

**SPEAKING WITH THE ORISHAS: DIVINATION AND PROPITIATION  
IN THE LUCUMI RELIGION**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Lucumí religion was born in Cuba from African and European religious systems. The enslaved Yoruba were brought to the New World through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. They were taken from their homes, family, language, and religion and brought to countries like Cuba to provide free labor to growing agricultural markets that benefited European colonizers of the Americas. The Yoruba would hold on to their religion, but in order to keep it alive, they would have to make it into a new religion. This new religion would become the religion known as Lucumí.

In Cuba, Lucumí practitioners would hide their religion beneath the façade of Catholicism. The orishas were associated with Catholic saints with similar attributes. The orisha Changó, who governs war and presides over lightning, became associated with Saint Barbara who is the patron saint of artillerymen and is linked to lightning. The Yoruba could be seen praying to a saint but were actually praying to an orisha. This practice became ingrained as a part of Lucumí tradition.

Divination and propitiation are at the center of the Lucumí religion. Divination determines the course of a practitioner's life and can reveal whether practitioners are in a good or bad position in their lives. Propitiation will ensure that good fortune will remain or that bad omens will disa

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	v
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY.....	2
Methodology .....	2
CHAPTER 3:LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
History of the Lucumí Religion .....	6
Modern Ritual Practice.....	9
CHAPTER 4:HISTORY .....	15
CHAPTER 5: DIVINATION.....	24
Obí .....	30
Obí Divination Using Coconuts.....	35

<b>Diloggún .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6: PROPITIATION .....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>CHAPTER 7: ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Interview .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>GLOSSARY .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>APPENDIX : IRB APPROVAL LETTER .....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>69</b>

## **LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1: Coconut prepared for divination. Source: About Santeria. Santeria Church of the Orishas. ....	34
Figure 2: Cowrie shells prepared for divination. Source About Santeria. Santeria Church of the Orishas. ....	43
Figure 3: Cowrie shells and jicara during divination session. Source About Santeria. Santeria Church of the Orishas. ....	45

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Orisha worship is a growing religious practice in the United States. It is estimated that 100 million people in the Americas and Africa practice a form of Orisha worship (Clark 2007). Candomble, Shango, Vodun, Ifa Foundation International and Lucumí are just a few of the various forms of orisha worship that are practiced in the Americas (Clark 2007). The Lucumí religion is practiced throughout the Caribbean, and South America, and North America and its practices vary by the country of origin. However, this thesis is limited to a discussion of Lucumí practice as it developed in Cuba. In this thesis, I will be examining secondary research sources by scholars of the Lucumí faith, such as Michael Atwood Mason, David Brown, and Ochani Lele, and combining their findings with ethnographic interviews from members of the Lucumí faith to bring a comprehensive view of two aspects of the Lucumí faith: divination and propitiation. In this thesis, I will present an affirmative argument for the importance of propitiation and divination in the Lucumí faith and provide evidence that propitiation and divination are the foundation of the Lucumí faith that assists the practitioners in their daily lives.

The research questions I am seeking answers to in this thesis are: 1) What are the types of divination used in the Lucumí religion? 2) Is it an integral part of the faith? 3) Do the practitioners follow through with the ebós that are prescribed during divination sessions? 4) Is ebó done on its own? 5) Do divination and propitiation bring balance to the practitioner's life?



## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

I was unsure of what to expect when I first met members of the Lucumí religion. The media generally portrays the individuals who practice the Lucumí religion negatively. One only hears of them when stories of animal sacrifice are in the news, and represent the practice as that of a secret cult. What I found were warm, welcoming individuals who spoke of the love they have for their orishas, how the orishas look after them, and their joy of presenting offerings to the orishas.

### Methodology

Lucumí practitioners are hesitant to speak about their religious practices. The religion was founded in secrecy in Cuba, and it is still practiced surreptitiously. As an anthropologist seeking interviews, it was difficult to obtain practitioners who wanted to participate. I used the snowball method to seek interviews. I was able to obtain three structured interviews, but two of my consultants asked me to leave their interviews out of my thesis. As a result, only one interview could be used in my thesis. Receiving a divination reading is akin to a religious counseling session. They are private moments that reveal inner desires and conflicts. This was the main reason that two of my consultants wanted their interviews removed from my thesis.

I conducted the interviews over the course of a couple of years with Lucumí practitioners from *ilés* in Central Florida. *Ilés* are Lukumí religious houses that function as the center or religious practice. I had unstructured interviews with practitioners between 2011-2012. During this time I was learning the lexicon, social etiquette, and forming relationships with the practitioners. I did not feel comfortable conducting formal interviews during that time.

In addition to the interviews I spent 2 years as a participant observer in a local ilé. I initially wanted to study the music and dance associated with each orisha, but as I observed the participants talking about divination and making offerings, I became interested in the role divination and propitiation played.

My entry point into the religion was through a local Lucumí priest. It is important to note that listening to elders is an essential part of the faith. I spent the first few months listening to the priest explain the religion. The priest would use a patakí and its corresponding odú to explain my questions regarding the faith. One of the primary methods I used to learn about the religion was through participant observation.

As a participant, I cracked and prepared coconut to be used for Obí divination, assisted in cooking adimús, pulled feathers off chickens, and helped to clean up after ceremonies. During this time I developed a better understanding of the faith, and created relationships with practitioners.

One of the practitioners I developed a relationship with is a woman I will call by the pseudonym, Marisol. She has been practicing the Lucumí faith for many years. She has not made the final step to become a priestess, but she has plans to do so in the near future. Her interview demonstrates the importance that divination and propitiation has on her life. She has been unable to receive a divination reading for a long period of time, and she speaks in the interview of how that has affected her life.

As I was researching the Lucumí religion, I became enamored with the religion and subsequently undertook the steps to enter the religion. These steps allowed me to become closer

in order to observe religious rituals that outsiders are unable to view. During some of these rituals, I felt more like a participant than an observer, and the participants felt the same. I was treated not as an anthropologist, but as an *aborisha* (Lu. one who worships the orishas, but has not made the final initiation). Even with my participation in the religion as an *aborisha*, it was difficult to obtain individuals to interview. Practitioners fear that if their employers, friends, and family discover they are practicing the religion, they will be judged harshly. The Lucumí religion began in secrecy in Cuba to survive, and it has evolved into a quiet, privately practiced religion.

My own religious background is unstructured due to my mother's agnostic beliefs. She was raised Catholic, but as she grew older, she became disenchanted with the Church. Some of it stems from our home church's refusal to baptize me. My mother was 15 and unmarried at my birth, and she remained unmarried until I was 6. Unmarried teen mothers were expected to take a vacation to a church-run home for unwed mothers until the birth of their child. My mother's choice to stay in our small Missouri town and raise me did not sit well with the parish priest, who had concerns about baptizing a child born out of wedlock. My mother eventually found a church to baptize me, which is ironically named Immaculate Conception. While my mother did not raise me in the Catholic faith, the rest of my family was (and remain) active in our home church, and I am familiar with its practices and iconography. The familiarity with the iconography and practice of Catholicism was helpful when studying the Lucumí religion. I was able to decipher between European and African elements. I also could commiserate with the immigrants who brought the Lucumí religion over from Cuba. My German ancestors brought Catholicism to my hometown, where they conducted the town's first Catholic Mass. The house that they celebrated mass in has been preserved as a part of the history of my hometown. At first glance, one may not see the

similarities of German Catholics and Cuban Lucumí practitioners, but they both sought out the United States in the hope of bettering their lives. They brought cultural elements of their home country with them, including their religion. They both felt strongly enough in their religious beliefs that they kept practicing them, even though they were only one of a few members in the area that were observing their particular faith.

Another aspect that assisted me in feeling comfortable around Lucumí practitioners was my familiarity with the Latin culture. I had been married for 12 years to a man who was born in Venezuela to a Cuban father and a Spanish mother. Not every practitioner is Latino, but the majority I encountered was of Latino heritage. I felt at home at the tambours listening to Spanish spoken around me, and the food was familiar as well. The only difference was the religion. I had not encountered the Lucumí religion during my marriage. My former husband and his family do not hold the Lucumí religion in high regard.

My ethnicity did not hinder me from conducting research, but the fact that I was married to a Latino gave me an affinal relationship to the Latino members. I am familiar with Latin American culture and history. My gender was not an issue with the majority of the practitioners I met, but occasionally I found that some individuals did not approve of a female studying divination.

## CHAPTER 3:LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review conducted for this thesis is divided into three sections: the history of the Lucumí religion, modern ritual practice, and anthropological research in religion and divination. The majority of the literature used is peer reviewed, but I also found literature published by non-academic practitioners of the Lucumí faith to be valuable in my research. One of the primary non-academic authors whose work I referenced is Miguel Ramos, a practitioner who self-publishes his books.

### History of the Lucumí Religion

There are many references for Lucumí history (Barnet 2001; Clark 2007; De La Torre 2005; Lele 2003; Palmie 2012; Ramos 2012; Vega 2000). I chose the following major resources because they provided the most detailed history of the Lucumí religion. David Brown's *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (2003), was essential for understanding the history of Lucumí iconography. Brown has a Ph.D. in Art History and was a fellow of the W.E.B Du Bois Institute at Harvard. His book traces Lucumí history from its beginnings in the *cabildos de nación* to modern Lucumí worship. The term *nación* was used in the 18th century to describe a community which was linked by a common language, culture, and religion and that shared political beliefs. The word *cabildo* was used by the Spanish to describe a small government division that was governed by a council (Childs 2006). The cabildos were social and political clubs that gave the Africans the ability to assist members in times of death

and illness by providing funds or religious services. The funds were also used to purchase freedom for enslaved members and to sponsor feast day dances. The cabildos were allowed to function because the state and church believed they held social control over the cabildos. The cabildos were divided into two ethnic groups: free blacks and enslaved Africans. These groups were not permitted to integrate because the state feared an uprising among them. A large portion of the book covers the development of Lucumí iconography.

*Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution, and National Identity* (2004), written by Christine Ayorinde is exceptional for its explanation of the origins of the Lucumí religion. It is vital to understand the sociopolitical context of the Lucumí religion, and this book delves into the political and cultural issues that surrounded the Lucumí religion at its inception and how it became integrated into Cuban society today. George Brandon's *Santería: from Africa to the New World* (1993) is not as detailed as Brown's or Ayorinde's books. It is still, however, a valuable reference on Lucumí history. Brandon begins his history of the *Lucumí* religion in Yorubaland in West Africa. He describes the history of the Yoruba and how they came to be a part of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

The Lucumí religion is descended from a religion practiced by the Yoruba in Africa. The Yoruba were forcibly removed from their lands in the western part of what is now Nigeria and southeastern Benin (formerly Dahomey) and exported as human cargo to the New World where they became slaves. In the New World, the Yoruba kept their religion alive as best they could. The Lucumí religion developed from the elements of rituals that the enslaved Yoruba were able to retain, evolving into a blend of Christianity and West African religious and cultural beliefs.

The term *syncretic* is used to describe blended religions. The use of the term *syncretic* to describe the Lucumí religion is contentious (Palmie 2012; Schmidt 2006). Not every practitioner combines Christian iconography with Lucumí iconography. This controversy has been covered in a chapter of Stephan Palmie's 2012 book, *The Cooking of History: How Not to Study Afro-Cuban Religions*, and in a 2006 article by Bettina Schmidt that argues against the term syncretism.

