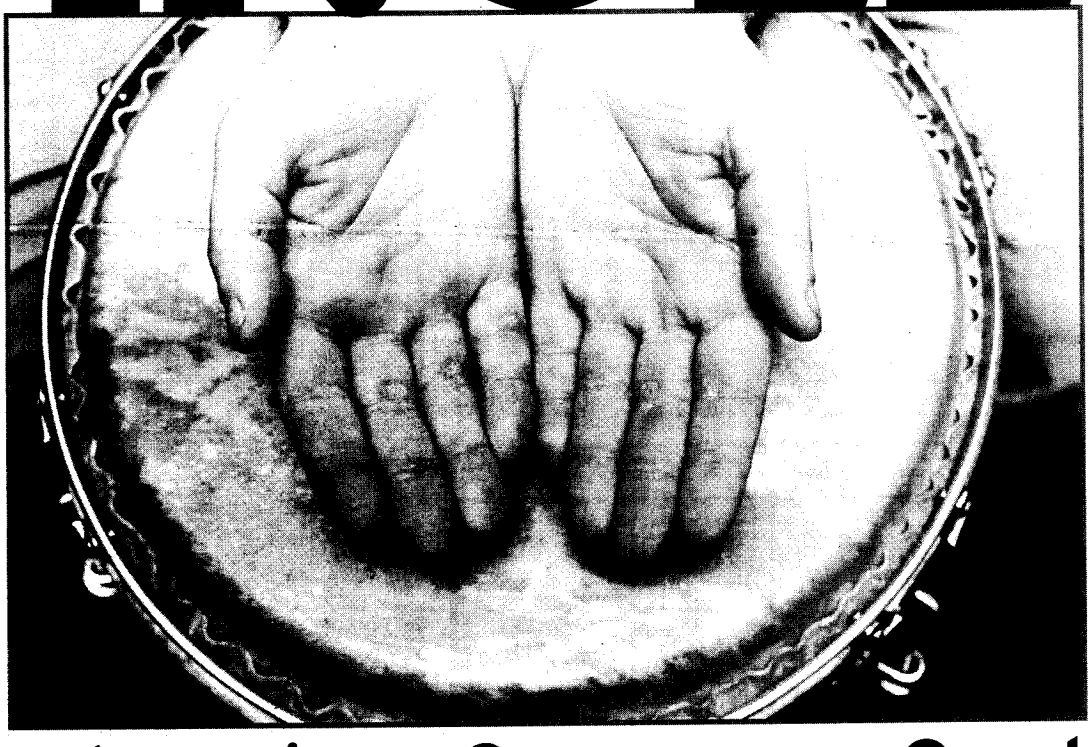
CIRCLE of FIRE

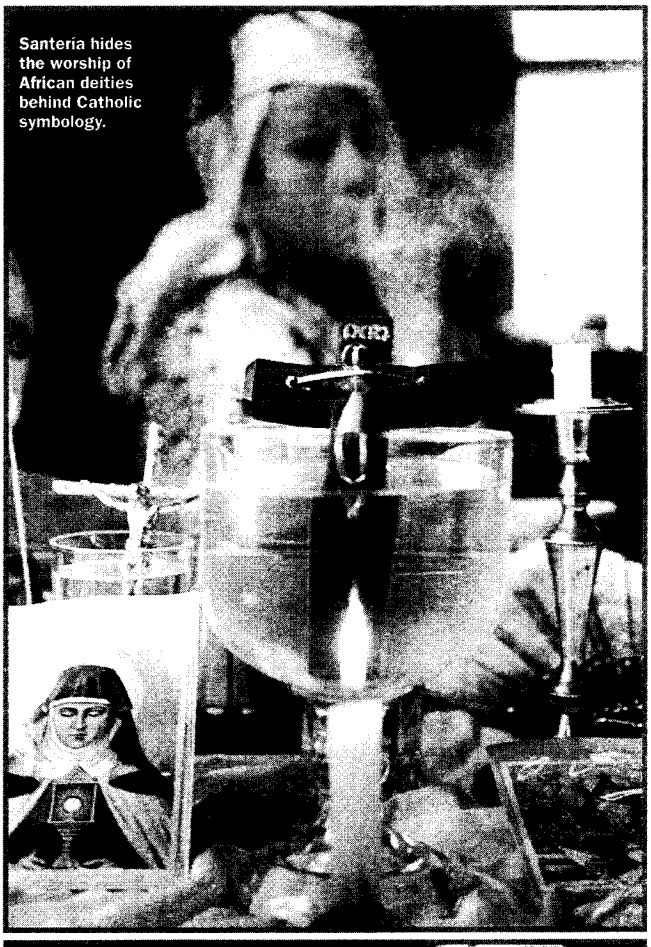


Santería Comes Out

"I have seen possessions," Guadalupe Garcia tells me over the phone one night. "It was by accident, I wasn't supposed to be in the room. Changó came. You could feel the effluvia, the shocking current—my hair went straight up. I felt him coming. He put his double-edged axe in my head. He said I had to enter Santería."

