosexuality with the prostitution, American gangsters and corruption that characterised the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista.<sup>52</sup> Men not expressing the appropriate revolutionary sentiment ran the risk of being labelled homosexual, whether or not they engaged in same-sex sex. Women's sexuality had traditionally been ignored; therefore, persecution of female homosexuals was much less common and dealt with in more paternalistic ways than that of men.<sup>53</sup> In the case of religions of African origin, their discursive association with criminality and vice meant that they were already marginalised. But characterisations of crime and vice as counter-revolutionary activities further contributed to stigmatising practitioners of these religions as transgressors of multiple boundaries. Where revolutionary stereotypes served to divide society according to support for the revolution, they continued to employ race, or cultural practices associated with it, thereby marginalising and discrediting a significant portion of the population. These public and private practices enabled cultural racism to thrive, even as the Revolution succeeded in eliminating the social inequality and glass ceilings that had previously impeded the social mobility of non-whites.<sup>54</sup>

Same-sex sex has existed throughout Cuban history, as have varying degrees of tolerance and persecution, and practitioners of Ocha-Ifá recognised different sexual practices among members of the same sex, without necessarily inferring a social stigma onto the individual. In the 1950s, Cuban ethnographer Lydia Cabrera documented at least five different Yoruba terms that her informants used for women who engaged in same-sex sex, and three for men.<sup>55</sup> Her research subjects also suggested that certain *orishas* preferred initiates with specific sexual inclinations, although the gender of

the *orisha* did not necessarily correspond to that of the devotee.<sup>56</sup> Taboos and myths concerning the source of the *orisha*'s power were the determining factors in choosing one's tutelary *orisha*, demonstrating that sexual orientation was a less important aspect of a practitioner's personal life than his or her ability to observe certain rules and regulations concerning *orisha* worship.

Developments in Ocha-Ifá since the 1960s, however, have responded to the conditions imposed by the Cuban Revolution. In order to avoid being labelled homosexuals, *babalawos* have publicly and openly professed their heterosexuality, refusing to initiate men who are, or may appear to be, homosexual. A number of *babalawos* refuse to initiate men to Ifá if previously possessed by their tutelary *orisha* in Ocha. As twentieth-century Cuban culture has determined that only women should be penetrated, both sexually and spiritually, men accepting spirit-possession run the risk of calling into question their sexual orientation.<sup>57</sup> True *babalawos*, like revolutionaries, must be heterosexual.

Yet, these contradictory policies concerning religions of African origin created the conditions in which Ocha-Ifá not only survived but flourished. If the religion indulged sexual aberrations, it also fulfilled the revolutionary goal of showcasing Cuban culture, much of which identified in some way with the island's African heritage. Additionally, Cuban internationalism, a strategy designed to forge political and cultural bonds with developing countries, facilitated exchanges between Cuba and African countries, enabling many adherents to learn new or different ritual practices.<sup>58</sup> Among these practices that began to gain popularity in the mid-1980s was the initiation of women to Ifá, or Iyáonifá in its Cuban form.<sup>59</sup>

### **The Egbe Gë̀lèdè: contemporary manoeuvres in gender, sexuality and the sacred**

*Babalawo* Victor Betancourt was initiated to Ifá in 1985 after participating in Palo Monte (a Bantu religion) and Ocha for more than thirty years. Through experience, he had realised that women in Ocha-Ifá possessed as much ritual knowledge as men; even concerning rituals in which gender restricted their participation.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, Betancourt identified domestic slavery and Cuban machismo as responsible for relegating women to the kitchen in the nineteenth century. Their qualification as cooks and cleaners had been absorbed into the religion during the republican period.<sup>61</sup> Betancourt aimed to expand the role of women in Ifá and rewrite the history of the religion in Cuba as one in which gender roles appeared far less circumscribed than they were by the 1990s. He also sought to use symbols and imagery of the past to judge and comment on race in late twentieth-century Cuban society.

Research of his religious heritage led Betancourt to believe that equally capable and respected female diviners of Ifá had arrived in Cuba as slaves.<sup>62</sup> Several women, he argued, such as Ma Monserrat González, Fermína Gómez, Latuán and María Towá, were known for their divination skills and had enjoyed prestige as a result of their extensive knowledge of the *odús* (myths) of Ifá. These women were so influential that *babalawos* heeded their advice. Furthermore, it was a former female Yoruba slave who gave the first ritual power of Ifá to a Cuban *babalawo*.<sup>63</sup> While not all practitioners agree that women arrived in Cuba as initiates to Ifá, the majority recognise the power, influence and reputation of the women Betancourt cited to support Iyáonifá.

After 1959, the Cuban state still expected women to form nuclear families and become mothers, even if they did not marry, but it also expected them to contribute to building socialism, a task that required their labour at all levels of the workforce.<sup>64</sup> The establishment of daycare centres, cafeterias and laundries helped to reduce women's workload, although a continued focus on changing women's behaviour made changing men more difficult. Nonetheless, in spite of their under-representation in high levels of government and other sectors, women had made enormous gains by the 1980s, entering all areas of the workforce and even outnumbering men in some of the more traditionally male occupations.<sup>65</sup> This process, however, had required some skilful manoeuvring in service of the revolution and, in a similar fashion, Betancourt had to do the same.<sup>66</sup> Overturning pre-revolutionary idealisations of gender roles in the workplace, if not the home, forced at least some practitioners of Ocha-Ifá to reflect on equitable religious praxis.

