

Editor's Note

The present monographic issue underscores the significance of African religions in the Americas, as they are manifested in countries with sizable black populations like Cuba, Brazil, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. But there are others such as Peru, Uruguay, Panama, Puerto Rico, and the United States, the latter with Caribbean-like cities including New York, Miami, and Chicago, where many of their practitioners reside. We recognize that the practice of Regla de Ocha, Palo Monte, Candomblé, Vodou, and others, allowed slaves to preserve their culture and survive in foreign lands. As their stay became more permanent, these religions made significant contributions to the development of New World cultures. As I have stated elsewhere, writings of and about slaves, blacks, and their African religious practices represent a counter discourse to the discourse promoted by the dominant society. It is a place of opposition which subjects all discourses to the same interpretative strategies. The current issue is a testament to the strength, resonance, resilience, and adaptability of African religions in a New World context.

The journal's cover reproduces an image of Elegguá (also known as Eleguá, Eleggua, Elegbara, Elegba, Legba, Exu, and, in Nigeria, Eshú). He is the Orisha of the crossroads, the one who opens and closes doors; in cosmological terms, he is a symbol of the four corners of the universe; in essence, he represents destiny. Elegguá is the first and the last Orisha to be invoked in any ritual. In Regla de Ocha, he is said to have twenty-one paths (*avatares*), with different characteristics. Some are Eshú Alaguana (brings bad luck), Eshú Malé (allies with Orúnmila), Eshú Laroye (guards the doors), Eshú Ayé (works with Olokun), Eshú Bí (protects the corners), Eshú Alalú or Akualú (owns the crossroads), and Eshu Barakeño (creates confusion). In some incarnations he is old, as with Eshú Elufé (oldest Eshú) and Eshú Añaguí (rules other Elegguás), but in others, as with Eshú Barakeño (lives in the thicket), he is youthful, dynamic, and jovial.

Elegguá can be made of cement, clay, a porous stone, a coconut, a *ñame* (type of yam), or a large seashell, with cowry shells for eyes, mouth, nose, and sometimes ears. And those who receive Elegguá honor him on Monday, with offerings of corn, rum, cigar, smoked fish, opossum, palm oil (*manteca de corajo* or *epó*), and a white candle. The Elegguá illustrated on the cover is called Eshu Ni, as defined by a second face that appears directly behind the visible one. This Elegguá has been attended to with tobacco and honey.

In Cuban Santería, Elegguá's Catholic avocation is El Niño de Atocha, San Antonio, San Roque, and El Ánima Sola. Among the Dahomeyan he is referred to as Legba; in Candomblé he is known as Exu, and associated with the devil. While he is indeed an important Orisha, he is received with Oggún (the laborer), Ochosi (the

hunter), and Osun (the rooster), and they are known as the Guerreros (The Warriors). Together they are very powerful and protect the recipient against all evil, while helping him/her in worldly matters. With this cover, we invoke Elegguá: We ask for his blessings and protection.

I was introduced to Santería at an early age. As a family, my mother, brother, and I traveled to Cuba with some regularity. On a trip in which my mother later returned to the United States, my brother and I lived with my aunt Eva, my brother's godmother, whom we affectionately called Mamina. She and her husband, Agustín, owned a house in the outskirts of Havana, beyond the Virgen del Camino, by the Carretera Central. Mamina was the Afro-Cuban member of a racially diverse family, and a Santera. However, her husband Agustín, who was of Spanish descent, was also a Santero. Though my godmother, Aralia, the oldest of ten siblings and long-term provider for the family, was a non-believer, everyone in the Santos del Río household respected my aunt's beliefs. Many years later, I would hear stories about my mother's teenage health problems, and how the doctors were not able to help her. Had my aunt not intervened with the aid of a *babalawo*, an Afro-Cuban priest widely known as *el chino de Puey*, she may not have survived. Certainly, she would have been denied marriage and her two children.

My own personal experience began around age ten, when my brother and I lived with my aunt Eva, and witnessed some of her rituals. Her house was quite modern, with a large livingroom, kitchen, garage, and backyard, yet my brother and I slept in the room where the Santos or Orishas resided. The room contained a convertible sofa, which at night became our bed. However, during the daytime, the room was used to perform ceremonies, some of them simple but others more complex and included sacrifices of birds and animals. Though this was the same room in which we slept at night, my brother and I rested soundly and without fear.

Mamina had a large white armoire. When opened, it revealed a sizable altar, with a white cloth, and what appeared to be numerous Catholic saints. Some were more remarkable than others. I recall a black virgin holding a child, an old man on crutches accompanied by a dog, another virgin with a boat and three fishermen praying by her feet, another virgin with a challis in one hand and a sword in the other. There was a black rag doll dressed in blue and white colors, several large tureens, beaded necklaces, shells, coconuts, and other sundries. With the doors wide opened, the altar seemed even larger. They exposed additional pictures and other figurines. There were even two horsetails with elaborate beaded handles.

I remember patiently watching as invited guests entered the room, at times touching the floor with a hand and then bringing it to their lips. There were some who preferred to lay down on a straw mat, face down, and others who laid on one

side, then on the other. To answer questions or concerns, Mamina used four pieces of coconut, and with these she was able to tell if the Orishas were pleased or not. First, she poured three drops of water on the floor, then said something like, “*Omi tutu, ana tutu, tutu Laroye, tutu ilé,*” and other phrases. After, she let the coconuts drop from her hands and waited to see how they fell, that is, with the white or rind (dark) sides up. If they fell with their white sides up, she said *alafia* and kissed the floor; if three were white and one dark, she said *itagua* and threw them again; if two were white and two dark, she pronounced the word *ellife* and smiled; if three were dark and one white, she voiced *oyekun* and was less likely to smile; and if they all were dark, she shouted *oyekun* and was very concerned.