Garcia, a fortyish Ph.D. candidate in NYU's Performance Studies program, is describing an incident of possession in the Yoruba-derived ➤➤

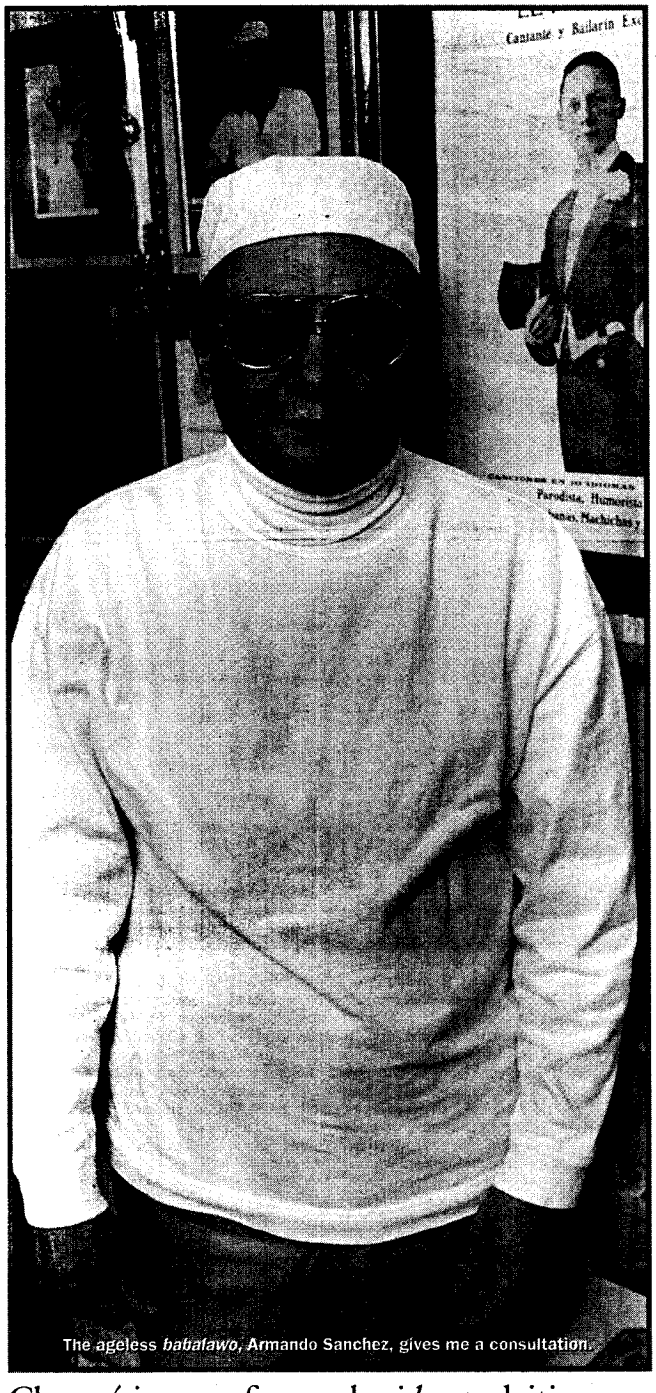
BY ED MORALES PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOE RODRIGUEZ



Santería hides the worship of African deities behind Catholic symbology.