Schmidt (2006) posits that the term *bricolage* more accurately describes how blended religions are formed. A bricolage is the construction of something by whatever materials are available. Schmidt states that the enslaved Africans created Lucumí from a bricolage of African and Christian religions and cultures to create a new religion that is constantly changing and growing. Palmie's 2012 book is focused on how social scientists have created the narrative on Afro-Cuban religion and subsequently its history. Palmie (2012) also points out that the foundation of Lucumí is the stones that are inhabited by orishas and that the Catholic iconography is merely a symbol of Cuban culture integrated into their religious practice. Palmie (2012) states that Afro-Cuban religions may be a mixture of different religions, but only the African deities are fed. This fact demonstrates to Palmie (2012) that the only deities worshiped are those of African descent. This conclusion is reinforced by Bascom's fieldwork, which was conducted in 1948. Bascom (1950) stated that the Catholic saints are displayed, but his informants only believed that the orishas' stones have power; the Catholic iconography was viewed as empty curios that may be discarded. The stones where the orishas reside must be fed blood yearly and never discarded (Bascom 1950).

Another European element that was added into Lucumí worship is spiritualism.

Spiritualism was introduced in Cuba in the latter half of the 19th century. It was practiced in secret because it was based on the concept that humans could communicate with God, the Saints, and the dead without a priest. This belief is contrary to the Catholic Church's teaching that a priest is needed to intercede between humans and the heavens (Brandon 1993) The following references were used to study Yoruba history, divination, and other ritual practice (Abimbole et al.

1964; Bascom 1941, 1943, 1950,1950, 1969, 1980, 1984; Law 1977; Smith 1976).

#### Modern Ritual Practice

Literature on modern Lucumí ritual practice is abundant; however, there is a dearth of information in the literature specifically regarding divination and propitiation. One book that does scrutinize divination is *Living Santería: Rituals and Experiences in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (2002), written by Michael Atwood Mason. Mason provides examples of his own experiences within the religion, but the majority of the book discusses the perspectives of other practitioners. In his chapter on divination, Mason (2002) utilizes Lucumí terms and provides an accurate description of an individual's divination session. He names the type of divination being performed and describes the client's apprehension of what the oracle will inform him or her. Mason concludes the client's divination session by informing the reader that the client was prescribed an *ebó* (Lu. offering) to Ochún.



In contrast, Mary Ann Clark's 2007 book, *Santeria: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion*, lacks the detail that Mason's 2002 book provides. In Clark's (2007) chapter on Lucumí divination, her descriptions of Lucumí divination are incomplete. For example, her explanation of the *Obí* divination system is brief and explains the system in only a couple paragraphs, and she concludes that it is a simplistic system, although it is actually a complex system (Lele 2001; Mason 1985; Ramos 2012).

There are several books written by Lucumí practitioners that I found useful in my research. By reading these books, I was able to develop a deeper understanding of the development and contemporary use of divination and propitiation (Canizares 2000; Irizarry 2012; Mason 1985; Lele 2000, 2001, 2003, 2010,2011,2012; Ramos 2012a, 2012b; Vega 2000).

*Santeria: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America* 2004 was written by Miguel De La Torre, who was raised in the Lucumí religion. He wrote his book to dispel inaccuracies about the Lucumí religion. He is no longer a practitioner, having since embraced Christianity, but he felt there was a need to describe the Lucumí religion in a more favorable light than it has been traditionally. De La Torre teaches social ethics at Iliff School of Theology and is the founder of the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion*. His book provides an interesting viewpoint of what it is like to grow up in the religion. Other literature that was enlightening on modern day Lucumí worship includes Barnet (2001) and O'Brien (2004).

### Anthropological Research in Religion

There is a copious amount of anthropological literature written on the topic of religion. I focused my research on literature devoted to divination practice and anthropological theory

regarding religion. The readings that I found on divination lament that divination is viewed as a useless part of a culture, and therefore, it is subsequently ignored. Anthropologist Barbara Tedlock (2001) writes in her article, “Divination as a way of Knowing: Embodiment, Visualization, Narrative, and Interpretation,” that academic literature on divination is placed with evolutionary and functional theories that position divination as an afterthought. Philip Peek (1991) writes in the introduction of his book, *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing*, that African divination research has described divination as a small portion of the social system and is, at times, irrational and detrimental to its practitioners.

However, before Peek and Tedlock (2006) expressed their desire for the writing of divination to be less prejudiced, E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1977) lamented on it in his book, *Theories of Primitive Religion*. Evans-Pritchard (1977) attributes the ambivalence toward the significance of divination to anthropologists’ view of religion as a whole. He states that most of the influential anthropological literature on religion was based upon the writings of individuals who had never personally met the people they wrote about. They based their findings on what explorers, missionaries, and traders informed them about a particular culture (Evan-Pritchard 1977). Evans-Pritchard (1977) also writes that anthropologists who publish academic literature on religion come from religious backgrounds or are either agnostic or atheist. He believes they view religion as unscientific and illogical, which renders them incapable of conducting thorough research on religion. Talal Asad (2003) states that religious components such as belief, myth, and ritual are concepts that vary from culture to culture. Clifford Geertz (1973) defined religion as a system of social symbols that are observed through behavior.

In the introduction to his book, *Anthropology of Religion*, Stephen Glazier (1997)

quotes James Fernandez who wrote that the goal of anthropology is to “find the familiar in the strange, and the strange in the familiar” (Glazier 1997:2). Glazier (1997) uses the quote to suggest that the study of religion should be in the center of anthropology.

In anthropologist Barbara Tedlock’s article (2006), “Toward a Theory of Divination Practice”, she states that the West’s negative view on divination is founded on writings of influential Romans who lived in the final century BCE. While the Romans may have found divination unreliable, it has been practiced by many cultures for millennia. Tedlock (2006) divides divination into four types: omen, pattern, symbol, and trance. These four types are then divided into two categories of divination: inductive (rational) and mediumistic (non-rational). Tedlock (2006) states that these two categories may shift from inductive to mediumistic within a single divination session. It is important to note that these categories were developed from a Eurocentric perspective, which separates the rational and the irrational. In Africa, combined divination systems are the norm (Peek 1991).

I also explored the literature written on Yoruba divination by William Bascom. William Bascom was an anthropologist who specialized in West African cultures and the African Diaspora, under the tutelage of Melville Herskovits. Bascom’s research has given anthropology a library of material. In his article titled “The Sanctions of Ifa Divination”, Bascom (1941) describes divination sessions with the Yoruba in West Africa, conducted from 1937-38, that are similar to modern Lucumí divination sessions. In the sessions described by Bascom, the client is given a divination verse along with the folklore. Bascom (1943) describes the folklore in detail in

his article “The Relationship of Yoruba Folklore to Divining”. He writes that the folklore of the Yoruba is tied to their divination system.

The Yoruba folktales have a similar purpose as the *patakis* (Lu.folktale) in Lucumí divination. The Yoruba folktale contains the story of an individual who was in the same position as the client, and it ends with a positive or negative outcome. Either way, the client knows that adhering to the diviner’s recommendations will ensure balance in his or her life. The protagonists in the folktale are humans, animals, or orishas (spiritual manifestations of the Yoruba god Ólódumaré) that have been in the same position as the client and were advised how to proceed. Their tale is a lesson for the client because they either proceed as they were advised and have positive outcome, or they choose to ignore the advice and have a negative culmination.

Another published source on the topic of divination was *Osun across the Water* 2001, an edited volume by Joseph M. Murphy and Mei Mei Sanford; it was written about the female orisha, Osun (referred to in this thesis as Ochún), and her travels from Africa to the New World. The section of the book that was noteworthy to my research was a portion regarding Ochún’s importance to divination. She was married to the orisha of divination, Orúnmila. A patakí tells that Orúnmila introduced Ochún to cowrie shell divination prior to leaving her for a short trip. Orúnmila was unable to return for years, and in his absence, Ochún divined for his clients. Upon his return, Orúnmila was pleased to find that his wife had become an accomplished diviner without his assistance. This story suggests that women have the ability to become skillful diviners without male intervention.

Cuban anthropologist Andrés Rodríguez Reyes (2004) writes that divination was utilized by enslaved Africans in Cuba as a means to exert control over their brutal existence in bondage. The Lucumí religion was kept alive by the enslaveds' descendants, but it began to grow in popularity with Cubans of varied races. Life in Cuba during the growth of the Republic was harsh for many Cubans, and they found peace within the Lucumí religion. Reyes (2004) states that there was another reason the people were drawn to the Lucumí religion: he believes that the desire to ward off illness brought many individuals into Lucumí. Divination sessions can reveal an illness long before its symptoms appear. A reading from the *diloggún* (Lu. cowrie shell divination) will reveal whether a person has a disease. For example, if the client receives Ogunda as the primary *odú* (Lu.divination patterns), then it is possible that the client may have kidney issues. The diviner may recommend that the client see a physician and avoid anything that may aggravate the kidneys.

The significance of the literature that I chose to write in my analogies provides a view of the Lucumí religion from its inception in Cuba to its current practice in the United States. My thesis will add important information about the cornerstone ritual practices of the Lucumí faith, divination and propitiation. Together they form the basis for all ceremonies and the choices that practitioners make in their lives.

## CHAPTER 4:HISTORY

The enslaved Yoruba from West Africa who were brought to Cuba created the Lucumí religion. The Lucumí religion has its roots in Yoruba traditions, but it evolved into its own entity. The history of Lucumí begins in Western Africa where the Yoruba people originated.

In Africa, the Yoruba religion was practiced in shrines and temples that contained images and objects related to the deities worshipped at the site. Every temple or shrine was dedicated to a particular orisha, and they were filled with emblematic items for that temple's orisha. The religious objects were more important to the Yoruba than their temples. They believed that the orishas inhabited the ritual objects, so anywhere the priest moved, the objects could be transformed into a temple. These items start out as ordinary items such as cowrie shells, stones, and gourd bowls and are transformed into religious symbolic items by a religious ceremony. The Yoruba also erected shrines in various locations, such as the marketplace, in and around the home, and by rivers (Brandon 1993).

Yoruba religious worship begins in the home. The human hierarchy of orisha worship started with the household priest then spread into many levels at the temple. The temple priests are divided by the number of initiations they have received and their age. The spiritual hierarchy begins with Olodumaré, who created and maintains the universe and is viewed by some as the equivalent of the Christian God. Oldumaré is viewed as distant from the human realm and is not revered in the temples. This deity is believed to be male and has two other manifestations: Olofín and Olorun. Olorun is the owner of the heavens, and Olofín is the owner of the earth. The

orishas fall under Olodumaré in the spiritual hierarchy. They are intermediaries between humans and Olodumaré. The orishas come in two forms: some, such as Obatalá, came on earth at the same time as Olodumaré. Others were once human, such as Changó, and when these humans died, they became orishas whose energies are trapped within stones. Individuals who worship the orishas are considered their children. The orishas worshipped vary from region to region (Brandon 1993).

The *egungun* (Lu. ancestors) come next in the spiritual hierarchy and are the ancestors of the practitioners. The *egungun* are venerated at their own shrines and assist the practitioners in their lives. The ancestors are not worshipped but are given respect and are able to assist in removing harmful elements in their descendants' lives. After the ancestors, the hierarchy is completed by humans, other animals and inanimate objects. Humans are unique in the hierarchy because they are needed to perform the rituals that keep the universe in balance. They are also the caretakers of the living and inanimate entities that reside with them on earth (Brandon 1993).

All of the entities in the spiritual hierarchy contain an element called *ashé*. *Ashé* is a powerful energy that comes from within an individual or object and can be used to make something happen. According to the Yoruba, *ashé* comes from Olodumaré and is distributed throughout the earth (Lele 2000).