Betancourt's study of Yoruba texts, both on the history of Ifá in West Africa and the *odús* that contain prohibitions against initiating women revealed that, although several myths criticised the involvement of women in Ifá, only one, Ireté Ogbé, had been employed to justify their exclusion.<sup>67</sup> In this myth the supreme Yoruba deity Olodumaré invests the *orisha* Odú with great powers:

Upon being called to earth by the *awos* (diviners), Olodúmare gave Odú a bird and told her that it would go anywhere she wanted it to and do anything she wanted it to do. She named it Aragamago, put it in a calabash and said that no one else could look at it. Those who looked at the bird would be blinded. The *awos* consulted Ifá [considered separate from Odú] who recommended that Orúnmila make an offering to the earth so that he could marry Odú. She let Aragamago out of the calabash to eat the offering. Odú then told Orúnmila that she had tremendous powers but did not wish to fight him. She would share her power with him if he obeyed her taboo – his wives could not look upon her face. Additionally, the one initiated to Ifá will not be allowed to suffer.<sup>68</sup>

This myth reveals the origin of Ifá and the source of Orúnmila's power – marriage to Odú. The calabash and the bird appear as symbols of spiritual power and the power of female deities is usually contained in some form of calabash.<sup>69</sup> Birds are potent messengers associated mainly with two *orishas* – Orúnmila, the medium between Odú and the *babalawo*, and Osaín, the deity of herbs and cures. Birds are also routinely passed over the body of an initiate to cleanse it of negative elements or are offered in sacrifice to the *orishas* in exchange for their assistance with a minor problem. The bird in the calabash symbolises the female power of Odú and its consumption of the offering acceptance of the pact between Odú and Orúnmila. Female power is often viewed as polluting or destabilising, but thus contained or controlled Odú's potential became available for Orúnmila's use.<sup>70</sup>

Most Cuban *babalawos* have interpreted Odú's taboo against Orúnmila's wives looking upon her face as traditional justification for prohibiting the initiation of women to Ifá. As the interpreters of the oracle, *babalawos* are equated with Orúnmila. Odú communicates via the oracle. Complete ritual fabrication of myths would put both the adherent and the religion at risk; however, alternative meanings of many *odús* have always been present in Cuban praxis, although practitioners identify them as incorrect or corrupted. Rather than challenge conventions, Victor Betancourt reinterpreted the myth as meaning that women could not look at the oracle.<sup>71</sup> Looking at the oracle may or may not be relevant to working with Ifá and this issue will be discussed in the following section. More salient for the moment is Odú's reassurance that those who

joined her would not be harmed. And to join Odú, Betancourt determined that women would have to become insiders, or witches.

As in Cuba, witches existed in Yoruba culture. Unlike in Cuba, only women practised witchcraft and they were generally believed to have control over life and death in a very broad sense. These usually post-menopausal women joined Egbe Gèlèdè, or societies of witches, from which they exercised their power. The term witch, however, is misleading because the Yoruba word for witch, *ajé*, does not imply malevolence. Their actions are more closely related to reproduction, fertility and political stability. The *ajés* can impact these aspects of human life in both positive and negative ways that are not always interpreted as life or death.<sup>72</sup>

In Yorubaland, men dedicated themselves to honouring these powerful women during times of social or political strife in order to appease and control their potentially destructive behaviour, convincing them to focus on life-giving activities. They donned women's attire and elaborate wooden masks representing birds or women's faces and entertained the *ajés* by dancing in annual masquerade ceremonies.<sup>73</sup> These ceremonies continued well into the twentieth century among some Yoruba.<sup>74</sup>

Founded in Havana in 1998, the Cuban Egbe Gèlèdè is based on the Gèlèdè from the Yoruba city of Ketú, where the practice originated. Worship centred on the feminine power, Igba Iwa, or Iyamí, known as the beginning and end of all life.<sup>75</sup> In different regions of Nigeria, Iyamí is also known as Iya Nla, who in turn is sometimes identified as the *orisha* Odú, while in other instances Iyamí is identified as Yemoja, the *orisha* of salt water and the mother of all the deities.<sup>76</sup> Cuban members of the Egbe Gèlèdè strive to be good mothers and wives, attend to the upbringing of their children and the family, and to study the lives of little-known or undiscovered women.<sup>77</sup> The Gèlèdè is one way in which women in Ocha-Ifá are attempting to halt and reverse the cultural destruction occasioned by the slave trade.<sup>78</sup> At a time in which the bodies of non-white women are exoticised in tourist brochures and billboards, making claims on motherhood demands an alternative view of women of African descent from Cubans and tourists complicit in the consumption and perpetuation of these stereotypes.

There is no indication that the masquerade currently takes place in Cuba, although certain societies and practices associated with it existed at the turn of the twentieth century or were introduced sometime in the middle of the century.<sup>79</sup> There is, however, a liturgical recognition of the Gèlèdè in Cuba in one of the 256 myths of Ifá. Osa Meji, one of the sixteen major *odús* of Ifá with which all practitioners are familiar, accounts for the Gèlèdè's existence and prescribes certain procedures to follow to avoid running afoul of the *ajés*. In this myth, the creator, Olodumaré, sent three *orishas* to earth:

Obarisa, Ogún and Iya Nla. Olodumaré gave Obarisa *aché* (spiritual power) and war to Ogún, but Iya Nla did not receive anything, so she complained to Olodúmare who responded by giving her the title 'Mother of All' and a calabash with a bird in it. When Olodúmare asked Iya Nla what she would do with her powers she told him that she would use them against her enemies but would give wealth and children to all who appeased her. Moreover, those who joined her could not be harmed.<sup>80</sup>

Once again, the bird contained in a calabash appears as symbolic of the female *orisha*'s power. Reproduction and the ability to bestow life are also central elements that serve to organise ritual structure and praxis. Iya Nla is therefore a significant deity for both men and women and as such is highly regarded and respected. Like all *orishas*, however,

Iya Nla could be dangerous if underappreciated or challenged. To establish equilibrium between the human and spiritual worlds, Osa Meji also reveals how to appease Iya Nla.