Grupo Patakín gets busy at the Public Theater.

gathering of initiates when she mistakenly walked into a room where Changó, the warrior god of strength and virility, was manifesting himself on the earthly plane.



The ageless *babalawo*, Armando Sanchez, gives me a consultation.

Changó is one of several *orishas*—deities representing various forces of nature—who provide a guide to life and a list of proclivities, much like astrological tendencies. ➤➤

Louis Bauzo occasionally uses percussion to facilitate a possession.

Santería has no main authority, no pope. It's extremely decentralized, and wide open to interpretation. It seems to attract low-maintenance, post-counterculture people of color. Poking around, I discover that a lot of my friends are involved in one way or another. While the stereotyped believer is a working-class, middle-aged woman (the typical patrons and vendors at botanicas, stores devoted to the sale of Yoruba paraphernalia that dot the barrios of New York), I've found more and more college-educated Latinos of my generation turning to Santería as a way to find their roots. Not all these devotees are Latinos; some are African Americans out to express their cultural nationalism, others are middle-class whites searching for a more authentic alternative to New Age. These people—many raised by parents who would be baffled by their practice of Santería—comprise a newly expanded community.

National Public Radio correspondent Maria Hinojosa, a stylish Chicana from Chicago who considers herself a casual practitioner of Yoruban-based religion, tells me she got interested in Afro-Cuban mysticism through a roommate from Colombia. "The Catholic religion, which I was raised in, is too obsessed with good and perfection. Yoruban religion has deities that are good and bad, that are imperfect." A *santero* (or initiate) had correctly predicted that her first child would be a son. Another friend, Ana Araiz, producer of Latin Night at S.O.B.'s, reveals that she has been initiated into the Candomblé religion, whose origins are in Brazil. Araiz describes Candomblé as having more crucial roles for women, since its founding initiates were mothers.

"You must be Ogún," she speculates cheerfully about what my *orisha* might be. The god of mineral and iron; the god of war. It doesn't sound right at first, but I begin to think about the rage I can feel, stuff I wrote off to growing up "coloured" or to adolescent clashes with my dad. If your *orisha* is Ogún you walk through the world with the weight of warlike energy at your command. But I guess I'm a Gemini, too. It so happens that I'm having a back spasm and one half seems to be pulling at the other. A New School student tells me I've got uneven yin-yang balance. She is a Guatemalan Jew from the Valley in Los Angeles who has taken up casual Santería involvement as a logical extension of her flamenco-dance studies. She tells me there are college-aged people all over the country turning to Santería almost in the way they did in the '60s, when Indian religion became popular. Some young Latinas from Washington Heights, in jaded phone calls, insist there are many charlatans who claim to use Santería to find out if their boyfriends are really being faithful. One woman says that, at a consultation, the initiate who was reading her tried to steal her jewelry, claiming to be possessed by an *orisha* that wanted it.