The Yoruba lived in city-states in Western Africa from the 14th century until the late 18th century, when the city-states collapsed. The largest was the city-state Oyo. Oyo was powerful enough to keep hostiles and from entering its territory. Oyo remained a vibrant, successful city-state until 1789 when poor leadership was unable to keep the city-state strong

(Ajai and Smith 1964). The loss of strong leaders to keep the area unified allowed the area to become vulnerable to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The Yoruba previously had not been a large part of the Trans Atlantic Slave trade, but by the 1820s, this paradigm would change. By 1840, the Oyo city-state was a shell of its former splendor. The area eventually collapsed into civil war and Oyo's citizens found themselves running to the edge of its borders. The slave trade had also begun to reach into Oyo, and whole towns were destroyed as their citizens were enslaved (Brandon 1993).

The Yoruba had been enslaved in the Americas since the 17th century, but the 19th century saw the largest numbers of enslaved Yoruba enter the Americas (Ramos 2010). Cuba would become one of the recipients for the enslaved Yoruba. Haiti's enslaved persons had revolted, and their revolt, in addition to the subsequent establishment of a black republic, opened up an opportunity for the Cubans to enter the sugar trade. To become a major player in the sugar trade, the Cubans knew they needed slave labor to work the fields, but they did not want to repeat the same mistakes the French had made in Haiti by losing everything to a slave revolt. The Cubans already had the enslaved working the tobacco fields, yet there were also a large number of free blacks residing in Cuba. The free blacks had some social mobility and even formed a militia. The number of enslaved people that would be needed to make Cuba a large scale sugar producer would increase the risk of Cuba falling to the same fate as Haiti, so they decided to install legal and social blocks to restrain the movement of free blacks and the enslaved (Ayorinde 2004).

One of the policies was the *Código Negro Cubano*, which was created in 1842 to curb the activities of free and enslaved blacks. The government sought to keep the two groups separated



to avoid revolts by the black population. There had been small revolts throughout the island, but in 1812, there was a large revolt led by military officers who had fought for Spain against the French in Haiti. One of these military men was José Antonio Aponte, who learned from the military officers how the Haitians were able to overthrow the French government. Aponte and the other military officers conspired to overthrow the Cubans in the same manner. Their plan was discovered by the Cuban government, and all of them were hanged.

Prior to this time, free blacks and enslaved persons had interacted in social clubs. These clubs were organized by ethnicity and enabled them to keep in touch with their homeland (Ayorinde 2004). One of these clubs was the *cabildo de nacion*, which would provide the foundation of modern Lucumí practice.

The *ilés* (Lu. ritual houses) that are found today in Cuba were formed from the *cabildos de nación*. *Ilé* is a term used by the Yoruba to describe their homes in Africa, where the foundation of their religion occurred (Bascom 1942). It stands to reason that the ritual homes in Cuba would be called the same. The *cabildos* also preserved the religious elements found in Yoruba, but they were fused with iconography from the Catholic Church.

The free and enslaved gathered up what they had retained from their own culture and religion then added cultural and religious elements from the Europeans in Cuba. Bettina Schmidt (2006) refers to this as a bricolage. The Lucumí religion has been described as syncretic, but I believe that Schmidt's term bricolage is more appropriate. The term syncretism implies a combining or blending of religious beliefs. The Christian iconography that is present in Lucumí was introduced solely to disguise the Yoruba's surreptitious worship of the orishas under the pretense of

practicing the **tenets** of the Catholic Church. Yoruba priest and author Wande Abimbola (2000) states that Lucumí is not syncretic because the stories of the Bible are not intertwined with the patakís. He points out that only the symbols are utilized, not the theology.

The Catholic Church was aware that the free and enslaved Africans were practicing African religions, but it was a futile mission for the priests to prevent this worship. Most of the priests lived in the cities while the majority of the enslaved inhabited the rural areas. Before sugar became a major product in mid-eighteenth century Cuba, the enslaved had more free time, which allowed the priests to proselytize to them. After the sugar boom, the enslaved only participated in the annual Catholic feast days. This fact made converting the enslaved to Christianity difficult for the priests. The priests were unable to find assistance from the plantation owners, who were more concerned with producing sugar than converting the enslaved to Catholicism (Ayroinde 2004). Catholicism was not promoted and African religions were prohibited.

African orisha worship took place under the guise of Catholicism. Herskovitz (1937) noted that indigenous peoples have been able to blend Catholicism and native religions. The enslaved Yoruba people would take similar measures to keep their religion thriving. The Yoruba orishas were worshiped under the pretext of worshipping Catholic saints (Barnet 2001). Each orisha became associated with a particular saint. Some of the orishas would be linked to saints that represented the same elements as themselves. For example, Changó the orisha of war, thunder and lightning would be associated with Saint Barbara who is invoked against thunder and lightning. Similarly, St. Barbara is also the patron saint of artillerymen. The orishas Yemayá, Ochún, Oya, and Obatalá would be linked to various avatars of the Virgin Mary. Olodumaré

would be equal to God, and Jesus would be linked to Olofin, who is a manifestation of Olodumaré (Brandon 1993).

Lucumí practitioners did not worship the saints; the saints were empty vessels that became a part of early Lucumí iconography. The stones that represent the living orisha are the only objects that are propitiated and revered (Bascom 1950). The Lucumí would continue to grow and worship their orishas in Cuba under the pretext of being good Catholics, even after their cabildos were suppressed (Brandon1993). This practice would change after the Cubans gained their independence from Spain in 1898, and the United States took over as the dominating influence in Cuba.

Cuba would celebrate its independence by embracing its whiteness and trying to distance its people from their African roots. Afro-Cubans represented a third of Cuba's population, and their culture was blending into the European culture of Cuba (Ayorinde 2004). White Cubans were determined to have a country that reflected a European heritage, rather than the African culture that was rapidly becoming part of Cuba. Some of the pressure to remove African culture came from the United States, which wielded considerable influence over Cuba (Brandon 1993). The United States had replaced Spain as the colonial power, and its will was imposed on Cuba. From government leaders to social issues, the United States instructed Cubans on how they were to act.

Free blacks also wanted to de-Africanize Cuba because they were concerned that institutions such as the cabildos made blacks appear uncivilized. Efforts to take down the cabildos would include: prohibition from conducting Christmas parades, requiring them to have

a Catholic saint, and requiring them to have a white patron. If the cabildos did not comply with these rules, they were disbanded, and their property was given to a Catholic church. The cabildos that survived adapted to include individuals of all races. These multi-racial individuals would practice the religion brought over from Yoruba in the cabildo (Ayorinde 2004). All races in Cuba were now worshipping the orishas.

As Cuba entered the 20th century, it was dependent upon the U.S. market and gave the U.S. military the right to maintain order and stability. The Cuban constitution was adapted in 1901 to reflect U.S. influenced laws. One of these laws gave black Cubans citizenship and equal rights. While the United States advocated for equal rights for Cubans of color, they still felt Afro-Cubans were not sophisticated enough to assist in building a prosperous country. Many in the United States and Cuba believed that there were too many people of color in Cuba, and a law enacted in 1902 prohibited non-white immigration. At the same time, white immigration from Spain and the Canary Islands was encouraged between 1902-1929, bringing nearly one million white immigrants from those countries (Ayorinde 2004).

The Afro-Cubans and their religion, Lucumí, were now pushed further into the background of Cuban culture and life, until Cuban Anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1947), who coined the term *transculturation*, began studying and writing about the African culture of Cuba. Ortiz believed that the religions of Afro-Cubans kept them in a backward state that inhibited them from assimilating into modern Cuban society. Ortiz was born in Cuba, but lived in Spain until he returned to Cuba as a young adult. He returned from Spain and spent the remainder of

his life trying to erase the backwardness he saw in Cuban culture (Ortiz 1947). His book *Los Negros Brujos* 1906 referred to Afro-Cuban religion as a form of *brujia* (Sp. witchcraft). Ortiz's 1996 book was focused on the impact of Afro-Cubans' retention of their African traditions on Cuba's modernization. Ortiz argued for laws suppressing the Afro-Cuban religion even more than what was already in place. His actions led to a rigorous campaign against Afro-Cuban religions that associated them with witchcraft, a negative association that remains in place today. This belief was shared among many citizens of Cuba. Cubans wanted their country to be viewed as a progressive and modern country, and they viewed the Lucumí religion of the Afro-Cubans as an obstacle to achieving this goal (Ayorinde 2004).

As Cuba reached the 1950s, its focus was no longer on removing elements of African culture, but on removing the government. The Cuban Revolution, from 1953-1959, would bring sweeping changes to Cuba that would affect all of the religions practiced on the island. After the Revolution lost the Catholic Church's support, the Castro government confiscated Catholic Church property, forbade religious events, and the Church was not allowed to proselytize. At the same time, the youth of Cuba were being taught a new ideology based on the beliefs of the Revolution that were agnostic and atheist. Religion was being pushed into the background in Cuba, and it would affect every religion on the island. (Brandon 1993).

The Revolution would recognize the cultural legacy that Afro-Cuban religion brought to dance and music, but its religious practices were still perceived as backward. However, Cuba would take the culturally rich songs, dances, and folktales of the Yoruba and make them an integral part of the country's culture. This secularization did not sit well with the practitioners of

Afro-Cuban religions. Ayorinde (2006) found in her interviews with practitioners in Cuba that they felt their ritual music and dance had become a spectacle. The government labeled Afro-Cuban culture and religion as a part of Cuba's traditions and history. This designation, unfortunately, led to ritual items being seized and placed in museums. The revolution did not bring freedom of religion to Afro-Cuban practitioners. Instead, it brought a renewed belief that they were not a part of modern life. The Cuban government commoditized the Afro-Cuban religion by displaying their ritual items in museums alongside those of past cultures, and the Lucumí ritual dances were now performed for tourists as a glimpse into Cuba's past. By commoditizing the Lucumí religion, the government could take elements of the religion, such as dance, and present them in a manner that the government felt reflected positively on Cuba.

Eventually the Cuban government would realize that new outlook also applied to Afro-Cuban Religion they could not suppress, and by the 1990s, the government had softened its views.

## CHAPTER 5: DIVINATION

Divination is the act of attempting to uncover the unknown variables in one's life by consulting supernatural forces, so that one may make beneficial life choices. To understand divination, one must view it through an emic perspective. Humans have sought divination since ancient times (Tedlock 2006) to assist them in bringing balance into their lives.

My experience with Lucumí divination has shown that it does not predict but instead provides a glimpse of what is possible in the future. In his book *Living Santería: Rituals, and Experiences in an Afro-Cuban Religion*, anthropologist and Lucumí practitioner Michael Atwood Mason (2002) describes divination as a ritual that assists the querents in finding where they stand in the supernatural and public worlds. If a practitioner is having problems or wishes to keep things going well in his or her life, divination will reveal what is occurring in the practitioner's life and how the orishas may assist on his or her path (Atwood Mason 2002). If divination reveals that tragedy is in the future, the practitioner will be advised by the diviner on what offering to make, and at times, a behavior modification by the querent is required as well. Lucumí author and priest John Mason describes divination as "an indispensable part of day-to-day living" (Mason 1985:77). Divination is the foremost method of determining how practitioners can find balance in their lives by revealing what the orishas desire for them to do to elevate themselves. By using divination, the practitioner may make a preemptive strike against a possible negative future (Mason 1985).

Anthropologist Barbara Tedlock (2006) describes four types of divination: omen, pattern, trance, and symbol. In omen divination, diviners find the answers in reading the natural world,

such as bird flight patterns and lightning strikes. Pattern diviners use rods or pendulums to make a pattern in the air that is then interpreted. Trance diviners communicate with spirits through trance by ingesting hallucinogenic plants and other means that alter the mind and body, allowing the diviner to contact the spirit world. The last form of divination is symbol: this includes tarot, palmistry, and Yoruba divination. Symbol divination systems are based on intricate patterns that describe what is occurring in the client's life for the diviner. Various objects which differ by type, according to place of origin or by what is available in a particular environment, are thrown by the diviner to create the pattern (Tedlock 2006). Lucumí practitioners discussed in this thesis create divination patterns with cowrie shells and coconut meat pieces.

