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Santeria Commerce and the Unofficial Networks of Interpersonal Internationalism

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In 2000, I spent four months in the Cuban city of Matanzas studying sacred Afro-Cuban drumming with legendary musician Cha-Chá (Esteban Vega Baccallao, 1925–2007). As the owner of prestigious drums sacred to the Santeria religion, Cha-Chá regularly employed several men of varying ages who were ritually “sworn” to his drums. The youngest of these men were in their twenties, and they often served as assistants during my drum lessons.

In February one of these young assistant drummers, Alejandro, frequently left our lessons early to visit his sick mother, Cha-Chá’s niece. Alejandro’s mother was hospitalized due to a circulation problem and subsequent infection in her leg, and for many days he reported either no progress in her condition or minor changes for the worse. At times he expressed concern that his mother would have her leg amputated or perhaps even die. One day, when we were alone, with some embarrassment Alejandro asked me if I had any antibiotics he could take to his mother. For whatever reasons, Alejandro’s mother’s doctors knew she needed antibiotics but could not provide the drugs given low supplies in the hospital. Dismayed, I told Alejandro I had none, but as we spoke I remembered that I did have a small tube of a common topical three-in-one antibiotic ointment (part of an almost forgotten first aid kit my mother had insisted I bring with me). I mentioned the ointment to Alejandro, explaining that it was topical, to be used externally on the skin. Alejandro thought that it might still be of help, if only for use to barter for something more appropriate. He gratefully accepted the small tube, and I was left feeling saddened that I could not do more.

When I saw him a couple of days later, Alejandro was beaming. He reported that he had given his mother’s doctor my ointment and they had injected it into her leg, causing immediate improvement and a steady recovery. I was happy but puzzled. Injected a topical ointment? Surely he must have been mistaken.

No, he insisted, they had indeed injected it *into* her leg. He imitated the action of a syringe with his fingers for emphasis. Alejandro thanked me warmly. I was happy to have helped, but inwardly I reeled at the possibility that this over-the-counter, two-dollar tube of ointment I had packed as an afterthought might have saved a woman's leg.

This incident was certainly peripheral to my research, one of countless anecdotes of deprivation and invention that are now common tropes in ethnographic accounts of post-Soviet Cuba. Putting aside the question of exactly what medical treatment Alejandro's mother received, what interests me here is not the adaptive nature of the medical care but rather Alejandro's use of the Santeria religion as a location of exchange between foreigners and Cubans. Caused by the withdrawal of Soviet financial support, the Cuban government's Special Period in Time of Peace ushered in an era of austerity and uncertainty. As Cubans struggled to resolve problems caused by shortages through means both legal and illegal, the ubiquitous circulation of American dollars in an underground economy forced the government to legalize their use in 1993. Two decades later, foreign currency is still the most efficient means by which to resolve problems in Cuba. Had Alejandro been one of many Cubans to receive remittances from supportive family members living abroad, most likely he could have purchased the necessary medicine himself through the purchasing power of foreign-equivalent Cuban currency. With neither remittances nor contact with the relatively low level of tourism in urban Matanzas, Alejandro was nonetheless able to tap into a source of foreign currency and goods through his affiliation with Cha-Chá, who regularly received international visitors seeking his knowledge and liturgical expertise.

My own visits had begun in 1996, but cultural experts such as Cha-Chá occasionally received foreign visitors during the 1980s and earlier. Such visits grew exponentially during the 1990s as Cuba's post-Soviet economic crisis forced an opening of Cuban society to large-scale tourism and foreign investment. I was one of many visitors who arrived at the doorsteps of Cha-Chá and other master drummers not arbitrarily but through unofficial transnational networks based upon personal contacts, ritual associations, and religious expertise. As a result of these contacts, experiences are shared, status is transformed, and rituals, lessons, and interviews are undertaken. But, as well, currency is exchanged in unequal but mutually beneficial transactions.