There are gay *santeros*, perhaps drawn by the culture's secrecy—judging from interviewing

Guadalupe Garcia smokes a cigar in homage to her *orisha*, Elegba.

sources, people feel more comfortable admitting they're gay than that they're *santeros*—and its healing powers in the face of AIDS. (Many traditional Latino initiates are drawn to Santería during a health crisis.) Another Puerto Rican friend confesses that she saw a ghost in her Washington Heights apartment when she was a child. I find out that the *espiritismo* tradition in Puerto Rico, a religion developed for European and Latin American tastes by Spanish mystics in the 19th century, was used by its believers in part to counteract Spanish colonialism by invoking the spirits of dead ancestors. In a documentary about Fidel Castro, a Cuban *santero* claims the revolution was "protected" by Santería. The proof is that a dove, a sacred symbol in Santería, landed on Castro's shoulder during a speech just after he took power. After the 1959 revolution, Santería grew rapidly in the U.S. (primarily in New York, New Jersey, and Florida). Its presence is felt in a typical *bodega*, where candles and other paraphernalia are sold next to common household items, in botanicas, and through the arts.

Yoruban religion is perhaps the most powerful aspect of African culture that survives, and actually thrives, in late-20th century post-industrial society. One can make the argument that many African American street cultures (hiphop, break dancing, gang regalia) are Yoruban proclivities. Capoeira, a holistic dance ritual from Brazil with roots in Candomblé, has been cited as the forefather of break dance. The taunting used by Santería drummers to coax *orishas* from the heavens can be compared to "doing the dozens," which in turn is part of rap's metrical structure.

Ever since the heyday of cultural nationalism in the '70s, African American artists have embraced Yoruban religions, but they're not likely to be open about it. "I had a religious experience," says an African American poet whom I became friends with during readings at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. "Being Yoruba has saved my life. As an artist, my sense of irony has been broadened through a deity like Elegba." The shared African American and Latino participation in these religions is one of the few manifestations of common ground between the two communities. In Santería, the often heard accusation that Latinos are trying to "pass" becomes irrelevant.

"I think I've experienced the initial stages of possession," says Steven Gregory, an assistant professor of anthropology and Africana studies at New York University, "where you just feel as though you're leaving yourself and it's as if your blood is draining out and you're sort of losing control—what people really do experience after that happens there's no way of knowing."

Possession can happen on many levels: There can be the intense experience of the initiation ceremony, which is always thoroughly supervised by a priest, or the chronic possession of practitioners who are so invested in their

orishas that they constantly feel the presence. But the most important expression of Santería is one most people experience without realizing its significance.

You may have had a moment like this at a Latin music show, whether it's more secular salsa like India, or Latin jazz by *santero* Giovanni Hidalgo, or more religious music like Milton Cardona's or Lázaro Ros's *bembé* performances. When Muñequitos de Matanzas, a secular group that plays rustic Cuban rumbas, appeared in New York for the first time three years ago, crowds followed them around with cultish intensity. Recently, director George Wolfe, who once expressed interest in Candomblé to me, had a big Afro-Cuban event at the Public Theater featuring Marco Rizo (author of the *I Love Lucy* theme song) and Louis Bauzo's Grupo Patakín.

Bauzo is a pleasantly burly Nuyorican who teaches conga drumming at Boys Harbor in Spanish Harlem, and who serves as a facilitator of possessions at ritual ceremonies where *orishas* are called to earth. Bauzo was influenced by many of the cultural upheavals of the early '70s and drawn to Santería, but he doesn't consider himself "a religious person. I'm involved in the song, dance, and energy." I'm not sure if he's trying to hide something.

Bauzo leads Grupo Patakín through a song praising Oya, the goddess of drums. I'm hoping for a lecture on the different ritual dances, but Bauzo decides to invite most of the crowd onstage. The band and the dancers are engulfed by the crowd. Bauzo plays a trumpet line that reminds me of something I once heard in a Barcelona plaza. The musicians are beginning to disappear among the dancers, who have formed a conga line with Bauzo at the head. Everyone is pulsing with an elemental energy. I can feel the beginning of a trance, and it doesn't matter if the *orishas* are coming down or we're levitating upwards: There's just one primal feeling that the saints are marching in and we can vibrate until we forget who we are.