Anthropologist Philip Peek (1991) wrote that diviners are portrayed by Europeans as unscrupulous individuals who utilize divination as a means to intimidate their clients into doing whatever the diviner wishes them to do. Peek (1991) states that he has not uncovered con artists among the diviners that he has studied in Africa. On the contrary, he has found men and women who possess an abundance of wisdom and morals. Peek (1991) attributes the European and American negative views of divination to their belief that it is an insignificant part of an individual's life, which is why there is a lack of academic publications on divination. Peek (1991) blames anthropology's apathetic view of divination on 19th century positivism, which sought to explore parts of culture that can be scientifically proven and ignored the parts of culture that were considered unscientific, such as divination. Peek (1991) states that scholars view divination as a game of chance and states that other anthropologists, such as Bronislaw Malinowski, fail to mention divination at all in their research publications. There are only a handful of scholars that mention divination as an important part of culture; two of such scholars include Durkheim and



Mauss, who stated that divination was a part of the whole culture and needed to be studied as a separate system (Peek 1991).

E.E. Evans-Pritchard, who conducted research on African divination systems, was critical of the lack of anthropological perspective on religion as a whole (Peek 1991). Evans-Pritchard suggested that religion must be studied as a system on its own and that the ethnographer's religious background may corrupt his or her research regarding religious beliefs (Peek 1991). He was critical of early anthropologists' writings on religion, and in his book, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Evans-Pritchard (1965) writes that we need to be cautious writing about religions that we cannot see through native eyes, language, or ideas. He states that, separated from the belief and practice, the meaning is lost in the language, but not the cultural context in which the connotations of language are found (Evans-Pritchard 1965). At the time of Evans Pritchard's 1965 publication, anthropologists had been basing their research on second hand reports from missionaries who may have understood the language, but not the cultural context in which the connotations of language are found.

Philip Peek (1991) believes that the British, who have studied African religions in depth, have not considered traditional African belief systems to be legitimate religious systems of knowledge in Africa. He writes that a number of British anthropologists have studied religion in Africa, but only to determine how it relates to social construction. Witchcraft, in particular, was observed to be an important part of social life. There are volumes of publications on African religion related to witchcraft, and very few related to areas such as divination. Peek (1991) finds it interesting that divination would only have a brief mention within the study of witchcraft, since

it is the sole means of detecting witchcraft. He mentions that the majority of the studies point out that problems were resolved with divination, but do not elaborate on what form was used and how the divination session ended (Peek1991).

I have noticed this same trend when reviewing literature related to the Lucumí religion; the lack of detail omits important information regarding the culture that is being studied. Issues that the client has prior to the divination reading and how the client solves the issues are important questions that reveal to an outsider how the culture resolves issues.

Evans-Pritchard (1965) wrote that atheist or agnostic anthropologists have used primitive religions to discredit Christianity. If primitive religions can be discredited as an uneducated fantasy world, then Christianity can be dismissed as well, since some anthropologists view religious faith as irrational (Evans-Pritchard 1965).

Is it our inability to believe in the irrational that has created a schism in the anthropological study of religion? How do we determine what is rational or irrational? Archaeoastronomer Anthony Aveni (2002) writes in his book, *Behind the Crystal Ball*, that magic is around us on a daily basis, but we refuse to allow ourselves to believe in the irrational.

Superstitious rituals, charms, and fetishes are a part of irrational human behavior called magic. Humans have believed in and have been practicing magic for centuries. Horseshoes have been used as a lucky charm since the Greeks invented them over two thousand years ago. The Greeks revered horses, so it was natural that their horseshoes would become a symbol of good luck, especially since they were made with seven “lucky” nail holes (Aveni 2002). Aveni (2002)

confronts the question of how humans determine what is rational. He writes that common sense, and a culturally shared belief, determines what is rational within a particular culture.

Anthropologist Stephen D. Glazier (1997) believes that religion should be at the center of any study in anthropology. Religion is the foundation upon which most cultures are built. The holidays that are celebrated, veneration of the dead, and the rites of passage for children and adults are almost all based on a religious belief. Yet, Glazier (1997) writes that most anthropology programs do not place emphasis on the importance of religion. There are anthropologists who have sought to understand the place religion holds in culture. Anthropologists, such as Barbara Tedlock and Philip Peek, are approaching religion, and in particular divination, as an important part of culture to be valued and not discarded just because it is viewed as inconsequential by others. In the Lucumí religion, divination is essential to the practitioner's life, as it informs the practitioner of how he or she may elevate and improve his or her own life. If one disregards divination when studying the Lucumí religion, then one will not fully understand the Lucumí religion.

In Lucumí, practitioners will be exposed to divination upon meeting the Lucumí priest. Divination will be used to determine if individuals can enter the *ilé*. If allowed to enter, the practitioners will receive divination every three to six months. This process is done to facilitate evolution in their life and to determine if they are in *iré* (Lu. blessing) or *osogbo* (Lu. misfortune). The diviner will determine through divination what *ebó* needs to be done to placate the orishas and encourage evolution in the querent's life. Even if the client comes in an *iré*, *ebó* will still need to be made to keep the client from slipping into *osogbo*. Once the practitioner

enters the ilé and receives the first initiation and becomes an aborisha, he or she will be able to divine using Obí divination.

The three types of divination used in Lucumí are: *Ópélé*, *Diloggún*, and *Obí* (Mason 1985). The *Diloggún* and *Obí* are widely used by all practitioners. However, only Lucumí priests called, *Babalawos*, may use the *Ópélé* divining chain. The *Ópélé* chain is thrown and lands in a pattern that is interpreted. *Babalawos* are males who perform sacred ceremonies and are the heads of an ilé, which is commonly referred to as an Ifá house (Mason 1985). My research was limited to ilés that practice the *Diloggún* and *Obí*. My thesis focuses on these two types of divination.

Their sacred ceremonies are performed by *oriatés*. *Oriatés* are extensively trained in the *Diloggún* and the *patakís* (Lu. sacred stories), which are an important part of the *Diloggún*. Every priest or priestess divines with 12 of the 16 cowries shell patterns that make up the *Diloggún*. Only *Oriatés* are allowed to divine with all 16 cowrie shells in the *Diloggún* (Lele 2011). *Obí* divination is used by all practitioners and is the most widely used divination system (Lele 2003).

Lucumí divination is attributed to the orisha *Orúnmílá*, but it is thought that *Diloggún* divination in particular may be associated with the orisha *Ochún*. *Ochún* is commonly referred to as the orisha of love and happiness, but she is more than just a pretty face. Her name means “source” and is an adaptation of the word *orísún*, which means the source of a river, children, love, happiness, and hope. She is also the owner of the divination system, the *Diloggún*, and the

17th

*Odú* (Lu. divination patterns). *Odú* are divination patterns with proverbs that stem from ancient Yoruba wisdom and are a creation of Oldúmaré (Murphy and Sanford 2001). The *odú* are the foundation of Lucumí divination and philosophy and are the basis of all laws (Mason 1985).

*Odú* is the point where humanity and the divine intersect. Each intersection is unique and its points capture time from the past, present, and future. An orisha, nature, humans, and their stories govern every *odú* intersection. The 16 primary *odú* of the *Diloggún* are considered to be the parents of the 240 secondary *odú* (Lele 2003).

### Obí

Out of the three divination systems, *Obí* is utilized the most for the reason that any initiate may utilize it, regardless of gender or religious status (Ramos 2012). *Obí* is often portrayed as simplistic and irrelevant because the “yes” and “no” answers are not as complex as received in other forms of Lucumí divination. In *Obí* divination, the answers of yes and no are more complex than they appear on the surface. *Obí*’s reputation for being a simple system stems from how it is performed. Unlike the *Diloggún*, *Obí* does not require the querent to open or close the session with elaborate rituals; *ebós* given are simple and inexpensive, and it provides a quick answer to whatever problems the querent is having (Ramos 2012: 2). These factors, along with its ability to be used by all levels of those practicing the Lucumí faith, makes it the most utilized form of divination in the Lucumí religion.

*Obí* was originally performed with kola nuts and was the oldest and the most utilized system by the Yoruba (Mason 1985). *Obí* is the Yoruba name for kola nut, and the name was kept, even

after kola nuts were no longer utilized in the Americas (Ramos 2012). There is a patakí that tells of the origins of Obí divination:

The patakí that tells of how Obí divination was given to the world begins in the odú Obara Osá... Obí was born a mortal man whose faith, charity, and purity impressed Olófin. Olófin decided to bestow Obí with the gift of becoming an orisha. Obí lived for centuries in the same pure existence, until the continual praise from mortals and orishas went to his head. Obí began to believe that no one could compare to him, and his conceit grew every day. Obí's behavior was oblivious to everyone, except Elegguá. Elegguá, the orisha who knows all, saw the change in Obí and tried to inform Olófin. Olófin could not see the darkness that was growing in Obí, until he saw it himself at a party he threw at his home for all of the orishas. Obí arrived at the party in a new crisp white robe. There was no orisha at the party who could compare to Obí's elegance, not Yemayá in her ocean finery, or Oshún in her honey gold dress, and not even Shangó in his royal red clothes, Obí stood out and he knew it.

A group of vagabonds came to the door of the party asking for money, Obí who was near the door chastised them for daring to come close to a palace where orishas were gathering. Obí told the vagabonds they were animals that belong in the forest, not near supreme beings such as orishas. Olófin heard the exchange and was shocked, and he now realized that Elegguá had been correct in his assessment of Obí.

The next day Obí decided to throw a party that would make Olófin's seem like a backyard barbeque. Obí's finery for his own party was even more spectacular than what he wore to Olófin's party. Obí had only the best food, drink, and music at his party. The only thing Obí did not want to have were vagrants at his door begging, so he sent word out that beggars are not allowed. The orishas began arriving for Obí's party; almost all of them had arrived when an extremely dirty beggar arrived at the door. Obí was furious at the mess the beggar left on the entryway, and screamed insults at him and told the beggar to leave immediately. Obí slammed the door on the beggars face, and turned around to find a shocked Elegguá staring at him. Elegguá asked Obí why he would treat their father with disrespect. However, before Obí could respond to Elegguá's claim, there was another knock at the door. Upon opening the door, Obí and all the other orishas watched as the beggar began to change into Olófin. Olófin let his ashé (energy) fill the room with a bright, white light. Obí fell to his knees and started to beg for forgiveness from Olófin. Olófin told Obí to quiet, and then he told him that he was a shell of the beautiful soul that he used to be and had squandered the life that he had been given. Olófin then told Obí that he was taking his power of speech away from him, and the only way in which Obí would be able to talk

was to throw himself at Olófin's feet. Olófin also replaced Obí's beautiful exterior with a hard, rough shell, and his bitter, cold inner self became warm and bright. Olófin informed Obí that no matter who comes to question him, he is required to answer after them, with humbleness. Obí, the human turned orisha, made another transition this by Olófin who turned Obí into a kola nut. Kola nuts are the fruit of Kola trees that are found in Africa. They have a hard outer layer, and a creamy white inside. Olófin informs Obí that he was transformed into the kola nut that has its physical beauty hid underneath a hard shell. Obí was given to the orisha Obatalá to serve under him to speak and work for the orishas. Obatalá took the inside of a kola nut and broke it into 5 pieces. These five pieces became the patterns that make up the oracle of Obí. [Lele 2001: 11-17]