I characterize these kinds of informal yet systematic and stable international networks, including those of Santeria's religious commerce, as cases of interpersonal internationalism. In so doing I alter the term *internationalism* from its common usage in the context of Cuban international relations. Almost since its inception, the Cuban revolutionary government has under-

taken collaborative or unilateral internationalist projects to support what it considers worthy socialist or humanitarian causes. Proponents of these internationalist actions, and particularly of Cuba's long-standing and extensive medical training and exchange programs, marvel at Cuba's outsized ability to "punch above its weight" and have impact on the lives of doctors and patients worldwide.¹

Supporters of such internationalist efforts characterize them as essential not only as demonstrations of Cuba's dedication to socialism and justice, but also as linchpins of the survival of the revolution because they have cultivated socialist values that have allowed the state to ask for great sacrifices from its citizenry during Cuba's Special Period.² But contemporary critics contend that Cuba's commitment to certain internationalist projects comes at the expense of serious domestic needs, representing a drain on Cuba's already strained economy.³ Even with the internationalism of favorable economic agreements from supportive nations (such as Cuba's so-called doctors for oil partnership with Venezuela), the global recession that began in the late 2000s forced Cuban leaders in 2010 to cut back on long-standing domestic subsidies and propose the unprecedented elimination of hundreds of thousands of government jobs. The steady trickling of bad economic news brought uncertainty as to how lost government jobs would be offset by job creation in a fledgling private sphere—and this in turn brought renewed attention to the cost of Cuba's foreign commitments.

When I reflect on my time in Cuba researching the music of Afro-Cuban religions, the fading national memories of military internationalism or the classic examples of medical internationalism become eclipsed by earthier matters, such as the countless everyday encounters between Cubans and foreigners visiting their island—encounters that enact a variety of unofficial, interpersonal transactions toward mutually beneficial ends. In such cases the obstacle that Cubans work to overcome is their own economy, which greatly privileges foreign-value currency that Cubans cannot directly earn. Cubans are paid salaries and pensions in *pesos nacionales*, typically earning the equivalent of about US\$15 to \$30 per month. This low figure is made manageable due to government subsidies of free health care and education, low-cost housing, and monthly "rations" of household staples. But foreign visitors exchange their currency for what is in effect a foreign-currency-equivalent peso, the *peso convertible* (CUC). Cubans cannot earn convertible pesos as salaries but may obtain them from foreign remittances sent to the island or through firsthand contact with foreigners visiting Cuba. Many desirable goods (appliances, electronics, certain types of food, clothing, and

as Alejandro's example illustrates, some medicines) are sold exclusively in government stores that accept only convertible pesos. As a result the economic and material gulf between those who possess convertible pesos and those who do not is far larger than a simple comparison of monetary value would indicate.

The dual-currency economy has profoundly altered Cuba, creating huge disparities in wealth, dividing society between Cubans with access to convertible pesos and those without. The desire for convertible pesos has led to a type of domestic or internal "brain drain," a situation whereby highly educated or skilled workers leave their jobs for tourist-industry work or private-enterprise activities, both legal and illegal. An additional result of the dual-currency economy and increased tourism to Cuba is the rise of *jineterismo*, a word describing a broad range of informal hustling and solicitation activities. Finally, within the overlapping spheres of tourism and *jineterismo* is the increasing commoditization of Cuban culture for foreign consumption, for which Santeria commerce may serve as but one of many examples.

The systematic element of an international network operating outside of official channels is a key component of interpersonal internationalism. Such networks, whether they are associated with Christian charity work, political activism, or Santeria culture, build and perpetuate specific alliances rather than resulting from random, one-time interpersonal encounters.⁴ Generally such alliances in Cuba result in mutually beneficial exchanges, with the foreigner typically offering CUCs, material goods, prestige, and possibly transformative connections in exchange for experiences, knowledge, objects, or actions. Importantly, the foreigner holds the power of international mobility and convertible pesos, resulting in power relations that are inherently unequal. In the interpersonal internationalism of the Santeria religion, alliances and networks are not only built upon personal contacts and word-of-mouth recommendations but also strengthened by the social structure of the religion itself.

Santeria in Cuba

In international contexts, Santeria is the best-known term for a syncretic Cuban religion based upon West African beliefs; other names for the religion include La Regla Lucumí, La Regla de Ocha, and Ifá. Brought to Cuban shores in the minds of African slaves, the religion's West African worldviews and rituals were remembered and reassembled both in bondage and, to a greater extent, in the free Afro-Cuban population. While components of European spiritism and

Catholicism exist within its religious rituals, most of the religion is based upon West African elements, particularly from the Yorùbá culture of southwestern Nigeria and Benin.