I also observed sacrifices of pigeons, chickens, and roosters. These and other types of fowl were kept and cared for in the backyard, along with pigs, goats, and other animals. There were large mango and avocado trees, and also herbs used in Mamina’s ceremonies. Usually, the large animals were sacrificed on festive days. Many of Mamina’s godchildren (*ahijados*) were invited to the house. These occasions were accompanied by drumming, singing, and dancing.

For the most part, Mamina wore a white turban, with matching blouse, skirt, and comfortable wooden slippers. Agustín also dressed in white, with matching shoes. They displayed many colorful beaded necklaces; some were black and red, green and yellow, and red and white; others were of a single color, blue, yellow, or purple, for example. It was not uncommon to see them smoking a large cigar.

Before my brother and I departed for New York, Mamina prepared a white plaster that she placed on our heads. We were also given leather wristbands that concealed colorful beads. All this was part of a ceremony to protect us as we traveled home. Many years later, I began to understand Mamina’s way of life, and the gift that she had given us.

My most recent encounter with African religions occurred in June, 2007, on a trip to the coastal town of Cabrera, Dominican Republic. I learned that a young woman had passed away and some people attributed her death to Vodou. A few days later, I was invited to the local television station to view a recording of the different timeframes in which this event took place. Witnesses maintained that they had seen the deceased woman ingest water. An investigative reporter asked a medical doctor to examine her in the coffin and recorded the diagnosis. After checking her vital signs, the doctor categorically proclaimed the woman to be dead. When pressed to explain why her body was not cold or rigid, he told the reporter that her condition was temporary and associated with her diabetes. However, the woman, according to an observer in the TV report, had died some nineteen hours prior to the doctor’s arrival.

After the medical doctor's visit, the woman was buried for a second time. The burial produced additional commotion and a carnival-like atmosphere. The television camera recorded bystanders who had heard sounds coming from the casket. On camera, one observer admitted that the sound could have been produced by a pick or a shovel, but suspected that it came from the sealed sarcophagus. Permission was obtained from the mayor, who was also present, to disinter the woman. The casket was opened and the observer described cut marks on the woman's arms and neck, perhaps from her attempts to escape burial. Someone else claimed that she had tears rolling from her eyes. The body was taken to the hospital for further examination, and she was buried yet again.

In the meantime, an effort was made to contact a Haitian priest from Samaná. Communicating through a cell phone, he affirmed that she was not dead and that he would go to Cabrera and raise her from the grave. The Cabrereños waited in the cemetery well into the morning for a man who never arrived. The small town was divided between those who believed in modern medicine, that is, that the woman was dead; and those who were convinced that her "death" was caused by non-western religious traditions.

The present issue is the result of a conversation Prof. Narciso Hidalgo and I had regarding literature and Afro-Cuban religions. We decided that it would be important for one of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* issues to feature African religions in the Diaspora. A scholar with detailed knowledge of the religions, Prof. Hidalgo kindly accepted my invitation to be Guest Editor. In conjunction with this conversation, we also set out to expose the Vanderbilt campus to the Yoruba religion. In the month of November (2006), Dr. Frank Dobson, Director of the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center, and the *Afro-Hispanic Review* invited *babalawo*, Mr. Nelson Freires, and his godson, Prof. Hidalgo, to the Vanderbilt campus; Mr. Freires's book, *El cielo sabe que te salva*, had just been released. Mr. Freires gave two talks: in the first one, he revealed the complex theories of the Yoruba religious system, and often resorted to rich and captivating verses that illustrated his ideas; in the second, he practiced the religion and explained the significance of the *opon Ifá* or *Tablero de Ifá* (Ifá's board) and demonstrated its use in divination. Mr. Freires showed his round wooden *Tablero*, with beautiful carvings of African figures associated with Orula or Orúnmila, the holy diviner who speaks to the *babalawo*. He sprinkled it with *eyerosun* (a special powder containing a kind of yam and other ingredients, which can include crushed *ikin* or palm nut), and used an *irofá* or deer horn to draw lines and zeroes.

Mr. Freires also employed the *ekuele* or *opelé* (a chain with eight evenly spaced oval medallions) to determine a person's destiny and reveal, as with the *Tablero*,

Orula's wisdom, which encompasses knowledge of the universe. The *opelé* makes sixteen different designs known as *oddu*, which are multiplied to reveal 256 new ones, each accompanied by a verse and one or more *patakies* or legends. These can lead to the formation of 4,096 *oddu*, 65,536 *oddu* or even 110,100,480 *oddu*! There are other methods used for divination. But, regardless of the system, each ceremony begins with a prayer known as *moyubar*, to the *eggun* (the deceased) and the Orishas.

The conversation between Prof. Hidalgo and Mr. Freires that took place on campus resulted in the fruitful exchange that is published in this issue. I want to thank both Mr. Freires and Prof. Hidalgo for their willingness to share their knowledge with the readers of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*; and Prof. Hidalgo for his help in preparing sections of the current issue. As part of an oral tradition, African religions have been handed down from generation to generation. For this reason, the reader will observe some variations in the written form. We have attempted to standardize some words, but also to respect differences.

The Spring 2008 issue will focus on Afro-Asia. Professors Evelyn Hu-Dehart (Brown University) and Kathleen López (Lehman College, City University of New York) will be Guest Editors. If you are interested in collaborating on this issue, please contact Prof. Hu-Dehart (Evelyn_Hu-Dehart@brown.edu) or Prof. López (kmlopez57@yahoo.com).

William Luis
Editor