Obí is based on a Yoruba divination system that survived the Middle Passage and underwent transitions in order to survive in the New World. Coconut is the most popular substitute in Cuba and the United States and became the primary source used to divine Obí. The enslaved from Yorubaland were determined to keep their traditions alive in the diaspora (Ramos 2012). Since the kola nut is not indigenous to the Americas, the enslaved Yoruba were forced to find a substitute. They adapted the coconut and other materials to the Obí system, which caused some changes to the Obí divination system. In the original system, the kola nut was divided by gender, based on the male and female physical attributes of the kola nut. The odús that fall when casting the kola nuts had male and female interpretations, depending on which side was up when the nut fell. These odús would undergo new interpretations in the Americas. The coconut does not have distinguishing physical characteristic that can be viewed as male or female (Mason 1985). Coconut is not the only substitute for kola nuts. Cowrie shells, which were also utilized in Yorubaland, hard Cuban bread, shells and coins have all been utilized in Obí divination throughout the New World. It is now a tradition in the United States to use the coconut, even though kola nuts are readily available. Coconuts continue to be used in remembrance of the adversity that enslaved Yoruba faced and those in Cuba who have faced harsh conditions, in the

past and present. Lucumí author Miguel Ramos writes that consumption of coconut became a taboo in various ilés (Ramos 2012:64). It was considered by some to be disrespectful to the oracle to ingest coconut. There is an indication that kola nuts were also prohibited from consumption in certain cases. This restriction is attributed to a prior prohibition of the kola nut in Yorubaland (Ramos 2012). Ramos states that the patakí of *Ejiogbé Osá* mentions a prohibition of coconut consumption (Ramos 2012:69):

In this patakí, Edún (the Yoruba term for monkey) was informed after receiving a divination reading to abstain from eating coconut, and he was also prescribed an ebó. His ebó was to offer a coconut, a box, nine copper bracelets, and a rope and leave it in front of his house by the door. At the same time Olofin declared that he needed 101 heads for an ebó, and he promised a large amount of money to whomever would bring him the heads. Agbo (ram) a ruthless, sly being went to Olofin with a deal. He promised the head of Edún in place of the 101 heads. Edún's head was worth more than 101 heads, so Olofin agreed to the bargain. Agbo went to Edún's home with a coconut. The coconut is Edún's favorite food. When Agbo reached Edún's home he knocked at the door, but Edún informed him that he was prohibited to open the door after dusk. Agbo tried to pursue him by telling him he had a fresh coconut for him, and if he opened the door just enough Agbo could pass the coconut to him. Edún knew he was prohibited from eating coconut, but he could not resist the temptation of a fresh delicious coconut. Edún opens the door with just enough space to reach the coconut, but it was also enough space for Agbo to grab Edún. Agbo placed Edún inside the box that had been left as an Ebó at the front door. As Agbo is walking off with Edún, Oyá sends her messenger, Afefé. Afefé is the breeze, and he swirled around Agbo knocking him to the ground. Elegguá swoops in and grabs Edún from the box, leaving the nine copper bracelets (which were left as an ebó to Oyá, and the coconut was for Elegguá). Agbo picks up the box and continues on his journey to Olofin palace, not knowing that Elegguá had removed Edún. Upon reaching Olofin's palace Agbo throws the box on the floor and demands payment from Olofin. Olofin then opens the box and becomes angry when he realizes that Edún was not in the box. He calls Agbo a liar and a thief. Olofin's displeasure was so severe that he cursed Agbo to be the food of Shangó, Yemayá and the Egún. To this day, prior to sacrificing a ram (which is what Agbo was) a chant is performed calling the ram a liar and a cheat.[Ramos 2012: 68-70]

The above patakí of Osá may be connected to a Yoruba patakí that discusses kola nut prohibition. This patakí tells of a pair of friends: a ram and a monkey. The patakí is similar to the



Lucumí patakí Osá, but kola nuts are substituted for coconuts. In the Yoruba patakí the ram betrays his friend the monkey and ends up becoming a sacrifice for the dead, which is similar to the Lucumí version. While the monkey was forbidden to eat kola nuts in the Yoruba patakí, there is no evidence humans were prohibited from eating them (Ramos 2012: 74).



Figure 1: Coconut prepared for divination. Source: About Santeria. Santeria Church of the Orishas.

## Obí Divination Using Coconuts

When Obí was used in Yorubaland, there were nine possible odús as an outcome, and the odús had gendered attributes. Kola nuts were identified as male and female by the appearance of “sexual organs” on the kola nut. The nib would be identified as male, and a kola nut with a cavity would be the female (Mason1985).

Original Obí Odú:

Akita- two male and two female up = triumph over adversity

Obita- two female and one male = live at peace no obstacles  
Éjire- one male and one female up = friendship

Ero- two female up = tranquil

Akooran- two male up = adversity, arguments

Ilera- one male up = healthy

Aje- one female up = negative issues

Idiwo- all of the dark sides up = a hindrance

John Mason (1985) lists eight odús, but he mentions that there were originally nine odús. It is difficult to determine exactly what the original odús were because there is a deficiency of information; some details were lost during the Middle Passage (Mason 1985). However, one can examine other geographical areas where the enslaved Yoruba were taken to observe the

divination techniques practiced there as a way of searching for the missing pieces. One can observe Obí divination practice in other countries as a means of trying to put the missing pieces back together. Brazil had the largest number of enslaved Africans and has maintained a larger number of cultural retentions from Africa. Kola nuts species are readily available in Brazil, making it an ideal location to study Obí in the New World. There was continuous contact between Brazil and the African continent due to the constant arrival of newly enslaved Africans. This fact, coupled with the continued use of kola nuts, provides a good idea of what Obí might have looked like two hundred years ago (Ramos 2012). The enslaved from Brazil and Cuba both originated from the same location in Yorubaland. When studying the cultural retention of the transformed Yoruba religion, it makes sense to study both areas in order to have a comprehensive perspective.

In Brazil, the Yoruba religion would become known as Candomble, which like Lucumí, incorporates Catholicism and Yoruba traditions. While kola nuts are available in Brazil, other items are also used for divination purposes. Apples and onions have been used for Obí, but it is unknown whether this use is due to an inability to acquire kola nuts or because of supply or price (Ramos 2012). The odús found in Brazil share similarities to the odús in the Lucumí system; this similarity may be because the enslaved people in the area of Brazil, where Candomblé is practiced, and the enslaved Cubans could have originated from the same area in Africa (Ramos 2012).

In Cuba, the coconut is the main object used in Obí divination. The odús found in its system can vary from five patterns to 20, depending upon who is divining. Oba Oriaté Miguel

Ramos (2012) wrote in his book on Obí divination that there are seven to ten possible positions. Lucumí author Ochani Lele writes in his book on Obí divination that there are five to 20 different odús possible (Lele 2001:55). Even though the answers of the oracle Obí are “yes” and “no,” the responses from the oracle are not simply “yes” or “no.” As noted above, there are five to 20 answers possible. The variance of odús is based on the traditions of the ilé from which the priests originate.

The coconut must be prepared before casting it for divination, and the diviner must be prepared as well. Both Lele (2001) and Ramos (2012) mention that diviners must be clean prior to divining. If they have engaged in sexual activity prior to divining Obí, they must shower before approaching the oracle (Lele 2001; Ramos 2012). After making sure they are spiritually and physically clean, diviners need to prepare the coconut. Both Lele (2001) and Ramos (2012) make it clear that Obí is an orisha that must be respected during the divination process. However, his disregard for humanity condemned him to eternity as an oracle for humans. Obí now only speaks in divination, and the orishas speak to humans through him.

It is important for practitioners to regard the coconut as a sacred oracle when they are using it for divination. When opening the coconut with a hammer or stone, the coconut must not be placed on the floor during this process; it is considered offensive to the oracle to smash it against the ground. The oracle must be placed on a flat surface that can withstand the impact of opening a coconut (Ramos 2012). Not only is it offensive to open Obí on the ground, but also, opening Obí on soil or carpet can cause the coconut’s white sides to face downward. This result will cause the oracle to have a higher number of the odú Okana (Ramos 2012). Okana is a strong

“NO,” to the question that is asked. This odú asks the diviner to not proceed, and if the individual chooses to continue the course of action, there will be severe consequences (Ramos 2012). Before striking the coconut, the diviner asks permission, a process which is referred to as *Agó* (Lu. with your permission) *Obí*. After cracking open the coconut, the diviner separates the coconut with a butter knife, which can be difficult to maneuver (Ramos 2012). I know from personal experience that using a sharp knife to remove the meat from the shell will cause injury to your hands. A butter knife is the safest choice. The pieces of coconut meat used for divination must be large and firm, so they will not crack when they are thrown. The pieces are then placed on a white plate with a *jicara* (Sp. the shell of a halved coconut).

A prayer is spoken prior to divination in order to open the oracle; it is called the *Mojuba* prayer. It is offered to the path of the orisha Elegguá to Eshú Laroye. Cool water is sprinkled on the Elegguá to cool him and to open communication to the orishas through Elegguá:

Omi tutu, ona tutu, ache tutu, tutu ilé, tutu Laroye, tutu arikú babawa. Fresh water, freshen my road, freshen my energy, freshen my home, freshen Elegguá,  
`Freshness that has no end, freshness so that we do not see an early death. [Lele 200:40]

The *Mojuba* prayer is taught to the practitioners by the priest or priestess that leads the ilé, and the prayer varies by ilé. The term *Mojuba* is a combination of two Yoruba words: *emi* (I) and *ajuba* (salute) (Ramos 2012).

The basic *Mojuba* in any ilé will start with praising the deity Olodumaré in its three forms. Olofin, who is the deity or Supreme Being on the earth; Olorún, who is the deity or Supreme Being closest to humans who also rules the sky, and Olodumaré, who is described by Ramos as being the most “remote and magnificent of the Supreme Being” (Ramos 2012). Olofin is God on

our earthly plane and also owns the palace that is often talked about in Lucumí patakís. Olorún inhabits the sunny daylight sky (Lele 2001). Olodumaré is an immeasurable entity, too powerful for the human eye to set eyes on (Ramos 2012). After honoring the three aspects of Olodumaré, the next section of prayers pays respects to the ancestors. The first ancestors to be venerated are the sacred ancestors of the Yoruba religion. After honoring Olodumaré and the ancestors, the diviner is ready to begin.

The first throw of the coconut will reveal to the diviner one of five odús that answer the querent's question. The pattern that is formed by the coconut pieces will indicate if the querent is in *osogbo* or *iré*. If the diviner determines that a second cast of the oracle is needed, then the odú is expanded to include up to 20 different possible answers (Lele 2001:55).

The five primary odú are Alafia, Etawá, Eyeifé, Okana, and Oyekun (Lele 2001: 55). I will use Alafia as an example to demonstrate the differences and similarities in one odú of Obí.

Alafia: Yes, four white pieces, blessings

Mason (1985) describes this odú as a peaceful calmness that is only for the young and old. This odú falls under the influence of Obatalá, who is often depicted as a wise elderly man. Obatalá reigns over respect, stability, and quiet. Obatalá is informing the querent to proceed, but with a caution to use common sense. Mason (1985) suggests that when Alafia falls, a second throw is needed to close the oracle. He states that Obatalá needs the support of others to reinforce his answer. Mason (1985) writes that he understands that Lucumí practitioners will stop with one throw, but he feels that a second throw is needed (Mason1985: 86). Ochani Lele (2001) believes that when the oracle is submitting to Obatalá, Shangó, Yemayá, or Ochún, a second throw is not

required. Lele also states that the iré will vanish if the client does not heed the quiet, methodical approach that Obatalá is encouraging (Lele 2001). Oriaté Miguel Ramos (2012) describes Alafia as an odú of peace that will bring tranquility to an anxious person. It removes chaos and brings life back into balance with help from Obatalá and Yemayá, who the Yoruba consider to be the ancient parents of the human race (Ramos 2012). Blessings rain upon the receiver of this odú, but as Mason (1985) mentions, above more consideration must be given to the request of the oracle to proceed with caution. The querent needs to rely on the influence of *orí* (Lu. inner guardian orisha who rules the **individuals'** destinies and guides them) when receiving Alafia (Ramos 2012).