Santeros (Santeria practitioners) believe that the world is alive with spiritual forces and that actions must be taken to exist harmoniously with those forces. The interaction of human agents and spiritual beings necessitates fundamental practices of the religion: divination (a systematic casting and reading of thrown objects to communicate with spiritual beings, ascertaining answers to questions or approval of actions taken); the offering of sacrifices; ancestor veneration; and spirit possession. Reflecting its West African roots, Santeria is a pragmatic religion, focused not on an impending existence after death but rather on living well on Earth and realizing personal potential and destiny. *Santeros* believe in a creator of the universe, but in Yorùbá tradition this God Almighty, incomprehensible in its wholeness, is characterized as distant and indifferent to the tribulations of humans (as in matters of health, happiness, finance, and relationships). For these earthly concerns practitioners appeal to the *oricha* (also *orisha*).

Oricha are ancient, anthropomorphically conceived divinities, each associated with a domain of nature and human behavior. Having once lived on earth, *oricha* are thought to be closer to human beings than God is, and therefore more sympathetic to human plights. Santeria initiates have a deeply personal connection with their tutelary *oricha*, whom they honor, worship, placate, and appeal to in several ways. In the most public communal rituals involving sacred drumming, song, and dance, the *oricha* themselves may be called to attend the festivities through spirit possession, temporarily “mounting” the body of an initiate to assume human form on Earth. Once down among their “children,” the *oricha* may be honored and asked for blessings, assistance, or advice.

Surrounded by the Catholic religion, colonial-era *oricha* worshippers noticed parallels between the mythology and representations of the *santos* (Catholic saints) and the *oricha*, resulting in a complex and multilayered pairing of the two. Indigenous African religious elements of secrecy, hidden symbolism, and flexible interpretation helped Cuban practitioners to preserve, adapt, and conceal their beliefs through Santeria’s history of persecution. The localized practice and oral traditions of the religion’s African source meant that a knowledgeable *oricha* priest could reconstitute a form of the religion with a modest number of participants.

Key to perpetuating African cultural knowledge in colonial Cuba was the *cabildo*, a segregated fraternal order approved by the Catholic Church and organized under the sponsorship of a patron Catholic saint. *Cabildos de*

nación—cabildos organized by African ethnicity or “nationality”—enabled the retention of ethnic-specific African culture on the island, including religious practices honoring the oricha. As slavery was phased out in the 1880s, the Afro-Cuban cabildos de nación were increasingly suppressed. Many cabildos disappeared, while others transformed themselves into family-based houses of worship dedicated to a primary African divinity and its corresponding saint. This so-called house-temple (*casa templo*), led by an experienced oricha “priest” (*babalocha* for males, *iyalocha* for females) and located within a private home, has been the standard locus of Santería religious worship for more than a century.

The religious social organization of these house-temples holds the key to the religious networks of commerce. Individuals cannot instantly convert or simply become santeros of their own volition, but rather must undergo graduated rituals, acquire sacred objects and knowledge, and consult with the oricha. All of these steps are policed by expert practitioners. The most important ritual in Santería is the full initiation of an individual, who receives objects sacred to his or her tutelary oricha and has the essence of the oricha “seated” within his or her head. The initiate completes a year in a restricted novice status before achieving a degree of “adulthood” within the religion. An experienced *babalocha* or *iyalocha* educates and guides the initiate through the process, becoming the new santero’s godparent. This long-term if not lifetime relationship requires respect, loyalty, and deference on the part of the junior initiate. In time knowledgeable practitioners may begin to initiate individuals on their own. They sometimes break away to form their own independent house-temple communities, but often operate independently while still deferring to their approving godparent, or bring new initiates into the fold of their godparent’s “house.”

This pyramid-type structure, with a senior *babalocha* or *iyalocha* at the pinnacle of authority with ranks expanding downward and outward based on seniority, has been the norm in Cuban Santería since the end of the colonial era. While formerly limited in geographic scope to a neighborhood, city, or province, the reach of some Cuban religious experts is now international. Although some santeros immigrated to other countries in the first half of the twentieth century, migrations increased at the beginning of the revolutionary government, surging according to Cuban political or economic conditions. In some cases immigrant santeros broke away from their Cuban elders and simply established independent religious houses in their new homelands. Others remained loyal to their godparents, cultivating a local or satellite independence while maintaining links to their Cuban elders as best they could.