The *orishas*, like human beings, are impulsive, curious and flawed. Out of curiosity, Orúnmila wanted to go to the land of the *ajés*, so he consulted the oracle to determine the best approach:

The Ifá oracle [Odú] advised Orúnmila to sacrifice a wooden image, a baby sash, and metal anklets before going to visit the 'haven of the-wielders-of-bird-power'. Orúnmila did this and returned safely singing: 'I have entered into a covenant with Death, and never will I die. Death, no more. I have entered into a covenant with Sickness, and never will I die. Death, no more'.<sup>81</sup>

In order to go to the land of the *ajé*, Orúnmila had to *be* one of them. He therefore disguised himself as a woman by wearing a mask and a baby sash (for carrying babies, worn only by women). The metal anklets kept him anchored in the material world. This appropriation of female cultural genitals enabled Orúnmila to 'know' the secret of the *ajé* and he used it to 'trick' them.<sup>82</sup> Yet, in becoming an *ajé*, however transitorily, the *ajés* could not harm Orúnmila.

Perhaps more important than establishing the relationship between Odú and Orúnmila, however, these myths repeatedly insist that those who join Odú (Iya Nla, the *ajés*) would not be harmed. Odú would protect the appropriately initiated insiders to the Egbe Gèlèdè . . . and also Ifá.

### 'Women penetrate Ifá'

Protected from the wrath of Odú through prior initiation to the Egbe Gèlèdè, María Cuesta Conde and Nidia Águila de León were the first two Cuban women Victor Betancourt initiated to Ifá in March 2000.<sup>83</sup> Calling the female version of Ifá and the women initiated to it Iyáonifá, Betancourt insisted that he was 'restor[ing] women's legitimate right [to work in Ifá] . . . contribut[ing] to the development of moral ethics in the Ifá tradition [and] purif[y]ing the cult through the new incorporation of the feminine gender'.<sup>84</sup> Betancourt merged the once diametrically opposed images of Africa, witchcraft and Ocha-Ifá with women, morality and purity to serve Cubans of African descent. Something had gone awry in Ifá during the twentieth century and, in Betancourt's analysis of the situation, women were the morally superior symbols of purity that would solve the problem.

In justifying and defending Iyáonifá, Victor Betancourt has repeatedly referenced the history of the religion in Cuba and a handful of female possession priestesses universally recognised as powerful and capable diviners of Ocha and as important ritual ancestors who practitioners continue to recognise in *moyubas* (songs) to honour the ancestors.<sup>85</sup> These women, however, were also known as astute, cunning and wily, hardly characteristics associated with morality and purity. Moreover, one of these women was responsible for some of the most significant innovations of the early twentieth century.

In addition to amalgamating the multiple *orisha* traditions into Ocha, Latuán also created the *obá oriaté* (master of ceremonies), a religious specialist who performed all initiation ceremonies and consecrated sacred objects in Ocha. Moreover, in a struggle for dominance of Ocha, Latuán used her position to sanction or condone particular practices.<sup>86</sup> She trained only one disciple, Lorenzo Samá, who in turn trained only two

men to succeed him. By the time of Samá's death in 1944, the office of the *obá oriaté* had become an increasingly male domain and, in spite of the prominent role women had played in both the development of the specialty and the training of their successors, they quickly disappeared from the office.<sup>87</sup>

The elimination of women from such a powerful ritual function suggests that creole adherents, unlike their African mentors, accepted and absorbed into their religious practice notions from the Cuban elite concerning the appropriate gender roles for men and women where respectability and status were tied to notions of honour controlled through marriage, to reinforce and regulate women's subjugation.<sup>88</sup> Although non-whites could never remove the stain of slavery, they employed a variety of techniques to distance themselves from it, including marrying white Cubans to lighten the skin of their offspring and conforming to elite behavioural expectations. Yielding a great deal of power and challenging the alleged natural authority of men was not consistent with the behaviour becoming for women in the twentieth century, especially among black Cubans who struggled to minimise differences between themselves and white Cubans, even as they continued to recognise their distinct heritage.<sup>89</sup>

These gendered changes taking place in Ocha also impacted Ifá. While related, Ocha and Ifá had maintained a certain ritual distance in Cuba. Very few *babalawos* had arrived in Cuba as slaves and they in turn trained very few men in the tradition until the mid-twentieth century, a custom that partially explains the popularity of Ocha, and other African-derived religions, among both men and women. While practitioners of Ocha and Ifá participated in the same ceremonies, neither relied on the other to perform rites or initiate new members. *Babalawos* initiated *babalawos* to Ifá and the *obás oriatés* initiated adherents to Ocha.<sup>90</sup> Men consecrated to Ocha, however, could later enter Ifá and at some point during the mid-twentieth century it became common for men to follow their Ocha initiation with initiation to Ifá.<sup>91</sup> This staging of initiations enabled *babalawos* to both observe and participate in Ocha rituals from which they would have been excluded if initiated only to Ifá, thereby compelling closer religious ties between the two traditions. Critics of Ifá argue that the practice gave *babalawos* more control over Ocha while others suggest that the ritual links between the two traditions helped to provide practitioners with a united front when faced with state repression intent on eliminating the cultural expressions of a race it could not accept.<sup>92</sup>

David H. Brown has also suggested that control over Ifá and its originally scarce ritual power began to weaken by mid-century, as the creole *babalawos* trained by Africans passed away. These first generation creole *babalawos* had hand-picked the men who they would eventually initiate into Ifá and forced them to undergo extensive training prior to initiation. Their successors attracted more disciples and relaxed the rules, leading to an overall expansion of Ifá. But one *babalawo* in particular was responsible for the majority of initiations that took place between the 1960s and 1980s. Taking advantage of this mid-century power vacuum, Miguel Febles Padrón began initiating men to Ifá based on their ability to pay for the initiation ceremony. This practice continued until his death in the mid-1980s, although by that time many other *babalawos* had also begun to initiate large numbers of men, mostly to be able to compete with Febles Padrón for spiritual capital.<sup>93</sup> It is no mere coincidence, therefore, that Victor Betancourt often refers to Febles Padrón in defence of his own innovations.