Adherents of the Lucumí religion believe that every person on Earth has a guardian orisha who guides us through our time here on earth. Through a divination ritual called a *bajada*, one discovers his or her guardian orisha. Afterward, the practitioner can prepare for an initiation called the **asiento**. In this ceremony, the practitioner's head is shaved, and the guardian orisha is received through the top of the head in an elaborate ceremony. Until this ceremony is completed, Obatalá, who is the owner of all heads, rules the practitioner's head. Following one's Orí will lead to personal elevation. If someone chooses to disregard the advice of Orí, then he or she will make illogical choices (Ramos 2012). I interpret Orí as a combination of intuition and clear thinking; disregarding it is akin to allowing one's emotion to overcome rational thinking.

## Diloggún

The next system of divination that is widely utilized is the Diloggún; it is also referred to as *Owo Merindinlogun* or sixteen cowrie shells (Bascom 1980). The Diloggún is the divination system that is the most familiar to practitioners and anthropologists. It is similar to the Yoruba Ifa divination system, in that it has 16 basic casts and 256 derivative casts (Bascom 1969). The Diloggún system works with the Obí divination system and incorporates proverbs and patakís.

The patakís are oral stories that have been passed down for generations and were brought to the Americas by the enslaved Yoruba. The patakís relate the history of the Yoruba people from their creation and are told during a Diloggún reading. Each patakí tells the story of a person, animal, or orisha that was in the same situation as the querent, and the choices of those in the story provide either a lesson of what not to do or what to do in order to achieve balance in his or her life. During field research conducted from 1937-38 in West Africa, William Bascom, studied divination among the Yoruba. He found that the Yoruba separated the tales into two types: those that contain an animal in the story, or those that contain an orisha or well-known individuals. Stories that had animals were told for entertainment. However, the stories that had orishas or well-known individuals in them were told as a part of history and were used to settle disputes, or to make a point in an argument over ritual or politics. Diviners utilized all types of folktales in divination sessions (Bascom 1943). In the course of my research, I have not noticed a separation of the patakís in the United States. That fact may be due to the availability of other forms of entertainment and storytelling not being viewed as important, outside of divination



sessions as it was in the past. The patakís that are told in the Lucumí tradition have been adapted from the original Yoruba folktales to reflect life in the Americas.

The Diloggún has 16 primary odú and 256 secondary odú. Each odú is comprised of proverbs, a patakí and ebós (Lele 2010). Unlike the Obí oracle that can be cast by all practitioners, only Lucumí priests can cast the Diloggún, and they only cast up to the first 12 odú. Oriatés are the only diviners who utilize all 16 primary odú. They are Lucumí priests who have undertaken extensive study on the meanings of the odú. Oriatés spend years studying under another oriaté to learn the odú of the Diloggún and the ceremonies in which they are used (Lele 2010). The odú of the Diloggún divination is determined by the pattern in which the cowrie shells fall when they are cast.

The shells are naturally round on one side with a jagged mouth on the other side. A Lucumí priest removes the rounded top, then files down the shell so that both sides are flat. This modification ensures that one side is not more apt to fall than the other. Lucumí practitioners believe that the cowrie shell contains the essences of an orisha, which enables the diviner to communicate with the orisha (Lele 2010).



Figure 2: Cowrie shells prepared for divination. Source About Santeria. Santeria Church of the Orishas.

Before opening the Diloggún oracle, the diviner prepares the room for the client. Traditionally, the diviner will sit on a mat, while the client sits on a small stool facing the diviner. The tools that the diviner utilizes to divine with the Diloggún are: a jícara (Sp. halved coconut shell), a candle and the *íbo*. The *íbo* consists of white chalk, a black stone, and two cowrie shells that have been fixed together. These are the basic elements needed for a diviner; however, depending on the traditions of the diviner's *ile* there may be additional items used (Lele 2003).

When the diviner is ready to open the oracle, he asks the client for his or her full name (for married individuals, their birth name and their married surname are used), then the diviner writes the client's name down and will use it during the opening prayer. The *derecho*, a fee paid for ritual services, is paid at this time. The cost of the reading varies by diviner and normally is not over fifty dollars. After receiving the *derecho*, the oracle is ready to be opened. The diviner makes a circle and divides it into four parts using white chalk on a mat. Similar to Obí divination, the prayer to Eshú Laroye is recited as the diviner scatters water from the jícara. Elegguá governs communication, and this simple act of praying by

scattering water is believed to freshen and cool the diviner and client as well as Elegguá himself. This step is done to clear all obstacles and to open communication with the orishas (Lele 2003).

The Mojuba prayer is recited as the diviner rubs the cowrie shells on the mat in a circular motion. Prayers to the ancestors and protection prayers to members of the ilé are recited. Prayers to the main five orishas, Elegguá, Obatalá, Oshún, Yemayá and Changó, are then recited according to the diviners' Orí. Elegguá is always given praise first because he opens the door for communication to the orishas. The prayers are directed to the orishas in the order listed above, except that the diviner's Orí will be at the end. For example, a priest of Yemayá would pray to Elegguá, Obatalá, Oshun, Shango, and then Yemayá. The only exception is that a priest of Elegguá would pray to Elegguá first and last. After calling on the orishas to assist the client and diviner to achieve a beneficial divination session, the diviner is ready to throw the cowrie shells (Lele 2003). The first throw is the primary odú, and the ensuing throw is the secondary odú. For example, if a client receives a seven on the first throw and a four on the second throw, his or her primary odú is Odí, and his or her secondary odú would be Irosun. The primary odú gives basic information of where his or her life is at this time; the second throw narrows it down. At this time, the diviner will inform the client what the orishas have to say about his or her life and what must be done to keep balance in his or her life (Lele 2003).



Figure 3: Cowrie shells and jicara during divination session. Source About Santeria. Santeria Church of the Orishas.

During Bascom's research with the Yoruba in Nigeria (1941), he found that they believe that divination was given to them by the orishas. The orishas control how the cowrie shell patterns land, and therefore, the *odú* given to the client is assigned by the orishas and is not under the control of the diviner. Bascom found that the Yoruba have belief in the verity of the diviner because there is no way for the diviner to control the results. Bascom (1941) also found that the diviner might not be able to answer a question given to him by the client if the *odú* does not reveal the answer (Bascom 1941).

The five main orishas speak for the first time at the diviner's *itá* initiation ceremony. This ceremony takes place during the *asiento* ritual, which marks the individual's transition to priesthood. An *asiento* is a contract between the practitioner and the orisha who governs his or her *orí*. During the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, contracts for the purchase of slaves made between Spain and other countries were called *asientos* (Landers 2008). *Asiento* translated into English is

seat or seated. However, the practitioner is seated during the itá ceremony, so the use of the word may refer to being seated.

In the itá ceremony, the orishas will speak through the diloggún and the *iyawó* (Lu. initiate) receives a reading that will last until death. The reading contains the odús, *ewes* (Lu. taboos), *patakís*, and *ebós* that if maintained, will keep the person in balance. The itá ceremony also determines the path of his or her orishas, the second parent orisha that governs the *iyawó* (the first was marked a separate ceremony), and the *iyawó*'s sacred name. The *iyawó*'s destiny will also be marked at this time. The *iyawó*'s past, present, and future are revealed and what needs to be done to insure the *iyawó* follows his or her destiny (Brown 2003). The cowrie shells used in the itá are given to the *iyawó*, who will use them to divine. This ritual is the most important divination ceremony that a practitioner will have. Prior to this ceremony, another ceremony was performed called the *bajada*.

The *bajada* is the ceremony that determines the orisha who governs the practitioner's *orí*. *Orí* is the force that determines a practitioner's destiny and is governed by an orisha. In her book, *The Altar of My Soul*, Marta Vega (2000) reflects on a conversation she had with her *madrina* (Sp. another name given to a priestess who leads an *ilé*). Vega's *madrina* tells her that throughout the world are millions of initiates who have the sacred *aché* (Lu. energy) of the orishas. Vega surmises that if everyone has *orí*, then everyone will also have an orisha as a guiding force. Her *madrina* explains that everyone does have *orí* and with that a destiny that has been placed under the guide of an orisha (Vega 2000:169). The *bajada* ceremony is conducted by an *oriaté* (Lu. spiritual leader of ceremonies), who employs the diloggún and *obí* divination systems to

ascertain who is an individual's orí. The bajada begins with the oriaté using obi divination to determine if everything is clear, and the ceremony may proceed if the answer is yes; then, the oriaté will proceed. In the case of a negative response, the oriaté has procedures that are undertaken to achieve the positive response. After the all clear is given, the oriaté begins with the diloggún divination, whose odú (lu. supernatural intersection) will govern the practitioner until they take the final step and transition to priesthood. It is not as restrictive as the itá, but it does give practitioners guidance on how they may keep balance in their life. The odú will also give the diviner an idea of who is the guardian angel of the practitioner. From here, the diviner will provide the oracle with the names of the orishas, until the oracle affirms that the orisha's name asked is the practitioner's orí.

### Summary

Divination is utilized by Lucumí practitioners to determine how to lead a balanced life and is the key element in all ceremonies. Obí divination is utilized by more practitioners because those who have not completed their transition into the priesthood can use it. It is thought by many to be a simplistic system, but that is not the case. Obi divination is a complex system that can bring clarity and balance into a practitioner's life, as long as he or she follows the dictates of the oracle. The diloggún system is used in important Lucumí rituals and is an asset to practitioners as they strive to maintain balance in their life. Divination is used in all aspects of a practitioner's life, making it the center of Lucumí religion.

## CHAPTER 6: PROPITIATION

Propitiation is the act of giving an offering to a deity or spirit in all religions. In the Lucumí religion, offerings are called ebó and are given to orishas, who are spiritual intermediaries of the Yoruba god Oldumaré, that live inside of stones.

The first thing I noticed on my initial visit to the home of a Lucumí priest was the offerings that were left next to the orisha tureens. I observed jewelry, cooked food, candy, antlers, and fresh produce. The ceramic tureens contain the essence of an orisha, and offerings are placed next to them. These tureens are the most notable objects in Lucumí iconography. The tureens are given to practitioners when they make the decision to become a priest or priestess.

Lucumí ceremonies will often have a large altar dedicated to an orisha. These altars are called thrones and are elaborately decorated with items that represent the orisha. David Brown (2003) names three throne ceremonies within the Lucumí religion: *Asiento*, *Cumpleanos*, and *Tambor*. All three thrones are draped in fine cloth and have a canopy with tied curtains in the front. Every orisha will have a throne with these basic decorations, except for the three warrior orishas: Elegguá, Ochosi and Ogún. The warriors' thrones are made from native tree branches instead of cloth. These elaborate altars are called thrones because they reference the crowning of an initiate into the Lucumí faith. When an iyawó takes the step of receiving her or his orí, a throne is created to house the iyawó for the weeklong events that take place during asiento.

During this time, the iyawó will be crowned with her or his guardian orisha, in a ceremony that formally unites the practitioner with her or his orí (Brown 2003). In this ceremony, the

ceramic tureens that contain the main orishas in the Lucumí religion will be consecrated, and the orishas will be born into them. The main orishas born are Shangó, Ochún,

Yemayá, Obatalá, Oyá, and Eleggúa; this list may vary depending on the ilé they are born into. *Ocha* houses are religious lineages that can trace their ancestry back to a house in Cuba that was the first Ocha house in their lineage. The iyawó is placed within the altar for six days, where he or she will sleep and eat next to the orishas.