The Yoruba tradition was always repressed in my Nuyorican family—in fact, I had little idea of its existence until after I graduated from college. There was hardly a hint of any African heritage in my family, although there are times when various relatives, particularly on my mother's side, seem subtly African to me. Although it's common for Nuyoricans to have someone in their family who is at least casually involved in Santería, there was not a peep about it in my own. Their choice to repress this tradition was made at least a generation earlier, back on the island. While much has been written about the assimilation of immigrants in the United States, Latinos undergo their own assimilative dramas in their native lands.

Santería emerged not long after black slaves landed in Cuba in the 17th century, so that African deities could be worshipped in the guise of Catholic saints. My parents came from families thoroughly inculcated with the idea that Santería is paganism. I grew up fully conversant with Americanisms—the only aspect of Christianity I objected to was its pagan mysteries. The body of Christ transformed into a wafer? No way.

But in my mid twenties, during a visit to the site of my grandfather's farm in Puerto Rico, I dreamt I was detecting his spirit, along with Atabey, the Taino goddess who watches over the rain forest. I didn't know it then, but communicating with and celebrating these two ethereal presences—that of an ancestor and a deity associated with a force of nature—are the two main currents of Yoruban spirituality. There was something about the synchronicity of the tropical smells and sounds of the rain forest. Intense exposure to earth energy was awakening something in me—something my parents had never been told about that had always been there, waiting to be tapped.

If there is one constant to Latino culture it's that it possesses both a mythic and a historical sense of narrative; the Latino psyche is an important place where these forces clash and are resolved. What draws me to Yoruban religions is their internal logic, designed to resolve contradictions, something Latinos have many of. The miscegenated consciousness is naturally postmodern: dynamic yet rooted in the past. I remember interviewing Teatro Campesino founder Luis Valdez, who had a poster of an Aztec in full regalia poking at a computer keyboard. That's me, I thought.

"In this form of spirituality the deities represent both good and evil qualities," says Maria Hinojosa. An *orisha* like Elegba, the gatekeeper and trickster, has a "father" aspect called Eshu, which Yorubans say is known in Christianity as the devil. But unlike Satan, Eshu isn't necessarily bad. In Santería, the line between good and evil is blurred—just like in real life.

On the surface, I'm indifferent to the irrational aspects of Yoruban religion. But the premodern part of my double consciousness is worried about the underworld and what might lurk behind me. If my *orisha* happens to be Elegba, how does Eshu work through me? I always felt compelled to filter the guttural, unintelligible, raw intuition within me through rationality. By daring to explore Santería, I might lay bare the inner threads of my thinking, like splitting open a coconut and drinking its milk.

Certainly you know who Changó is. The life of the party, the big person on campus, the wo/manizer, the thunder god. According to Yale historian Robert Farris Thompson, he suffered the consequences of arrogantly playing with fire, and became lightning itself.

Every day, Changó is wandering the streets of New York, represented by the red and white beads that certain members of the Latin Kings gang wear. He's serenaded in countless salsa songs by artists from Celia Cruz to Milton Cardona. Remember *I Love Lucy*'s Desi Arnaz howling "Babalu" during his cheesy nightclub act? Although it was a little like Pat Boone singing Little Richard's "Tutti-Frutti", Arnaz was referring to Babalu-Ayé, the *orisha* of illness, who is also known as St. Lazarus in certain European cultures. The syncretic act of camouflaging the Yoruban *orishas* behind Catholic saints has accounted for the survival of the religion as San-

tería in Cuba, Candomblé in Brazil, and voodoo in Haiti.

Of course, these religions have a problem with public image. In its transition to Christianity, European culture vigorously repressed pagan elements (earth-based gods and goddesses) which resemble those of Yoruban faiths. This stigmatizing tradition persists in movies like *Angel Heart* and *The Believers*, which sensationalize aspects of the religion—possession and ritual sacrifice of small animals—so that the mainstream still fears it. Santería has become a handy explanation for anything grotesque or abominable. For example, one of the detectives in the Elisa Izquierdo child-abuse case initially told the tabs that the police were "investigating whether the mother's practice of the Santería religion played any role" in her daughter's death. But despite this history of persecution, the religion has proven impressively resilient, and now, when Western ways have come under question, the ancient tradition of Yorubaland seem more in tune with late capitalist New York. Its acceptance of the inevitability of struggle resonates with the ideology of empowerment.