As a result of this expansion of Ifá, it had become the main objective for many men interested in joining a religion of African origin by the 1990s and they began skipping the initial step of joining an Ocha house. The overall impact of these aspirations to Ifá has, however, feminised Ocha.<sup>94</sup> Men who can, prefer to become *babalawos* and those who do not could be suspected of being homosexual. Spirit possession, for example, continues to be a central and desirable part of Ocha religious praxis and is understood as confirmation that initiation to a particular *orisha* was appropriate. Men, however, generally avoid being possessed by female *orishas* for fear of having their masculinity questioned.<sup>95</sup> Being spiritually passive in relation to a male *orisha*, paradoxically, does not imply such speculation. Public performance, rather than private acts, determines an individual's gender in Ocha-Ifá and compels men, much more than women, towards heterosexuality, indicating that adherents ultimately accepted twentieth-century Cuban assumptions of gender as flowing naturally from anatomical sex.

Betancourt unmistakably seeks to use Iyáonifá to restore some of the power women lost over the twentieth century as men usurped their specialties – he has openly stated this in interviews with journalists and scholars, as well as in articles he has written on the subject. What he does not state, yet is implicit in the logic used to justify the participation of women in Ifá, is an observance of the compulsory heterosexuality that the majority of *babalawos* absorbed after decades of repression based on alleged sexual non-conformity, a revolutionary obsession with homosexuality and its association with counter-revolutionary activity. *Babalawos* confronted racist culture by denying male sexual transgression and embracing the longstanding ideal of masculinity that praised men for their virility and effective control of women.<sup>96</sup>

Betancourt does not, however, identify sociopolitical processes, persistent racial stereotypes and what Alejandro de la Fuente calls the 'traumatic process of dealing with racism and discrimination' as the origin of the prohibition against homosexuality.<sup>97</sup> Rather, he appeals to what he calls the 'natural complementarity' between men and women:

we know that in order for a human being to be born, two must intervene, in the same way. And the ceremonies can be different, the woman on the bottom and the man on top or the man on the bottom and the woman on top, the man gives and the woman receives. Right here, in the sacred encounter, there are ceremonies and rituals that remind us of how a man and a woman can give birth.<sup>98</sup>

Not only does Betancourt advocate a particular variety of heterosexuality, as Gayle Rubin might argue, he advocates sex for the purpose of procreation, at least metaphorically, in a ritual context.<sup>99</sup> A causal relationship between sex, gender and desire must exist to stabilise ritual practice.<sup>100</sup> This vision restricts entry to Ifá, albeit in a less limited sense than before, and maintains a gender hierarchy in which binary relationships privilege heterosexuality, reinforcing the authority of men in Ifá.<sup>101</sup> In order to illustrate this point, it is useful to examine some of the criticism Betancourt has received from other *babalawos* in Cuba.

Condemnation of Betancourt and his initiation of women to Ifá follows one of two arguments. The first posits that because women cannot become *babalawos* and work with Odú, Betancourt and others like him are deceiving the women, exposing them to certain danger and retaliation from the *orisha* for disobeying her taboo. A number of *babalawos* argue that in Nigeria there exist three categories of women who can work with Ifá: the *apètèbí* (apeterbi), *iyánífá* and *iyálówò*. As in Cuba, the *apètèbí* fulfils the

limited role of preparing the Ifá room or ritual space for the *babalawo*, but the *iyánifá* and *iyálowò* can care for the deity and divine with the divining chain once they reach menopause.<sup>102</sup> Betancourt's error is in allowing pre-menopausal women to come into contact with Odú.

Yet, an examination of the initiation process for the *iyáonifás* in Cuba demonstrates that Betancourt does indeed observe these taboos. Both *babalawos* and *iyáonifás* receive the red parrot feather that is later placed in a calabash during the initiation ceremony.<sup>103</sup> *Babalawos*, however, eventually enter Odú's grove (a sacred exterior space inhabited by the *orisha*) to be 'reborn' through their contact with Odú. *Iyáonifás* must remain outside of Odú's grove and forego the 'rebirth', although their heads are shaved to symbolise their new beginning in Ifá.<sup>104</sup> If entering Odú's grove is as crucial to Ifá praxis as it appears, then women do not enjoy all the benefits of initiation and divination. The grove and contact with Odú serve to privilege men and place them at the top of the religious hierarchy. Women are viewed as potentially, if not actually, destabilising elements.

The second argument against the *iyáonifás* sustains that Cuban tradition simply does not permit the initiation of women to Ifá and that such initiations would never have occurred under the guidance of older *babalawos* because they followed Cuban traditions.<sup>105</sup> Significantly, these critics cite Cuba, not Africa as the source of gender discrimination in Ocha-Ifá and refer to the *odú* Eyila Shebora to justify their position. In this myth, Yemayá learned to divine by watching her husband Orúnmila. She then made a living through divination in her husband's absence. Upon discovery of Yemayá's betrayal, Orúnmila consulted Ifá and was told that he could give Yemayá advice or spiritual influence (*cofá*) but he could no longer live with her. As one particularly irate *babalawo* stated in response to Betancourt's initiation of women, 'This is the birth of women not as *babalaos*, nor as priests, but as *apeterbi* of Orula [Orúnmila], slave of Ifá'.<sup>106</sup> This notion of women being unable to contain secrets or other ritual information is a particularly Cuban phenomenon, as is the masculine response to chastise women by reducing or eliminating their religious power.<sup>107</sup> Women are seen as interlopers who must be kept in their place.

More than a decade after the initiation of the first *iyáonifás*, it is clear that while they crossed a significant gendered barrier, women have yet to gain acceptance among the men in Ifá. Although they interpret Odú's message, the *iyáonifás* do not participate in the largest Ifá ceremony that augurs the events of the New Year and attracts thousands of *babalawos* from all over the world.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, those seeking the assistance of Ifá in solving their problems continue to prefer the *babalawo* to the *iyáonifá*, although a few individuals approach the *iyáonifás* out of curiosity. Nidia Águila de León, however, has confessed that she has yet to be taken seriously by those seeking advice.<sup>109</sup>

## Conclusions

In spite of the fact that initiates to Ocha-Ifá increasingly came from different class and racial backgrounds by the end of the twentieth century, it retained its African identity for both adherents and broader Cuban society. The initiation of *iyáonifás* was one among many gendered manoeuvres responding to state and societal pressures to discipline and control African cultural expressions and, by extension, Africans and their descendants who continued to experience racial discrimination long after it had been 'officially' eliminated.<sup>110</sup> Appropriation of taxonomies used to subordinate and control



Cubans of African descent became the means through which one *babalawo* sought to expand the power of women in Ocha-Ifá and revise its history in Cuba. Witchcraft, once seen as the underworld domain of black men, became a feminine pursuit purged of its potentially destructive elements through a conscious recoding of sacred symbols. Bourgeois interpretations of spirit-possession as uncontrolled and unconventional sex were reformulated to represent stable, reproductive sex culminating in motherhood and the non-spirit possession, Ifá portion of the Yoruba religious complex. Witches would now occupy themselves with domesticity, caring for their families just as early twentieth century intellectuals had expected African women to do.