For some santeros this deference may be driven by necessity resulting from the lack of a local community or specific ritual items or expertise. But for others Cuba serves as a mecca of Santeria authority, the ultimate source of religious genealogies and power to which all santeros can connect when tracing the legitimacy of their spiritual lineages.⁵ An iyalocha in New York, Miami, or Veracruz, for example, might send or accompany her religious godchildren to Cuba to meet her own godparents or to undergo “proper” initiations with respected Cuban elders. Santeria master drummers might follow a similar pattern, as certain consecrated drums used in Santeria rituals must be “born” of existing sets and the drummers initiated into an existing drum fraternity (my U.S. teacher’s fraternal alliances with Cuban master drummers is the connection that led me to Cha-Chá). The international travel involved in all of these spiritual networks is costly, but the pull of Cuba as the source of authentic culture and spiritual authority is powerful, and for many, worth the effort.

The Commercialization of Santeria

These international networks of Santeria spirituality existed on a very small scale before the revolution and continued after Fidel Castro came to power, though under more difficult circumstances. Even while it was promoting Santeria culture as folklore in national troupes, the Cuban government hardened its policies toward all religions in the early 1960s. Citizens with any religious leanings were banned from Communist Party membership and excluded from certain jobs or leadership roles. Santeros were required to register their drum ceremonies with local authorities (a policy still in place today), and government agents monitored participants, jailing santeros who dared to initiate children into the religion.⁶

Regulated and marginalized, Santeria persisted. From the mid-1960s until the late 1980s, government rhetoric and policy toward all practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions adopted a hostile yet paternalistic tone, implying that Afro-Cuban religions were primitive holdovers from an ignorant and persecuted past. The authorities believed that given time to absorb the state benefits of education and modern medical care, combined with the secular ideology and scientific rationalism of the revolution, santeros would eventually abandon the religion, transforming it into a benign, secular folk tradition.⁷

During these decades, transnational networks of santeros brought foreigners to the island for initiations, even when initiating foreigners and possessing their currency were illegal.⁸ But Cuba’s post-Soviet opening of the island to for-

eign travelers greatly increased the traffic of Santeria commerce. Because Cuba's dual-currency economy greatly privileges contact with foreigners, visitors to the island interested in Santeria provide Cuban santeros with an unusual opportunity to use their everyday religious practice to procure convertible pesos. For santeros with no connection to tourism and no source of foreign remittances, the impact of such transactions can be great. And because of the remote chance that the foreigner, pleased with the results of the encounter, may want to seriously engage with some element of the religion, the possibility of cultivating a long-term foreign client or godchild is worth pursuing for many santeros.

Foreigners who want to deepen their involvement in Santeria can undertake a variety of religious ritual actions ranging from minor spiritual consultations to full initiation into the religion. Each ritual action has a *derecho*: a ritual fee that covers not only the supplies and expenses but also the esoteric knowledge and religious status necessary to carry out the rituals. The greater the importance of the ritual action involved, the higher the *derecho*. The highest fees are associated with Santeria's most important ritual: full initiation into the religion. The amount of these initiation fees illustrates the magnitude of Santeria's potential commerce within Cuba's dual-currency economy.

Initiation expenses involve a broad range of ritual items and clothing, sacrificial offerings, specialized religious labor, supportive labor, and facilities. For many Cubans, initiation costs are prohibitively high—so much so that some interested Cubans never undergo initiation or delay it for years, even decades.⁹ A rough average cost for a Cuban to be initiated in Cuba, expressed in equivalent U.S. dollars, is about \$500 (plus or minus \$200), well beyond a year's salary for most peso-earning Cubans.¹⁰ By comparison, for an American to become initiated in the United States the cost of an inexpensive initiation is often between \$5,000 and \$15,000, with more costly initiations ranging from \$20,000 upwards to \$40,000 or more.¹¹ In addition to the attraction of Cuba as an authentic source of the Santeria religion, the lower costs and perceived higher quality of religious actions in Cuba motivate some foreigners to travel to Cuba for their initiations. However, as with most experiences on the island, Santeria commerce is a dual-currency system—foreigners are charged convertible pesos for the same actions and experiences that Cubans typically pay for using pesos nacionales. To become initiated in Cuba costs a foreigner roughly \$2,000 to \$5,000 CUC, a relative bargain for the foreigner but a huge sum by Cuban standards.¹²

The transactions in Cuba between foreign patrons of Afro-Cuban religions and Cuban religious practitioners are mutually beneficial. The foreigner un-

dergoes religious rituals (ones perhaps unavailable domestically) for a price lower than possible in his or her home country while experiencing rituals of a perceived higher quality, authenticity, and prestige. The Cuban religious experts providing the religious rituals and experiences earn the tangible benefit of convertible pesos. In addition, the Cuban santero gains the prestige of being viewed as an authority by a foreign client, as well as the possibility of permanently expanding the network of his or her religious “house” internationally, becoming a religion-based site of interpersonal internationalism. The large sums of convertible pesos enhance the reputation of the expert santero locally by benefiting a variety of ritual specialists aligned with him or her: diviners, ritual assistants, liturgical singers, drummers, and support labor drawn from the santero’s local godchildren. The prospect of earning convertible pesos generates enthusiasm on the part of all; for poorer santeros with no access to foreign remittance money, these occasional opportunities to earn convertible pesos represent a helpful windfall.