When Guadalupe Garcia offers to help me investigate the world of Santería from the inside, I decide to take the bait. Garcia invites me to a function of her "house" (or temple). The occasion is an anniversary celebration of a young boy's initiation into Santería. The boy, whose *orisha* is Changó, is the youngest son of a family that recently arrived from Cuba. The initiation is not unlike a bar mitzvah, but it is recelebrated yearly with an extended family composed of temple members. This particular house is located in Washington Heights, in a building across the street from an Orthodox Jewish temple, whose patrons are milling in the streets as we arrive.

We enter the apartment and the typical sights and sounds of a lower-middle-class Latino gathering are apparent. The air is thick with the smell of rice and beans and roasted chicken; the adults are dressed conservatively, the children in jeans and sweatshirts; family members are seated in a long row which starts at the entry door and ends in the living room, where merengue music is playing. A proud father is alternately merengueing with his daughter and schmoozing with the guests. The boy whose anniversary is being celebrated holds court with the other kids in his room off to the side.

Suddenly the music is interrupted and everyone takes a seat. A 22-year-old recent raft exile from Cuba lights up a cigar and begins reciting a litany of invocations. He is a *babalawo*, a Santería priest, who is a bit of a prodigy; he's already been involved in two other Yoruban-related religions, and now, in his University of Miami T-shirt, he is presiding over this. The *babalawo* and a priestess (whose *orisha* is Yemaya, goddess of the ocean) perform incantations and toss pieces of coconut to the floor. The convex or concave shapes, read together, amount to a divination of the young boy's future.

After much tossing, the religious leaders decide something's wrong. They order the boy to go to his room and change into all-white clothing, which will make him pure. With a mixture of reluctance and repentance, the boy returns and they throw the shells again. This time they're satisfied with the results. "He's a rebellious kid," Garcia tells me later. I'm struck by the similarities with a gathering in my family: adults cautiously watching children, maybe overprotecting them. Even stranger, the duality of Santería means that the young boy's First Communion portrait hangs in the living room—I keep forgetting these people are Catholic, too.

I go to the *padrino*, or godfather of the house, to ask for an interview. He balks, and when I try to question the younger *babalawo*, the *padrino* angrily chases him away. "This is a sacred African religion we're practicing here," he shouts at me, and suddenly everyone in the gathering is lookin[illegible]s. "This is protection for African culture from the white man, and we have to keep it secret. Someday you'll need this protection!" he scolds me. Even though most of the people here are of mixed blood and many could pass for white, it's clear they are committed to African culture. The "protection" seals off the house from the outside world. Once I'm there, eating at the table, sharing the ritual, I'm locked into the circle.

"These rituals are like a a social club," says Steven Gregory, who has extensively researched Santería houses in New York. "I remember I was literally plucking chickens with about five or six different people and they were telling different stories about people who were at the ritual, interpreting things in terms of Yoruba myths. You begin to see the world in a different way, not through an indoctrination but through everyday interactions with the people who are involved." Gregory had been plucking chickens for an initiation ceremony, which in the New York area can cost anywhere between $5000 and $12,000. The costs are to cover "the mobilization of a community," as Gregory puts it, from musicians to out-of-town priests to food.

At such ceremonies there is ritual sacrifice, one of Santería's public relations problems. A high court decision in 1993 decided in favor of a Miami-area *babalawo*, granting the right to sacrifice animals for religious purposes and providing an opening for Yoruban devotees to come out of the closet. Although many of the faithful refused to talk to me on the record, some people (after consulting their *orishas*) were willing to talk.