Yet, the myths Victor Betancourt reinterpreted to destabilise the gendered hierarchy of Ifá and accommodate women, served to prohibit the initiation of anyone but heterosexual men and women to the priesthood. This was clearly a deliberate manoeuvre as analyses of nineteenth-century Yoruba practices and early twentieth-century Cuban customs suggest that adherence to binaries was not a necessary or salient feature of *orisha* worship. In fact, the opposite was true. Rather than surmising that late twentieth-century devotees like Betancourt had lost the possibility of recognising the malleability of gender, I suggest that it was consciously ignored and publicly recognised as ritual knowledge lost in translation when practice became more Cuban. In doing so, rather than destabilising gender and sexuality, initiating women to Ifá was a way to stabilise these as coherent identities flowing naturally from anatomy in order to maintain the precarious position of Ifá atop the hierarchy of religions of African origin in Cuba.

## Notes

I would like to thank the Graduate and Professional Students' Association, the Office of Graduate Studies and the Tinker Foundation, as well as the Latin American and Iberian Institute's Doctoral Fellowship, all at the University of New Mexico, for funding the research for this chapter.

1. On racial democracy, see Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
2. Fernando Ortiz, *Hampa afro-cubana: Los negros brujos (Apuntes para un estudio de etnología criminal)* (Madrid: Editorial América, 1917), p. 19. Ortiz's criminological study of these religions formed the basis for both regional and national legislation aimed at eliminating all religions of African origin.
3. In this effort, I accept Pete Sigal's challenge to historians to employ queer analysis in examining gender and/or sexuality in order to understand the way in which notions 'that approximate sexuality destabilize the very category of the sexual' in non-western and/or colonised cultures. Pete Sigal, 'Latin America and the Challenge of Globalizing the History of Sexuality', *American Historical Review* 114 (2009), pp. 1340–53. On destabilising gender, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'A epistemologia do amário', *cadernos pagú* 28 (January–June, 2007), pp. 19–54; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990; New York: Routledge, 2006).
4. Some researchers refer to this religious complex as Santería, while others identify all religions of African origin collectively as Santería. I use Ocha-Ifá, as they are the terms many practitioners prefer and they clearly indicate reference to the Yoruba religious traditions.
5. The metaphor of horse and rider may indicate a dominance of Òyó Yoruba traditions in Cuba. The Òyó Empire used horses to conquer and subjugate new peoples and regions and female possession priests prepared male combatants for battle. See J. Lorand Matory, *Sex and the Empire that is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyó Yoruba Religion* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005).
6. Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Parvasini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003), p. 33.
7. See e.g., Randy P. Connor and David Hatfield Sparks, *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Participation in African Inspired Traditions in the Americas* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Mary Ann Clark, *Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule* (Gainesville: University

- Press of Florida, 2005); Tabaré Guerere, *Las diosas negras, la santería en femenino* (Caracas: Alfadil Ediciones, 1995).
8. Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.
  9. Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
  10. Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, pp. 7–8; Oyèwùmí, *Invention of Women*, p. 69.
  11. Mary Ann Clark discusses the concept and role of cultural genitals in *Where Men Are Wives*.
  12. The nineteenth-century trial of Enriqueta Fabez, a woman who disguised herself as a man, practised medicine and married a woman, is illustrative of this point. Julio González Pagés, 'Género y masculinidad en Cuba: ¿El otro lado de una historia?', *Nueva antropología* 61 (2002), pp. 117–26, here p. 121.
  13. See Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, p. 7.
  14. I disagree with Oyèwùmí's argument that Yoruba society was not gendered, as she herself demonstrates in many ways that it was, but rather suggest that it was not gendered in the way that western cultures conceptualise gender. Her emphasis on kinship, age and insider-outsider status explains how individuals could have multiple, malleable social identities at one time, simply depending on the context in which they found themselves in a given moment. Oyèwùmí, *Invention of Women*.
  15. Andrew Apter, 'The Embodiment of Paradox: Yoruba Kingship and Female Power', *Cultural Anthropology* 6 (1991), pp. 212–29.
  16. Oyèwùmí, *Invention of Women*, p. 52.
  17. Verena Martínez Alier, *Marriage, Class and Color in Nineteenth Century Colonial Cuba* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), p. 2.
  18. Aline Helg, 'Black Men, Racial Stereotyping, and Violence in the US South and Cuba at the Turn of the Century', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (2000), pp. 576–604, here p. 577.
  19. On the *cabildos de nación*, see Phillip A. Howard, *Changing History: Afro-Cuban Cabildos and Societies of Color in the Nineteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998). On their role in preserving Yoruba ethnic identity through religion, see David H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
  20. There were a number of revolts in which slaves used their religious festivities as the means to both organise and communicate instructions between plantations. The most well-known are the Aponte rebellion of 1812 in Havana (Aponte himself was free, but used the Yoruba religion to organise slaves on plantations) and the Escalera Conspiracy of 1844 in Matanzas, led by a Yoruba woman. Plantation owners generally permitted music and dancing among their slaves to reduce the likelihood of revolt, especially after 1844. See José Luciano Franco, *La conspiración de Aponte* (Havana: Consejo Nacional de Cultura, 1963); Robert L. Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict Between Empires Over Slavery in Cuba* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1990).
  21. Rebecca J. Scott was the first to identify this phenomenon in *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860–1899* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).
  22. Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Registro de Asociaciones; Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, Religiones Africanas.
  23. On the murder of the 'niña Zoila', as she was known, see Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886–1912* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Alejandra Bronfman, *Measures of Equality: Social Science, Citizenship and Race in Cuba, 1902–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
  24. *Diario de la Marina* offers some fine examples of clients charging witches and warlocks with fraud for failing to resolve personal issues such as love, finances and health. Plaintiffs of all races reported defendants of all races to the police and brought their cases before judges. Most cases revolved around the efficacy of the practice and whether or not the witch had complied with her client's request or not. The exchange of money was common in these relationships, therefore, many denunciations sought to recuperate that spent on fraudulent spells or talismans. Publicly shaming the witch through the accusation and trial also served to reduce her prestige and guarantee a loss of clients, eventually putting the witch out of business. See for example: 'Brujería', Crónica de Policía, *Diario de la Marina*, 7 January 1902, edición de la tarde, p. 4; 'Brujería', Crónica de Policía, *Diario de la Marina*, 26 August 1902, edición de la tarde, p. 4; 'Brujería', Crónica de Policía, *Diario de la Marina*, 21 August 1902, edición de la tarde, p. 4; 'La brujería en Matanzas – En Bellamar el pueblo indignado trató de linchar a un brujo. Trataba de robar un niño', *Diario de la Marina*, edición de la mañana, 25 June 1919, p. 1
  25. Bronfman, *Measures of Equality*, p. 44.
  26. Helg, 'Black Men, Racial Stereotyping', p. 583.
  27. Ortiz, *Hampa afro-cubana*, pp. 365, 388.

28. Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, p. 217.
29. Ortiz, *Hampa afro-cubana*, p. 194.
30. Ortiz, *Hampa afro-cubana*, pp. 38, 365, 214. Researchers have long suspected that female slaves practised abortion, either to limit the number of children they had or to avoid bearing offspring condemned to a life of slavery. This phenomenon remains difficult to prove as it does not appear in historical records, although infanticide certainly does. What has been clear for some time, however, is that slave women had considerably fewer offspring than free black women. María del Carmen Barcia Zequeira, *La otra familia: Parientes, redes y descendencia de los esclavos en Cuba* (Havana: Casa de las Americas, 2003), p. 66.
31. Clark, *Where Men Are Wives*, p. 121.
32. Ortiz, *Hampa afro-cubana*, p. 136.
33. Helg, 'Black Men, Racial Stereotyping', pp. 589–90.
34. Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 34.
35. 'ejecutan contorciones con sus cuerpos que ofendan a la moral', Gerardo Machado, Presidente de Cuba, Decreto no. 2156, Gaceta Oficial de la Republica de Cuba 23 no.96, tomo 4 (25 October 1925), p. 10034, cited in Robin D. Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness: Afro-Cubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1902–1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), pp. 231–2.
36. The Tribunal de Urgencias established in each province for urgent judicial matters contains documentation concerning the activities of the police and the interest the state took in plotting the social networks of accused witches and warlocks. See for example, Archivo Provincial de Matanzas, Fondo Audiencia (Asuntos Generales), 'Expediente relativo a causa seguida contra Federico González Castillo por un delito relacionado con brujería 30 April – 18 July 1906', leg. 19, no. 359; Fondo Audiencia (Asuntos Generales), 'Expediente relativo a causa seguida contra Dolores Fiallo Pérez por práctica de brujería, 7–19 January 1946', leg. 35, no. 565.
37. Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui, *Los orishas en Cuba* (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1990), p. 13.
38. Miguel Ramos, 'La división de la Habana: Territorial Conflict and Cultural Hegemony in the Followers of Oyo Lukumí Religion, 1850s–1920s', *Cuban Studies* 34 (2003), pp. 38–70, esp. pp. 48, 53; Clark, *Where Men Are Wives*, p. 113.
39. On Ogún and gender, see Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.
40. Clark, *Where Men are Wives*, p. 67.
41. Several researchers have noted the long-standing hostility in Matanzas to Ifá and the babalawo, possibly because of the prominent role women had in Ocha throughout the twentieth century. See Brown, *Santería Enthroned*, p. 20. Several people I interviewed in Matanzas between 2005 and 2007 cited the scarcity of babalawos as the reason women were able to enjoy such prestige in the region. Raúl 'Kimbo' Domínguez Valdez, Regla Mesa Milanés, Juan García, Dolores Pereira, interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007.
42. Brown, *Santería Enthroned*, pp. 91–2.
43. Clark, *Where Men are Wives*, p. 65.
44. Clark, *Where Men are Wives*, p. 65.
45. Fuente, *A Nation for All*, p. 290.
46. Ocha-Ifá and the Abakuá (Calabar) were the most oft-performed religions of African origin.
47. Juan García, a practitioner of Ocha, performer and eventual director of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba (CFN), saw two very different processes occurring simultaneously. First, the *orishas* and drums that had previously been confined to 'sacred sites' in houses were taken to the stage. Second, the people who went to see the performances did not see the *orishas*, they saw the men and women dancing based on the 'displacement' that the choreographers had designed. Spectators essentially saw what they wanted to see. Interviewed by the author, Matanzas, December 2007. On the value of folklore, see Christine Ayorinde, *Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution and National Identity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), p. 108.
48. Several non-white practitioners I interviewed expressed this concern, but also continued to initiate whites, partly because Ocha-Ifá 'does not discriminate' and partly because it is economically beneficial to do so as white Cubans tend to have greater access to the foreign currency necessary for purchasing scarce items. 'Kimbo', interview with the author, Matanzas, December 2007; Victor Betancourt, interview with the author, Havana, November 2007.
49. 'su religión para satisfacer sus apetitos y aberraciones sexuales'. Quoted in Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui and Román Orozco, *Cuba Santa: Comunistas, santeros y cristianos en la isla de Fidel Castro* (Madrid: El País Aguilar, 1998), p. 370.