For performance experts of Santeria dance, drumming, and song liturgy, contact with foreign students produces similar results. Such students might send their own students and colleagues to Cuba with letters, currency, and goods. These individuals then return with news and letters in response, perpetuating the networks. In the case of Cha-Chá, drum lessons and sacred drum initiations for foreigners benefited not only him but also his “sworn” drummers (such as Alejandro) and other allied associates, who might also prevail upon the visitor to bring items should he or she return (medicine and clothing were the most common nonmonetary requests I received from Matanzas drummers). In addition to payment, expert teachers might also request that the foreign visitor use his or her audiovisual equipment to document the teacher’s expertise to serve as a promotional work or bolster the teacher’s reputation, both in Cuba and abroad.¹³

Just as tourists are widely visible in many areas of urban Cuban life, foreigners are increasingly a part of urban Santeria commerce.¹⁴ Foreign students of Santeria religion and performance arts come from all over the globe to study in Cuba, often drawn to the prominent displays of state folkloric troupes but sometimes engaging expert individuals with no connection to the folklore or tourism industries (such as Cha-Chá). My research in Matanzas revealed a clear split between santeros with foreign clients (and often having connections to state folklore performance) and those who operated on a purely local, peso nacional level. When combined with the localized idiosyncrasies of the religion, personal jealousies, and economic crisis, access to foreigners and their currency sometimes creates conflict or accusations regarding

the motivations of santeros who take foreign clients. In a sense, conflict has always been part of the religion as the local, compartmentalized practices that helped Santeria to survive persecution perpetuated non-standardized practices—with the variations subject to criticism by fellow santeros. With no single leader or Vatican-type institution to rule on orthodoxy, standardize practices, and settle disagreements, disputes are common in the religion. Even without foreign clients, rivalry and disagreement over religious issues can result in criticism, gossip, and accusation in regard to religious competence or personal motivation, pulling at the loyalties and alliances of local santeros. The potential monetary reward involved with foreign clients raises the stakes and exacerbates rivalries.

Concerning foreign initiates, rumors abound as to whether or not ritual requirements are relaxed or abbreviated in the interest of profit or to accommodate time-pressed foreign visitors. Jineterismo and fraud also exist near the margins of Santeria as the ignorance of new visitors or novice foreign santeros may be exploited for financial gain. Blurring the line between local variation and deception, accounts exist of ritual experts intentionally performing fraudulent initiations on foreigners or selling foreign clients suspect *oricha* for personal gain.¹⁵ Some travelers to Cuba return to their native countries having purchased a ritual object, participated in a Santeria ritual, or even undergone some type of initiation, only to be told by local Santeria authorities that their experiences or items were the result of either incompetence or fraud.

For some observers, the penetration of the Special Period's hardships and jineterismo into Santeria's praxis exemplifies the devastating cultural effects of the dual-currency system on Santeria culture. The commercialization of the religion is now a common theme in ethnographic studies, as are the claims by many santeros that they personally are not motivated by profit but that many other santeros are so inclined.¹⁶ Some santeros complain that international Santeria commerce has inflated the costs of rituals in general, pushing the prices of initiations or religious supplies even further beyond the reach of Cubans locked in the national peso economy.¹⁷

International commerce appears to cause some expert santeros to prioritize foreign clientele over the local community. In the 1990s the prefix *diplo-*, taken from Soviet-era foreign currency stores reserved for diplomats and other foreign visitors, was disparagingly affixed to Santeria terms to identify practitioners and religious practices focused on commerce with foreigners.¹⁸ These entrepreneurs of diplo-Santeria often work with institutional support or solicit new customers who are attending public performances of Afro-Cuban culture.