The altar is decorated with a mixture of Afro-Cuban and Yoruba iconography. It is an example of New World bricolage that resulted in the Lucumí religion's traditions. Lucumí religious displays are representative of three sources: the cabildo de nacion, the material culture of Cuban society, and Catholic iconography (Brown 2003).

All of the orishas, other than the warriors, are kept in ceramic tureens. These tureens are selected for each orisha based on their decorations that link them to a particular orisha. Although there are some individuals who create orisha tureens, most of them are parts of ordinary dinnerware sets. Ceramic soup tureens were popular among the upper class in Europe in the 18th century. By the 19th century, these tureens, called *souperas*, were being imported to Cuba. They became a fixture of the upper class Cuban society and were associated with social status. By the late 19th century, the *souperas* along with other china pieces were kept in elaborately decorated china cabinets (Brown 2003). At this time, the orishas began "living" in *soupera* tureens within wooden china cabinets called *canastilleros*. How many practitioners had cabinets full of *souperas* is an unanswered question. Lower cost reproduction became available in the late 1800s. Lighter skinned, wealthier practitioners may have assisted priests in obtaining items as an ebó to



the orishas. There were ocha houses that had the means to purchase items, but most of them did not. Even today elaborate, costly altar items are not available to most Cubans. David Brown (2003) writes that a priestess in an impoverished neighborhood in Cuba placed plastic ducks on her altar for the Orisha Yemayá, who represents the waters on earth and their creatures.

The souperas were chosen as a vessel for the orishas' sacred stones, a continuation of the Yoruba practice of placing the stones in covered pots. Not all of the orishas live in souperas. Some, like the warriors, live in open clay or iron pots, and for the water orishas, such as Olokun, a container that has been sealed to hold water is needed (Brown 2003).

African items were integrated into Lucumí altars in the 19th century. An influx of Canary Islanders who immigrated to Cuba began importing West African items to sell to Lucumí practitioners. These items included cowrie shells, African grey parrots, animal horns, and calabash gourds (Brown 2003). Brown (2003) surmises that since these goods were being shipped along the Middle Passage that Lucumí items and slaves were on the same ship to Havana.

Today in the United States, Lucumí altars are decorated with ceramic tureens, some of which are being produced by Lucumí practitioners and are decorated with orisha iconography. Offerings are left for the orishas next to the soupera and are specific to each orisha.

Offerings called ebó are given as gifts or prescribed through divination. The term ebó is defined as a sacrifice because every item given to an orisha was either purchased or made for that orisha, it is considered a sacrifice of money and time (Lele 2010:7). An ebó may be as simple as a candle or as elaborate as *tambour* (Lu. drumming ceremony) dedicated to an orisha.

Weekly ebós are done to keep the orishas pleased and strong, so that they may assist the practitioner in keeping his or her life in balance. For example, the orisha Eleggúa is rubbed with red palm oil on Mondays (the day that is associated with him) and given coffee and a cigar to open the door to a good and prosperous week.

Most ebós are prescribed during divination sessions where it is determined what is needed to aid the client in keeping balance in his or her life. The diviner will have determined what ebó is required and which orisha should receive it. If the ebó given is edible, the giver is allowed to eat it after offering it to an orisha; the food is considered to be blessed. The only exception is if the ebó was made for cleansing or osogbo . The ebó becomes the repository for the negative energy and should not be eaten, particularly if the osogbo was for an illness. There is a belief that eating illness-tainted food may cause the illness to spread (Lele 2012:19).

The patakí of Rat and Cat demonstrates the importance of ebó. It is told with the Diloggún reading Okana. Okana was a woman who was self-destructive, and the patakís in the Okana odú reflect her behavior. Ochani Lele writes of a patakí found in the Okana odú where Okana eventually finds evolution by making ebó (Lele 2010:11):

This patakí begins with a redeemed Okana sitting with her grandchildren. Her grandchildren are troubled that a cat has killed a mouse. They ask their grandmother Okana, why a cat would do such a horrible thing. Okana tells them that at one time Cat and Rat were the best of friends, but this was at a time when there was an abundance of food. A drought destroyed the plentiful food supply that prompted Cat, the mother of three kittens, to seek the advice of a diviner. The diviner told Cat that the orishas wanted her to visit her cousin who lived very far away. The diviner informs Cat that her kittens would be safe with her friend Rat while she was away-if she made ebó. Cat was given a list of ebós to ensure the safety of her kittens and herself on her trip. Cat had every intention of making the required ebós, but she became distracted by hunting for her kittens. Cat left her kittens with Rat and did not make ebó before she left for her trip. Rat was very

hungry, and the kittens looked very tasty. The gluttonous Rat soon ate the kittens. Cat returned from her trip and was so devastated by the death of her kittens that she tortured Rat before she landed the killing blow. Okana tells her grandchildren that this is why cats kill rats. She also tells her grandchildren that if Cat had made ebó her kittens would have survived. Okana's grandchildren exclaim that they will never forget to make ebó. Okana tells them that if they make ebó their lives will be full of blessings. [Lele 2010:25-30]

The Yoruba had similar folktales that told of negative reprisals for not making an offering. One of them speaks of Lizard who was told to make two offerings. One was to get married and the other was to ensure his wife would continue to marry him. He completed the first offering, which enabled him to marry. Since the second offering was not made, his wife left him soon after they married (Bascom 1941).

Before an offering is given to any orisha, the practitioner is required to greet and make an offering to the orisha Elegguá. He opens the door that allows communication between the orishas and humans. The practitioner informs Elegguá which orisha is to receive ebó and what is being given. Elegguá is asked to clear the path of communication to allow the ebó to be received by the orisha in the best manner possible. The dead are venerated, not worshiped, in the Lucumí faith through Spiritualism. Spiritualism is not a formal part of Lucumí ritual practice, and the two rarely intersect. One of the times that they do is when the *Egún* (Lu. the dead) and orishas are propitiated together, or when they are working together.

The orisha is given its first offering right after it is born. Orishas are born from an herbal mixture called *omiéro* and prayer; the energies are harnessed in stones that are placed within the ceramic tureens. The first offering is so controversial that the right to give it made its way to the Supreme Court; it is blood from a chicken, goat, or ram, depending on which orisha is receiving

it. Each orisha takes blood from specific animals. Blood sacrifice, *ebó eje*, is considered to be the most powerful form of *ebó* given to an orisha (Mason 1985). William Bascom wrote that the Yoruba only consumed meat when an animal was sacrificed or had died from natural causes (Bascom 1951). Meat was a valuable product to the Yoruba, and animal sacrifice was taken seriously. The Lucumí view animal sacrifice in a similar manner, and animals are treated as humanely as possible.

In September of 1987, the city of Hialeah, Florida enacted several ordinances aimed at eliminating animal sacrifice. The ordinances stemmed from the opening of the first Lucumí church in the United States, which was located in Hialeah, Florida. In April 1987, Lucumí priest Ernesto Pichardo began the process of turning a former car dealership into a place of worship. The church would hold ceremonies important to the Lucumí faith, including those in which animal sacrifice would be performed; the church also aimed to create a space to educate the public on the Lucumí faith. Pichardo soon found himself in a battle to practice his religion in a country that was founded upon religious freedom for all. The idea of animal sacrifice within religion would test the right to freedom of religion within the United States (O'Brien 2004).

If Pichardo thought he would receive support from his fellow Cubans, he would soon find that some of them were appalled that the Afro-Cuban religion had immigrated to the United States with portions of the Cuban community. The white Cuban community in the Miami area was horrified that the church was displaying a religion that they felt represented poor and uneducated Cubans. Prior to the Mariel boatlift in 1980, which brought a large number of AfroCubans to Miami, the majority of the Cubans in Miami were white and upper class. They

did not want Cubans to be associated with a religion that originated in Africa and was practiced by the lower class (O'Brien 2004). Animal rights groups would join in the protest against the Lucumí church. The Humane Society of the United States implored the city council of Hialeah to ban animal sacrifice on the grounds of animal cruelty.

From June until September of 1987, protests continued against the Lucumí church that Pichardo founded. On September 8, 1987, three ordinances were added to the June ordinances prohibiting animal sacrifice. The Miami branch of the ACLU took the case on the basis of the violation of the First Amendment (O'Brien 2004).

On October 5, 1989, Judge Spellman upheld all four ordinances and declared that the First Amendment rights are not absolute. The ACLU then took the case through the Federal appeals process, where they lost every ruling, much to the delight of the Humane Society of the United States. On March 23, 1992 the Supreme Court announced their decision to review the case: arguments began in October 1992 (O'Brien 2004). During the arguments, Justice O'Connor asked if citizens were allowed to trap and kill mice and rats and boil lobsters. On June 11, 1993, the US Supreme Court handed down its decision. All of the Justices found that Hialeah had violated the First Amendment and that all four ordinances were unconstitutional. Justice Kennedy wrote that religious beliefs do not need to be acceptable in order to receive protection under the First Amendment (O'Brien 2004). The court stated that the objective of the ordinances was to suppress religion (O'Brien 2004).

This ruling gave protection to more than just practitioners of Lucumí; the Hmong ritually sacrifice animals, as do Muslims and Jews. If the US Supreme Court had upheld the previous rulings, the outcome would have affected more than the Lucumí religious community.

The first time a Lucumí practitioner will experience blood sacrifice is when they receive their warrior orishas. The warriors received are Osun, Elegguá, Ochosi, and Ogún; these are the first orishas a practitioner receives prior to the asiento. These orishas do not live in a soupera; Osun lives within a metal cup on a pedestal; Elegguá is a stone head who lives on a decorated terracotta plate; Ochosi and Ogún both live together within an iron pot containing their tools.

After the warriors have been soaked in *omerio* (Lu. herbal mixture) and prayed over by an oriaté and two other priests, they are brought out to the aborisha. Before the sacrifice may proceed, Obí divination is thrown to determine if it is accepted. The ceremony will not proceed until the ebó is accepted. Then, the Mojuba prayer is recited at this time, and at the end of the prayer, the orishas are told why they are being approached. When sacrificing a bird, its head and feet are washed with cool water; for four legged animals, coconut is blown into their ears and above the eyes. Then, the animal is touched to the body of the individual who is receiving the sacrifice; in this instance, it would be the aborisha. The bird is touched to the aborisha's feet, knees, shoulders, back of neck, and front of throat. Next, the aborisha will be instructed to hold his or her hands out, and the bird is touched to the front and back of aborisha's hands. Subsequently, the bird is placed in the aborisha's hands, where he or she prays for the animal and thanks it for giving its life (Lele 2012:132). For cleansing rituals, pigeons will be used, due to the fact the animals used in cleansings are not consumed. Animals that are consumed will be

prepared by an *alashé*, who is the sacred cook. Individuals such as an *alashé* are chosen for their job by divination.

The *alashé* does not just cook the sacrificed animals; she is also responsible for creating *adimús*. *Adimús* are cooked food that is made with ingredients that are specific to an orisha. This food is served after it is cooled; food is never offered to an orisha hot. It is important for the orishas to be cool and calm, so that they may act rationally on the petitioner's behalf. *Adimús* may be prescribed by divination or made by a practitioner when petitioning a particular orisha.

Making *ebó* gives power to the practitioners over their lives, especially in times where they seem to have little control.

## CHAPTER 7: ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

One woman has taught me quite a bit about the Lucumí religion, and its practitioners. Marisol's love for the orishas is evidenced by her joy of preparing *adimús*, and other types of offerings for them. She has practiced the Lucumí religion for over 10 years, but has not taken the final step in the religion. One of the reasons she is delaying is financial. *Asientó* is a laborious, expensive ceremony that can cost upwards of fifteen thousand dollars. Some of the cost can be attributed to building the throne, feeding a couple hundred people, goats and chickens to feed the orishas, tambour drummers, the clothes worn during the ceremony, and other ceremony related costs.