Way out in Central Brooklyn, I found Antonio Cabrera Mondesire, a *babalawo* who feels that Santería is an outdated term, and that Yoruba devotees no longer need to hide their faith behind Catholic saints. "People think that all we do is kill chickens and play drums," said Cabrera Mondesire in his sparsely decorated living room, the center of a two-story house that doubles as a temple. "But we have a philosophy that is full and rich and is meant to help the human being on this plane to do the best they can before they go onto to the next plane. That's something every religion is supposed to do."

Mondesire, a 41-year-old Bronx native of Puerto Rican and Afro-Caribbean descent, heads the house of Ilé Obàtálá Oya with his wife. He is currently giving a lecture series at the Caribbean Cultural Center on the philosophical and theological underpinnings of Lucumi, the name given to the Yoruban religion and culture in Cuba. We share the connection of having both been brought up Nuyorican in the working-class North Bronx where, in the '60s, blacks and Puerto Ricans were rare. He reminds me of a cousin of mine who became a Pentecostal physical therapist—driven, dressed in white.

While explaining in one breath that Changó is "the animating spark that allows the human being to triumph and become bigger than what he or she really is," Mondesire can calmly reverse his field to describe how to rid one's house of bad spirits: "Let's say you move to a new place and there's spirits in there, there's residual energy from the former inhabitants; and if it's a house you might have spirits, disincarnate human beings who are vibrating on a more subtle level. They may just hang out. What you must do is physically, then spiritually clean it. Set up a shrine area dedicated to one's own ancestral spirits. Sooner or later, your spiritual energy will settle and displace the old energies."

At the entrance to Mondesire's house, as in Garcia's house, and in all the Santería households I visited, were small shrines devoted to Elegba. Carved out of some earthen or possibly bone material was an oval-headed figure with eyes and mouth made of cowrie shells. Often a cigar that has been put out after being lit is placed in the mouth of Elegba, giving the "doll" an eerie anthropomorphic charge. There's something about its earthiness that freaks me out. The soil as a place for living and decaying

things strikes a primal chord in me.

I have a dream in which I'm throwing a party in the Bronx, and a guest begins to spontaneously combust, melting into a *Night of the Living Dead* zombie that sends me fleeing into the next room. I wonder whether this stuff is just plain creepy or whether I've been conditioned to think it's creepy. My Catholic indoctrination has taught me to be fearful of spirits and the underworld. A Venezuelan film I saw last year spelled it out: Nice man with Catholic wife gets tangled up with a *mulata* chick on the mainland—she traps him by having a *santero* put a spell on him. His sweating face while under the influence of the spell is the film's quintessential image.

How long does it take before a child stops being afraid of the dark? When the Bronx elevated train slips below the earth to enter Manhattan, does the child still fear drowning in the tunnel below the Harlem River? When the child dreams of the creatures that teem below the earth's surface, of tendrils that threaten to rise from underground and choke him in his sleep, will he awaken to sweat-soaked sheets? Or will he be smiling, unafraid, laughing devilishly, in charge of his destiny, in control of the gateway to all knowledge?

The child is Elegba, and lately I've begun to wonder if the child is me. Elegba is the trickster, the gatekeeper of all roads; he can ameliorate the worst of fates and darken the most hopeful ones. Guadalupe Garcia is convinced she's Elegba and fully expects to be initiated as such. She explains, "that's why I'm being so open about us when so many are secretive." So in collaborating with Garcia to shed light on Lucumi, I must be playing the same Elegba role.

According to Yoruba devotees, it's foolish of me to try to figure out who my *orisha* is on my own. So, on the advice of Garcia, I go for a consultation with Armando Sanchez, a 75-year-old *babalawo* who came to New York from Cuba 50 years ago. Sanchez, who fronts a Cuban music group called Son de la Loma, ran with all the mambo legends of the late '50s from Machito to Mario Bauzá until failing health led him to Santería. "I got really sick," said Sanchez before we started a divination. "I was down to 135 pounds. We went down the Hudson River; it was 22 degrees out. They threw out all my medicine and I was kept in ceremony for seven days and nights. I came out a changed man."