50. Bolívar Aróstegui and Orozco, *Cuba Santa*, p. 370.
51. Abel Sierra Madero argues that 'many men have become homosexuals because the social environment has inferred it upon them' [muchos hombres han devenido homosexuales porque el medio social los ha inducido a ello] (author's translation). Abel Sierra Madero, *La nación sexuada: Relaciones de género y sexo en Cuba (1830–1855)* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2002), p. 66. On homosexuality and the revolution, see José Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 124–44.
52. Ian Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), p. 57.
53. Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich, 'Homosexuality, Homophobia and Revolution: Notes Toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience, Part I,' *Signs* 9 (1984), pp. 683–99, esp. pp. 687, 692.
54. Alejandro de la Fuente, 'The New Afro-Cuban Cultural Movement and the Debate on Race in Contemporary Cuba', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 40 (2008), pp. 697–720, here p. 713.
55. Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte* (1954; Havana: Editorial SI-MAR, 1996), p. 52.
56. Cabrera, *El Monte*, pp. 50, 52–3.
57. This phenomenon is more regional and characteristic of Havana rather than Matanzas, the other centre of Ocha-Ifá. One of my Matanzas informants suggested that the dominance of the *babalawos* in Havana can account for the propagation of this theory, while their minimal presence in Matanzas explains the receptivity to spirit possession in that region. Domínguez, interview with the author, 2007.
58. Most Cubans participated in this programme through military support for African wars of national independence as soldiers, technicians and teachers. Some participated in more culturally oriented programmes such as music. The programme also enabled Africans to study and participate in cultural exchanges in Cuba and the main proponent of initiating women to Ifá has strong connections to Nigerian practitioners of the Yoruba religious complex. On internationalism, see Susan Eckstein, 'Cuban Internationalism', in Sandor Halebsky and John M. Kirk (eds), *Cuba: Twenty-five Years of Revolution, 1959–1984* (New York, Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 1985), pp. 372–90.
59. The practice originated in the USA in 1985 when a Nigerian *babalawo* initiated Daifá to the priesthood, making her the first female Ifá diviner in the Americas.
60. Betancourt, interview with the author, November 2007.
61. Victor Betancourt Estrada in Rogelio Fabio Hurtado, 'El poder de Olokún', *Consenso* 5 (2006), available at <[http://www.desdecuba.com/10/articulos/1\\_01.shtml](http://www.desdecuba.com/10/articulos/1_01.shtml)>, consulted 15 March 2008.
62. Victor Betancourt Estrada, 'El fenómeno Iyónifá en Cuba', *Consenso* 2/1 (2005), <[http://www.desdecuba.com/01/articulos/1\\_01.shtml](http://www.desdecuba.com/01/articulos/1_01.shtml)> (accessed 6 August, 2013), p. 1.
63. Betancourt Estrada, 'El fenómeno Iyónifá en Cuba', p. 2.
64. Aviva Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution* (Oxford, Maldon: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), p. 142.
65. On the gains women made 1959–89, see Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
66. While most researchers recognise the policies designed to incorporate women into the workforce, higher education and non-tradition jobs, some suggest that women were manipulated because these policies have been strategic, designed to fill labour shortages and achieve production goals. Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, pp. 139–40.
67. Betancourt Estrada, 'El fenómeno Iyónifá', p. 1.
68. Afolabi A. Epega and Philip John Neimark, *The Sacred Ifá Oracle* (New York: Athelia Henrietta Press, 1995); Maybell Padilla Pérez also noted that Ifá does not take life from those consecrated to it. Maybell Padilla Pérez, 'Sacerdotisa y brujas', *Consenso* 6 (2006), available at, <[http://www.desdecuba.com/11/articulos/9\\_01.shtml](http://www.desdecuba.com/11/articulos/9_01.shtml)> (accessed 12 May 2012).
69. In Nigeria, it would be a calabash. In Cuban practice, soup tureens, clay pots and other common receptacles with lids serve as the calabash.
70. Clark argues that Cuban practitioners tend to view women as polluting due to menstruation, while the same process in Nigeria is seen as so powerful it can destabilise the *orishas*. Clark, *Where Men Are Wives*, p. 117.
71. Betancourt Estrada, 'El fenómeno Iyónifá', p. 1; interview with the author, 2007.
72. On the *Gèlèdè* and the *ajé*, see Babatunde Lawal, *The Gèlèdè Spectacle: Art, Gender and Social Harmony in an African Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996); Henry Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Gèlèdè: Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba* (1983; Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990).