Like many of the practitioners I have met, she comes from a Christian background. She is committed to the orishas, and her love for them is evident in the *adimús* she prepares for them. She is married and has a son. Neither her husband or son practice the religion, but they do support her desire to practice. She has recently left her *ilé* where she had been for nearly five years. This has left her with the inability to receive a divination reading, which is essential for her to understand if she is making the right choices in her life. Her interview reflects these concerns. Her reason for leaving the *ilé* is personal and will not be revealed in this thesis.

### Interview

Regarding her first divination reading Marisol states:

Do I remember my first divination session? Yes, my first reading/divination session was with a Santera friend who eventually became my godmother many years later. My path in this religion is a long and winding one. My very first reading was in 1995. For me, the most memorable aspect was her words "if you stand upright, in the center [the



eye] of the hurricane you will be safe while everything else swirls around you.” Meaning I had to do what I thought was best and stand up for myself and let consequences happen as they would. The orisha Oyá was telling me not to worry, and at that time after reading what precious little was out there on the religion, Migene Whippler's Santeria book for example, I had deeply fallen in love with Oyá. I carried that reading around for years in my purse close to me. I still have it.

On divination she states:

My most memorable divination session was at my bajada several years ago, so many years after that first reading. The oriaté muttered almost to himself as he threw the shells and said in his somewhat-hard-to-understand English, "What are you doing sitting here? (In front of me) YOU should be here on the mat divining," or words to that effect. It was a defining and validating moment for me. Other things were said, but in that second, in that moment, I saw myself clearly being a priest or priestess. It was daunting, the years of sacrifice and study needed to be a "good" diviner, and it was exhilarating to know I had a purpose. I still think about it every day. I still get the same feelings.

I absolutely feel that divination adds a critical framework to one's life that it is imperative to ask the orishas. And yes, that it brings elevation into our lives and the ability to avoid misfortune. Because of some extenuating circumstances, I have not had any readings, any shells thrown for a long time. I feel disconnected, sad, and lonely. Am I doing what I need to, to bring me into proper alignment with my destiny? My orí? Am I in iré and on path, or floundering? I become very discouraged after a long period without a reading.

I think that when you enter the room with the diviner, you are in a sacred space. You are in ritual, as I think of it from way back in my pagan days. The priest or priestess is there as a facilitator, but only the orishas know what is in your heart. This is their communication with you via the [hopefully skilled] manipulation of the diloggún or the opélé. I've been in situations where people outside of that room laugh and joke and get loud conversations going, let their heads get heated, and just generally treat it in a condescending manner. I've been in a situation where another godchild in my ilé came into the room and eavesdropped on a reading of mine. That is a terribly intrusive thing to do, unless you are made head and have been invited in. I think that it is critical to be quiet and respectful while divination is done to keep busy with tasks while you are waiting or to meditate to show the proper etiquette, so you go into the room cleanly. You are approaching divinity with the help of an intermediary; it's never routine.

I feel the same way about cutting coconut for obí, making rogation balls, throwing obí for oneself--not that I have done that yet--or for other people when you are initiated, you are working with an orisha. Have that awareness.

One of the most important aspects of this interview regarding divination is her feeling of disconnection from not having a divination reading in a long time. She has no idea if she is following the path her orí desires. She is unable to make a preemptive strike against osogbó (Yr. misfortune) or keep her life in iré (Yr. blessings). She is unable to speak and connect with the orishas, which is an integral part of the Lucumí religion. Until she is able to have regular divination sessions, she will continue to be unsure if she is making the right choices.

One way that she is able to continue a relationship with the orishas is to make ebó (Yr. offering), which she does regularly. This ensures that even though she is unable to communicate with the orishas through divination, she can make offerings to appease the orishas so she may receive blessings from them. Since she is a child of Yemayá, she often makes offerings to her, but other orishas receive offerings as well. She explains that:

My favorite *ebo* that I've done so far is also one of the simplest: the obi y omi tutu reading from Ochani Lele's book *Sacrificial Ceremonies of Santeria*. Fresh water and coconut to Elegguá. I've had to do this after a reading, and it is so and yet so powerful. You pray to the first to be honored in all ceremonies, that orisha who can open the path.

Even our daily words and actions are sacrifices offerings. To my mind, my week then starts with this ebó: The Monday offering to Elegguá and the Warriors (Ochosi and Ogún). Fresh-brewed coffee, rum, palm oil and a cigar.

I routinely take watermelon drizzled with molasses to my guardian orisha, Yemayá, to the ocean. I routinely take honey (tasting it first) to pray to Oshun at the river. Every morning, I throw three dashes of water at outside my front door from a small red and black painted jicara and pray. Then I salute Elegguá inside and say mojubas (prayer). Every Saturday morning, I make creole coffee and a small breakfast for my Spiritual escort, my handmade Gullah doll. On Sundays, I refresh my *boveda* and often make an Ancestor dinner for the *muertos*. I adore cooking for the orishas: puddings, cooked fruit, corn porridge, okra, *tamales*, *ochinchin*, stuffed eggplant, and platters of carefully arranged fruit. All of it. I have a notebook that I keep just for recipes. I have a special blue and white checked apron with sunflowers on it that I reserve just for cooking for and with the orishas. The idea of someday being an *alashé* is another favorite reverie. After doing an ebó, I feel calm. There is clarity and a connectedness.

My offerings may not always be perfect but everything is done with love and respect and intention, with gratitude.

Ebó gives her the ability to connect to the orishas. Her offerings are given in love, and she hopes that they are received in a similar fashion. During my limited research, I have not met any practitioner that does not enjoy making ebó to the orishas. If divination is the center of the Lucumí religion, then ebó is the cement that holds it together. Even in times when a practitioner does not have the ability to have a divination session, he or she is able to keep the relationship with the orishas open, even if the communication is only one way.

The most common ebó is to give Ochún, the orisha of love and happiness who resides in rivers, a bottle of honey in the river. This simple ebó would become my weekly ritual for several months. My experience with the Lucumí religions started out academically, but then evolved into a personal spiritual experience. I was going through a rough divorce when I began graduate school. The stress of family discord, mixed with the rigors of graduate school, left me drained and miserable. I heard a practitioner mention that she was going to the river to give Ochún honey, to bring love and happiness into her life. I quietly decided to do the same, partially as a way to view ebó from an emic perspective, but also in the hope that Ochún might decide to bring light and laughter into my life. As I poured the honey into the river, I felt the stress and sadness that permeated my life start to dissipate. Afterwards as I walked back to my house, I felt happier and lighter. I began to give Ochún honey at the river on a weekly basis, and I began to understand the give and take that occurs with the orishas and humans.

I walked into my first divination session more analytical than when I poured honey into a river. I was skeptical that throwing shells would be able to decipher my complicated life. I watched the shells fall into a pattern without any help from the Lucumí priest. The pattern showed that my life was in turmoil, and I needed to take honey to a river for Ochún. I informed the priest that I had already been giving Ochún honey at a river. He was surprised and told me keep to bringing herhoney.

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

The Yoruba were forcibly taken from their homes in West Africa to the New World, to provide free labor for the growing agricultural markets in the Americas. One of the countries that received the enslaved Yoruba was Cuba. The Yoruba lost most of their culture, but they would retain their religion. In order for their religion to survive, it would have to rebuild itself with elements from Africa and Europe. The cabildos de nación would provide the foundation for the Lucumí religion to cultivate. The Spanish priests in Cuba tried to prevent the Yoruba from continuing their religious traditions. The Yoruba in turn publicly prayed to Catholic saints, while privately worshipping the orishas. Each orisha would become associated with a particular saint. The saints were empty vessels that were used to disguise the orishas and were also a part of European culture that the Africans adapted as a part of their own identity.

At the turn of the 20th century, the Spanish would be driven out of Cuba with the help of Afro-Cubans and the United States. The United States would replace Spain as the governing influence, and its racial policies would affect the Afro-Cuban population. The political and influential people of Cuba wanted Cuba to be viewed as a progressive country. This desire meant that Cuba needed to become more European in appearance and culture. The Trans-Atlantic Slave trade had brought a large number of Africans to Cuba whose culture and race were dominating the island. In the early 1900s, Cuba would prohibit immigration from non-European countries, in effect whitening the population. At the same time, Cuba began removing African elements from its culture.

Political changes in Cuba in the 20th century would bring large numbers of Cuban immigrants to the United States. Among them would be Lucumí practitioners who brought their

religion with them. The Lucumí ritual of animal sacrifice would test the United States on the right to freedom of religion and, after a tough battle, the Lucumí practitioners would win the right to feed their orishas.

During my research process I was able to find the answers to my research questions.

1) The types of divination used by the Lukumí practitioners with whom I conducted **research** are obí and diloggún.

2) Divination is the center of the Lucumí religion and has under gone changes and adapted to remain viable, such as the switching of coconut from the kola nut in Obí divination. When practitioners are unable to receive divination readings, they are left feeling lost and severed from the orishas. They have no idea if they are living their life as their orí wants them to, if they are in iré, or if they need to make a specific offering to ward off osogbo. The interview in my thesis highlights the importance of divination in the religion. My consultant does not know if the choices she is making in her life are the right ones.

3) I found that practitioners follow through with ebó the majority of the time it is prescribed in a divination session.

4) Ebó is given outside of divination for many reasons. Love for the orisha, desire for something from the orisha, and in cases where divination is not available to the practitioner.

5) Propitiation gives practitioners control over a situation which they have no power over. When divination reveals that osogbó is imminent, the practitioner is given an ebó to ward off the impending disaster. Or if the divination speaks of iré, the client must still give ebó, or the

blessing may either not occur or be lessened. In situations where the practitioner is unable to receive a divination reading, propitiation allows the practitioner to keep communication open with the orishas.

In the Lucumí religion, the relationship between the orishas and the practitioner is important. The practitioner desires communication with the orishas, and this communication is achieved through divination. The orishas speak to the practitioner and help him or her keep balance in their life. Propitiation is a tool that is essential to prevent bad things from occurring in the practitioner's life and keep blessing a part of his or her existence. Divination and propitiation give the Lucumí practitioners the means to have control over their lives and its unexpected events.

## GLOSSARY

**aborisha:** an individual who worships the orishas, but has not taken the final steps to become a priest/priestess.

**aché:** spiritual energy that comes from Olodumaré and is passed through to all living beings on earth.

**adimú:** a cooked meal that is offered to an orisha.

**asiento:** the final ceremony that transforms a practitioner into a priest/priestess.

**bajada:** a divination ritual that determines one's guardian orisha.

**diloggún:** cowrie shell divination.

**guardian orisha:** the orisha that governs a practitioners life.

**iré:** blessings, balance.

**iyawó:** the term used to describe an initiate during the first year following asiento.

**jicara:** a halved coconut that is used to hold water.

**obí:** divination using coconuts.

**odú:** the patterns that fall in Lucumí divination.

**omiero:** a herbal mixture that is used to give life to an orisha stone.

**oriaté:** a Lukumí priest who conducts ceremonies.



**osogbo:** misfortune

**patakí:** a folktale that is told along with a diloggún reading.

**priest/priestess:** a Lukumí practitioner who can divine with the diloggún.

**tambor:** a drumming ceremony for an orisha.

**APPENDIX : IRB APPROVAL LETTER**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**  
**FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Kristi A. Marrero**

Date: **July 20, 2012**

Dear Researcher:

On 7/20/2012, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination  
Project Title: The Propitiation of the Orishas through Divination, Adfmu and Ebós in the Lukumí Religion.  
Investigator: Kristi A. Marrero  
IRB Number: SBE-12-08564  
Funding Agency:  
Grant Title:  
Research ID: NA

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 07/20/2012 04:06:10 PM EDT

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joanne Muratori".

IRB Coordinator

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