Sanchez sits at a table and pulls out an *opele*, a divining chain made of "natural elements." He throws it in seeming random fashion on the table again and again. "This is the chain of slavery," he says solemnly. I'm holding a stone in one hand and a shell in another, which he alternately taps to get a yes or no answer to what he ascertains from the Ifá, a text he keeps next to him. When the pattern of the chain reveals itself, he writes it in a notebook and it looks like the zeros and ones of digital information. Sitting next to Sanchez is a large goblet filled with water, in which a crucifix is submerged. In Santería, Jesus was a black man called Oluboro, son of Obatala, one of the *orishas*. The crucifix represents the four cardinal points of North, East, West, and South. It is submerged in water because that is the main element of life. When I notice the crucifix I realize where Andres Serrano got his idea.

"Pick two numbers between one and 16," Sanchez begins.

"Seven and nine," I answer.

"Whom are you separated from?"

"From many people."

"Your heart is broken because you're not with them."

"But almost everyone is separated from a loved one."

"Sometimes you don't sleep well. You jump up in your sleep. Things get put in your mind when you sleep. Sometimes when you're alone in your room you feel like someone's with you."

"I always thought it was my grandfather's spirit."

"Do you have an illness in your family?"

"My aunt was in the hospital."

"Do you keep stones in your house?"

"Yes."

Stones. Back to the earth again. I like to keep stones I've gathered on hikes and other pastoral journeys on my bookshelf. But so do most of us. Most of the revelations from Sanchez's reading could have been guessed by anyone. I ask him, "Can I be successful without compromising my idealism?" Sanchez seems annoyed. "This is too complicated a question, you have to simplify it."

"Okay. Will I be successful?" Sanchez throws the divining chain again and the answer is yes. "It's silly to ask questions that you already know the answer to," he smiles. I have the feeling he's sensed a lack of sincerity on my part and has given me a fake consultation. As Steven Gregory puts it, "In order to know something you have to take responsibility and if you're not initiated you haven't accepted the responsibility to have this knowledge, so it's not really secretism as much as it is a kind of respect for sacred knowledge."

Still, Sanchez said some things that resonate. I live in a circle of fire, he told me, and everything I've attained or created has been from my own efforts; I have asked no spiritual force to provide for me. I have the power, he said, to construct things from the force of my intellect. This makes me think of my desire to construct a new Latino identity. My whole project of writing, as a translator, a synthesizer of two cultures, seems to come into view. I leave Sanchez's place with the following advice: I am to put eight rolls and a glass of water on a white dish, put a candle on either side, and leave it on my kitchen floor. Then in two days, I must discard the rolls in a nearby park. Orula, which is a divine knowledge-force above the *orisha*, would benefit from this. Offering Orula the rolls would establish my relationship with the divine force.

I never got the rolls. I think I'm too much invested in something called free will, or what I understand as free will. The overtones of surrender were beginning to bug me. Maybe this wasn't so different from the Catholicism I'd fled in my youth. I can't forget that kid whose anniversary was being celebrated, and his awkward compliance with the demands of his tribe. His restlessness was very familiar to me.

But perhaps this immersion in ritual and rigidity is the veil of Christianity hiding the true face of Yoruban religion. Maybe there's more to Santería than the imperative of conformity. Robert Farris Thompson writes about the "coolness" of character in Yoruban aesthetics, the "generosity of spirit" called *ire awe*. I feel it like a fresh breeze within me. I don't have to give up its inspiration as I free myself from social obligations. What's important—to me and to *santeros*, casual and serious—is not what you believe but *that* you believe. For now, that's all the protection I need. ❖

Research: Sheila Maldonado