But as with other elements of the Cuban economy, the Cuban government took note of foreign visitors' interest in Santería as a religion. In response the state developed programs of Santería religious tourism in an attempt to capture hidden international Santería commerce. These so-called *santurismo* programs reportedly offer all-inclusive tours—some that even include full initiations into Santería—that direct foreigners to santeros who work in partnership with the state.¹⁹ These government-authorized santeros are an exception to the norm of international person-to-person exchanges, but in the early 1990s the Cuban government took action to bring more Santería commerce under the auspices of the state. After years of refusing to authorize organized groups of santeros or *babalaos* (specialized Santería divination experts), in the early 1990s the Cuban government recognized the Asociación Cultural Yoruba (ACY), supporting it with funding, granting it a renovated building across from Havana's *capitolio*, and allowing it to raise money from foreign organizations. Besides enabling it to sponsor educational, folkloric, and touristic activities, the ACY's privileged and official status allows it latitude to work with foreign groups and for its card-carrying members (7,000 strong and growing) to host visitors interested in undergoing religious activities. ACY membership cards, issued for an annual fee of 250 pesos nacionales, have become for some members a state-sanctioned guarantee of religious authenticity, one offered to foreigners who appear interested in Santería or, for that matter, anything else.²⁰

For expert practitioners in Cuba, government sponsorship is a divisive issue. ACY members (whose ranks include many highly respected *babalaos*) point to government recognition as acknowledgment of expertise and authenticity, its institutional wealth and international connections as evidence of the quality of its organization. Those without government approval characterize government-sponsored groups as sellouts susceptible to state influence and deferential to government political policies, a charge the ACY consistently denies.

Such conflicts are apparent in what is arguably the most prominent annual activity conducted by *babalaos*, the announcement of the *letra del año* (letter of the year), an annual spiritual prognostication guided by the wisdom of the *oricha*. The ACY enjoys an official monopoly over this important divination and announces its “reading” through government media, while a rival group of *babalaos* without government support conduct their own *letra del año* rituals (yet another group of *babalaos* in Miami conduct their own reading as well). Because the “letters” revealed through divination refer to Yorùbá verses that in turn must be interpreted by the *babalao*, great is the potential to interpret the *letra*'s “signs” referring to health, prosperity, misfortune, or danger as metaphors applying to the Cuban government. In a 1995 paper on

Cuban NGOs, Gillian Gunn notes that government authorities had long been interested in influencing babalaos due to the latter's respect within the Santeria community. While the president of the ACY told Gunn that the organization contested the membership applications of babalaos "pliant" to government positions, such a statement concedes that government-influenced babalaos exist.²¹

In his study of the conflict over the *letra del año*, anthropologist Kenneth Routon argues that government involvement in the ritual pushed what was once a localized, esoteric disagreement into the realm of politics. Presenting multiple perspectives concerning the *letra del año* controversy, Routon concludes that "the 'official' babalaos of the ACY will always come up with a politically correct *letra*," one at least neutral if not favorable to the government.²² Thus, santeros and babalaos not affiliated with the government may claim spiritual superiority vis-à-vis the ACY due to their not being subject to co-optation by the state or deferential to government positions; in short, not bending religion to accommodate state politics. But such claims are given little circulation and must compete with the wealth and international reach of the ACY and the state tourism industry. Truth be told, several unofficial organizations critical of the ACY continue to wait for government approval of their own groups so that they might take their place as state-sanctioned authorities of Santeria and its international commerce.

Human Capital and Happiness

From Santeria tourism to religious *jineterismo* to government-authorized ritual divinations, material need is the primary catalyst behind accelerated change in Cuban Santeria. While most case studies depict government involvement in Santeria commerce as reactive to preexisting economic activity, the government itself plays a role in commercializing not only Afro-Cuban culture aimed at tourists but also even Cuban grassroots community movements. In one such case described by anthropologist Adrian Hearn, the government's concern with generating revenue overruled the holistic nature of a proposed community project by recommending a focus on music and dance components more likely to attract tourist commerce.²³ Shaped by the government's financial need, such projects become one more node in a commerce-driven feedback loop anticipating and then fulfilling touristic desire.

By contrast, some non-Cuban santeros, students, scholars, musicians, and dancers eschew the constrictions of tourism and the artifice of official folklore to pursue personal contacts with Cuban experts—sometimes carrying only a

name, other times bearing a letter of introduction—thereby creating, reactivating, or extending international religious networks. In time some of these individuals may bring others to Cuba—friends, students, colleagues, customers, godchildren—introducing new individuals to the rich culture of Afro-Cuban religion, honoring their teachers and elders, and providing a context for cultural exchange and commerce. These are unofficial international networks that result in mutually beneficial exchanges, examples of interpersonal internationalism.