73. See e.g., Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Henry John Drewal, 'Gèlèdè Masquerade: Imagery and Motif', *African Arts* 7 (1974), pp. 8–19; Drewal and Drewal, *Gèlèdè*; Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*.
74. Both the *ajés* and the need to appease them became much more closely connected to the destructive power of witches under British colonisation of Nigeria. See Drewal and Drewal, *Gèlèdè*.
75. Padilla Pérez, 'Sacerdotisas y brujas'; Drewal and Drewal, *Gèlèdè*.
76. In Cuba, different names for the same orisha are explained as different avatars or paths (*caminos*) of the deity.
77. Maybell Padilla Pérez belongs to Victor Betancourt's Ifá Iranlowo. Padilla Pérez, 'Sacerdotisas y brujas', p. 2.
78. Fuente, 'New Afro-Cuban Cultural Movement', p. 700.
79. Organisations or celebrations associated with Gèlèdè are the Egungun (related to the ancestors) and the Oro (related to death), both of which were brought to Cuba from West Africa, the first with the slave trade and the second through twentieth century 'returns' to Africa. On the Egungun, see Fernando Ortiz, *Los cabildos y las fiestas afrocubanas del Día de Reyes* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1992). On the Oro, see Victor Betancourt Estrada, 'Respuestas a Felipe Ifaláde', *Consenso* 2 (2005), available at, <[http://www.desdecuba.com/02/articulos/13\\_01.shtml](http://www.desdecuba.com/02/articulos/13_01.shtml)> (accessed 15 August 2013). Both societies are the domain of men.
80. Babatunde Lawal, taken from Pierre Verger, in Babatunde Lawal, 'New Light on Gèlèdè', *African Arts* 11 (1978), pp. 65–70, here p. 66.
81. Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, pp. 40–41.
82. Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, pp. 40–41.
83. 'Las mujeres penetran en Ifá' was the facetious title given to an article concerning the initiation of women to Ifá in *El Caiman Barbudo*, a cultural review published by Cuban youth. Mirta Fernández, 'Las mujeres penetran en Ifá', *El Caiman Barbudo* 9 (14 March 2009), accessed 10 July 2009 at, [http://www.caimanbarbudo.cu/html\\_total/simpresas/articulos/345/index\\_articulo\\_09.htm](http://www.caimanbarbudo.cu/html_total/simpresas/articulos/345/index_articulo_09.htm). Url no longer available, but see *El Caimán Barbudo*, no. 345, marzo-abril 2008. Initiation was conducted through the Itèfà ceremony used in Cuba and West Africa to initiate boys and men to Ifá. Betancourt Estrada, 'El fenomeno Iyáonifá en Cuba', p. 2.
84. Betancourt Estrada, 'El fenomeno Iyáonifá en Cuba', p. 2; Betancourt, interviewed by the author, 2007.
85. Betancourt Estrada, 'El fenomeno Iyáonifá en Cuba', p. 1; interview with the author, 2007.
86. Ramos, 'La división de la Habana', p. 53.
87. Ramos, 'La división de la Habana', pp. 52–3.
88. Alyssa García, 'Continuous Moral Economies: The State Regulation of Bodies and Sex Work in Cuba', *Sexualities* 13 (2010), pp. 171–96, here p. 174.
89. Practitioners of religions of African origin consistently identified themselves as Africans or their descendents in the documents outlining the founding of their organisations until the 1959 revolution, even as they emphasised the similarities between their beliefs and Christianity. Archivo Nacional de Cuba, *Registro de Asociaciones*.
90. Brown, *Santería Enthroned*, p. 151.
91. It is difficult to pinpoint this date, and it varies from family to family, although based on interviews with practitioners I have found that the practice was certainly common by the 1950s and appears to have endured until the mid- to late 1980s.
92. Concerning the details of this historic debate, see Brown, *Santería Enthroned*, pp. 151–5.
93. Brown, *Santería Enthroned*, pp. 89–90.
94. Tomás Fernández Robaina, interview with the author, Havana, June 2006.
95. Tomás Fernández Robaina, 'Cuban Sexual Values and African Religious Beliefs', in Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones and Gays*, p. 207. My informant in Matanzas, 'Kimbo', dismissed this attitude as a Havana-based practice that emerged as a result of the dominance of the *babalawo*. Interview with the author, 2007.
96. García, 'Continuous Moral Economies', p. 175.
97. Fuente, 'New Afro-Cuban Cultural Movement', p. 702.
98. 'sabemos que para que nazca un ser humano, tienen que intervenir dos, de la misma forma, y los ceremoniales pueden ser diferentes, la mujer abajo o el hombre arriba, o el hombre abajo y la mujer arriba, el hombre introduce y la mujer recibe. Aquí mismo, dentro del encuentro sagrado, hay ceremonias y rituales que nos recuerdan como un hombre y una mujer pueden dar a luz'. Betancourt, interviewed by the author, Havana, November 2007.

99. Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex', in Rayna R. Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 143–78, here p. 181.
100. On sex/gender/desire, see Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 31.
101. On compulsory heterosexuality, see Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 31.
102. Consejo de Sacerdotes Mayores de Ifá de la República de Cuba, 'Nota aclaratoria al artículo publicado en el Caiman Barbudo sobre las Iyanifás', 30 May 2008, <<http://www.cubayoruba.cult.cu/editorial/Nota%20Aclaratoria%20sobre%20las%20Iyanifa.htm>> (accessed 3 March 2009).
103. According to a *babalawo* in Matanzas with whom I spoke regarding the ceremony I had witnessed, the red parrot feather represents the power of the *babalawo* and forms part of the sacred items a *babalawo* receives upon initiation. Yurien Martínez Milián, conversation, Matanzas, December 2007.
104. Odú's grove is a symbolic space and in Betancourt's organisation is a wood frame structure surrounded by fabric, located at the far end of the yard. I was able to witness the last part of this initiation ceremony of children to Ifá in 2007 and Victor Betancourt later discussed the initiation of women with me. In response to my questions, Betancourt explained that the ceremony was *almost* identical for the boys and the girls, the only difference was in the prohibition against women entering Odú's grove. Interview with the author, 2007.
105. Jorge Felipe Marín, 'Réplica a "El fenómeno Iyáonifá"', *Consenso* 2/2 (2005), available at <[http://www.desdecuba.com/01/articulos/2\\_01.shtml](http://www.desdecuba.com/01/articulos/2_01.shtml)> (accessed 6 August 2006).
106. Marín, 'Réplica a "El fenómeno Iyáonifá"'
107. Brown, *Santería Enthroned*, p. 154.
108. Lázaro Cuesta Valdés, 'Un mensaje necesario: La historia y significado de la Letra del Año', Comisión Organizadora de la Letra del Año Miguel Febles Padrón, 20 January 2005, available at, <[www.folkcuba.com/aa\\_history\\_la\\_letra\\_do05.asp](http://www.folkcuba.com/aa_history_la_letra_do05.asp)> (accessed 5 January 2006).
109. Most of the interest shown by practitioners is initially curiosity, not respect, although Águila de León insists that after consulting her they leave satisfied with her work. In Elsie Carbó, '¿Mujeres babalawos?', 15 March 2005, <<http://elsiecarbo.blogspot.com/2005/03/mujeres-babalawos.html>>.
110. Fidel Castro declared the elimination of racial discrimination in 1963 and all discussions of race were silenced thereafter. Race has re-emerged as a sensitive topic of discussion in Cuba only in the last decade.