There are darker, exploitative networks as well, and the degree of capitalist penetration into Cuban culture as a result of the economic crisis can be depressing for those who consider its human toll. The rise of Cuba as an international destination for sex tourism, replete with tropes of exotic desire and racist stereotypes and fantasies, represents the return of a demeaning situation that the socialist revolution had purposefully stamped out. Although some Cubans set their terms for these types of transactions and are able to transform their lives materially, it seems a moral stretch to characterize these interactions as mutually beneficial. Some encounters become relationships (which also, ironically, must be registered with the government) and may generate new interpersonal networks. Cuban-foreigner couplings may become long-term serial affairs, some based on exploitation and material need, others based on affection and love resulting in marriages and families. Nonetheless, jineterismo and international sex tourism can transform Cuban bodies into a form of human capital painfully different from the type celebrated in speeches by Cuban leaders.

In contrast to all this darkness of need, commercialism, and networks of exploitation, others interpret the global appetite for Cubans and their culture through alternative symbolism. When I chatted with musicologist Olavo Alén in Havana in 2003, he conceded that Cuba needed to import many things and that its industry did not manufacture much to export to the rest of the world. But, he noted, so many countries with great manufacturing industries, powerful nations that create remarkable products, also produce citizens that do not seem entirely happy, individuals who consume media and travel the world searching for novelty and distraction. When some of these citizens discover Cuba and its culture, they become enamored, happy. Often they come back for more. And so, Alén reasoned, through its culture Cuba was manufacturing happiness. Importer of goods, Cuba possesses a surplus of happiness to export to the world in the form of a culture that captivates individuals and brings joy to their lives. Sitting in Alén's office, I smiled, because I knew exactly what he meant.

Notes

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1. John Kirk, “Reflections on Medical Internationalism,” *Latin American Perspectives* 36, no. 1 (2007), 139–40.

2. Isaac Saney, “Homeland of Humanity: Internationalism within the Cuban Revolution,” *Latin American Perspectives* 36, no. 1 (2009), 111–23; Richard L. Harris, “Cuban Internationalism, Che Guevara, and the Survival of the Cuban Revolution,” *Latin American Perspectives* 36, no. 3 (2009), 27–42.

3. James Petras and Robin Eastman-Abaya, “Cuba: Continuing Revolution and Contemporary Contradiction,” 2007, petras.lahaine.org/articulo.php?p=1705&more=1&c=1.

4. For brief case studies on unofficial Christian networks connecting the United States and Cuba, see Sarah J. Mahler and Katrin Hansing, “Myths and Mysticism: How Bringing a Transnational Religious Lens to the Examination of Cuba and the Cuban Diaspora Exposes and Ruptures the Fallacy of Isolation,” in Damián J. Fernández, ed., *Cuba Transnational* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 42–60.

5. Since the 1960s a variety of movements within the international oricha community have moved away from Cuban Santería in favor of a more African-centered model, viewing African rather than Cuban practices as authoritative models for oricha worship. These movements result from a variety of political, national, ethnic, and personal motivations.

6. Anonymous personal communications with the author, Havana and Matanzas, Cuba, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2007. In Cuba I collected anecdotes regarding religious persecution during informal conversations rather than formal on-the-record interviews. Due to the personal nature of religious practice and varying degrees of comfort in discussing it, or government persecution of santeros, I intentionally avoid using named sources for certain anecdotes.

7. This attitude is best exemplified by a 1973 essay “Regarding Folklore” by Cuban ethnologist and folklorist Rogelio Martínez Furé, more widely republished in English in Peter Manuel, ed., *Essays on Cuban Music: North American and Cuban Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), 249–65. When I interviewed Martínez Furé in Havana in September 2000, he disavowed the majority of the essay, citing directives he was given at that time to articulate government attitudes.

8. Marta Moreno Vega reports that at the time of her 1981 initiation in Cuba it was illegal for Cubans to initiate foreigners. Prohibited from paying for her initiation with dollars, she covered her initiation costs by bringing fifteen pairs of contraband U.S. blue jeans to Cuba for her godmother to sell on the black market. Vega, *The Altar of My Soul: The Living Traditions of Santería* (New York: Ballantine, 2000), 215–17.

9. From within Cha-Chá’s circle of drummers, Daniel Alfonso Herrera (1946–2010) exemplifies the long-term santero who waited decades to become fully initiated in 2005, something he finally accomplished in part due to the earnings generated from his foreign drum students.

10. My figure is based on discussions with santeros in Havana, Matanzas, and the United States. For a comparison of initiation cost estimates for Cubans in scholarly literature, see Katherine J. Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 9; Michael Atwood Mason, *Living Santería: Rituals and Experiences in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 60, 142; and Christine Ayorinde, *Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution, and National Identity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 162.

11. These figures are based on my research in California. For a comparison of U.S. initiation costs in scholarly literature, see Raul Canizares, *Walking with the Night: The Afro-Cuban World of Santería* (Rochester, NY: Destiny Books, 1993), 33; Miguel A. de la Torre, *Santería: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 116; Steven Gregory, *Santería in New York City: A Study in Cultural Resistance* (New York: Garland, 1999), 90; Migene González-Wippler, *Santería: The Religion* (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, [1989] 1994), 174, 289; Julio O. Granda, "A Materialist View of Santería and the Expenses Associated with the Initiation," MA thesis, Department of Anthropology, Florida State University, Tallahassee, 1995, 69; Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 220; Joseph Murphy, *Santería: African Spirits in America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, [1988] 1993), 91. See also John Lantigua, "Holy Wars, Inc.," *Miami New Times*, April 9, 1998, www.miaminewtimes.com/1998-04-09/news/holy-wars-incl/.

12. My figure is based on discussions with santeros in Havana, Matanzas, and the United States. See also Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 220–21; Ayorinde, *Afro-Cuban Religiosity*, 162.

13. See Lisa Knauer's essay on the transnational video dialogue between Cubans on the island and in the United States via "audiovisual remittances." Lisa Maya Knauer, "Audiovisual Remittances and Transnational Subjectivities," in Ariana Hernández-Reguant, ed., *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 159–77.

14. The unofficial nature of much Santería commerce with foreigners makes it difficult to estimate numbers of participants with any accuracy. Writing of her Santería research in Santiago, anthropologist Kristina Wirtz states, "Seldom did I meet a santero who did not boast of at least one foreign godchild." Kristina Wirtz, *Ritual, Discourse, and Community in Cuban Santería: Speaking in a Sacred World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 152.

15. Ayorinde, *Afro-Cuban Religiosity*, 161–62; Rogelio Martínez-Furú, interview with the author, September 20, 2000, Havana; Miguel Ramos, "Diplo Santería and Pseudo Orishas," Eledá.org, 2010, eleda.org/blog/2010/12/27/diplo-santeria-and-pseudo-orishas/.

16. Wirtz, *Ritual, Discourse, and Community*.

17. Ayorinde, *Afro-Cuban Religiosity*, 162. I heard similar complaints in both 2005 and 2007, mostly in Havana.

18. Martínez-Furú, interview; Ramos, "Diplo Santería and Pseudo Orishas." Cuban ethnologist Natalia Bolívar claims the Cuban government began offering specialized Santería spectacles for foreign tourists using diplo-santeros in the late 1970s, though by her account (including outrageous "rituals" featuring bare-breasted female dancers) these were entertainment- and folklore-driven enterprises rather than religious commerce. See Juan O. Tamayo, "In Cuba, a Clash between Religions," *Miami Herald*, January 12, 1998, A1.

19. Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, 9, 221–22; Rogelio Martínez-Furé, “A National Cultural Identity? Homogenizing Monomania and the Plural Heritage,” in Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, eds., *Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 161.

20. In 2007, a babalao introduced himself to me on the street near the ACY building (did he follow me from inside the ACY?) and offered to assist me in my research or in recommending private restaurants or rooms for rent, producing his ACY membership card to assure me of his religious legitimacy. For similar encounters, see Wirtz, *Ritual, Discourse, and Community*, 72; and Adrian H. Hearn, *Religion, Social Capital, and Development* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 45–46.

21. Gillian Gunn, *Cuba’s NGOs: Government Puppets or Seeds of Civil Society?* (Washington, DC: Center for Latin American Studies, Georgetown University, 1995). Though written from a stance clearly adversarial to the Castro government, see also Oppenheimer’s chapter “Courting the Babalao.” Andres Oppenheimer, *Castro’s Final Hour: The Secret Story Behind the Coming Downfall of Communist Cuba* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

22. Kenneth Routon, “The ‘Letter of the Year’ and the Prophetics of Revolution,” in Hernández-Reguant, ed., *Cuba in the Special Period*, 132–38.

23. Hearn, *Religion, Social Capital, and Development*, 92–94.