

# 'Invertidos' in Afro-Cuban Religion

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ONE OF CUBA'S many paradoxes is the society's acceptance of homosexuality within the concept of *santería*, a Yoruba-originated religion once considered primitive and deviant and now adopted as a national heritage symbol, a major aspect of a unifying folklore and an official tourist attraction. Furthermore, it is the most popular Afro-Cuban religion, gaining increasing popularity in Cuba and in the Cuban diaspora. In fact *santería* is by far the most popular religion practiced these days in Cuba. Male homosexuality—which traditionally in Cuba means sexually passive homosexuality—and cross-gender behavior are not only tolerated in *santería* but form an essential part of its mythology, philosophy, and practice. As paradoxical as it may sound, religion provides a unique space for homosexual identity and expression in a society with no official “gay scene” and with a history of *machismo* and state-induced homophobia.

*El Monte*, by Lydia Cabrera, is a 1954 classic ethnography of Afro-Cuban religion and one of the first to mention homosexuality (without using the actual term) within *santería*'s history and mythology. Cabrera, herself an out lesbian, refers to homosexuals as “*invertidos*” (an old-fashioned colloquial term meaning “reversed”) and to homosexuality as “*el pecado nefando*” (an archaic term relating to the “the abominable sin of sodomy”). She writes: “Since long ago it has been known that the abominable sin was very common in *Regla Lucumi* [*santería*]). She mentions Papá Colás, a well-known *santería* priest of late 18th-century Havana who “was a famous *invertido* married to another *invertido* ... disguised as a woman ... causing a great scandal.” She also tells the story of the female *oricha* [goddess] *Yemayá*, who fell in love with a homosexual man (*Addodi*, in Yoruba culture), went with him to the mythological country Laddó, where all men were homosexuals, or as quoted in the book, “*maricas, mitad hombres*” (“faggots, half-men”), and protected them. This myth contributed to the popularity of *Yemayá* among effeminate homosexuals.

In his book *Des dieux et des signes* (2000), French anthropologist Erwan Dianteill analyzes the importance of gender and sexuality in Afro-Cuban religions. He also provides a “logical” explanation based on his research as to why it is important to be an effeminate homosexual (*afeminado*) when taking certain roles within the *santería* hierarchy and chain of continuity. Dianteill discusses “*sexe social*” as distinct from physical sex, in which women and *afeminados* belong to the same feminine category, whereas men and masculine lesbians belong

to the masculine category. In his survey he found that 62 percent of *santería* worshippers were biological females while 74 percent were feminine in their social sex, indicating that twelve percent were homosexual men. In my own research between 2002 and 2005, I interviewed 48 homosexual *santería* worshippers. In my sample I observed that 27 were visibly effeminate (56 percent). Fifteen identified themselves primarily with *Yemayá*, one of the nine major *orichas* (31 percent); most of these I deemed effeminate.

Dianteill discusses three levels of relationship between the initiates and the *orichas*: identification, filiation, and alliance.

**Identification.** Before the initiation ceremony, the individual identifies with characteristics of a certain *oricha*, and after the initiation this identification process is reinforced. The process allows male initiates to “change sex” by identifying with female *orichas* such as *Yemayá* or *Ochún*, or to “manipulate gender identity” by identifying with gender-ambiguous *orichas* such as *Obatalá*. It is interesting to look at the internal division between the biological sex of the initiates and the sex of their chosen

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*orichas*, whether out of choice or out of spiritual destiny. Dianteill's survey, based on 100 initiates, shows that, although the masculine *orichas* are more popular than the feminine ones (by 58 percent to 42 percent), almost a quarter of male initiates chose (or “were chosen”) to identify with feminine *orichas*. On

my last visit to Havana I was invited to the initiation ceremony of the bass player of Puerto Rican top Reggaeton group Calle 13 to the female *oricha* *Ochún*. The masculinity and femininity of the *orichas* can be “changeable” in some cases—*Obatalá*, for example, is usually represented as male, but sometimes as female or even as hermaphroditic—allowing cross-identifications.

According to Dianteill, the process of identification provides a co-existence of the human spirit and the *oricha* in the corporal envelope, enabling the homosexual *santeros* to interject a feminine principal in the initiation process, and in the possession process the possibility to exteriorize it. A term used in initiation is *se ha hecho[el] santo*, literally meaning “to become a saint” but also “he has had the saint done onto him,” indicating a “reconstruction of identity.” This is also an important concept in the formation of gay identity, so we can see here two parallel “identity reconstruction” processes that a homosexual initiate can experience—a religious or ceremonial one and a personal, psychological one.

**Filiation.** The next stage of involvement is that the initiates become ritually “related” to the *orichas*—as “son,” “daughter,” and “bride.” The system allows different connections of filiation to occur simultaneously. Initiates who are *hijo* or *hija de santo* (son or daughter of the saint) can also become during the *asiento* ceremony, which represents a “marriage” between *oricha* and human,

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a *iyawó* or “youngest bride.” Hence, the intricate filiation system between human and *oricha* can make the initiate a son, a young bride, and a human copy of the *oricha* all at the same time. This can sometimes be confusing if judged by Western logic of family connections, but in Yoruba societies in Africa and in the New World, such complicated and ambiguous family relations are possible even in secular life. Filiation terms describe not only relations between *orichas* and humans but also between the initiates themselves. This system actually allows homosexual men to have spiritual “descendants” that they do not have in real life, and creates an alternative family to one’s blood relatives.

**Alliance.** The alliance level of relationship between human and *oricha* can be compared to a sexual act where the *oricha* penetrates the initiate. In the possession process the spirit is said to “mount” the possessed. The Yoruba verb *gùn* means “to mount,” and the term for possession priest is *Elégùn* (“the mounted one”). The term *gùn* is also used for a brutal sexual act and for what a god, especially *macho oricha Changó*, does to his initiates. Passive homosexuals are considered the most qualified males to be “mounted” by the *orichas*. In any such union between human and *oricha*, not depending on the original gender of each, the human always takes the feminine role and the god takes the male one, thus making the possession process a simulation of a sexual act in which the *oricha* (even a female one) penetrates the possessed. The essence of the initiation process is that the *oricha* enters the *iyawó*’s body, where he leaves some of his substance, just as a man leaves his semen inside a woman or a passive man. Even those male initiates identifying with masculine *orichas* are “penetrated” and “inseminated” by the *orichas* and therefore take a feminine role during the initiation.

#### THE DIVINE AND THE DEVIANT

In *santería*, music and performance are essential to the practice. The rituals require artistic and performance skills. The general public’s perception is that feminine homosexuals are more artistic than men and women and thus better equipped to organize and participate in rituals (Fry, 1995). Lourdes, a *santera* from Havana, told me: “In the ritual, the presentation and the dances are very important, for us and for the spirits. It has to be beautiful to please the spirits. The *maricónes* do it the best. They are even better than us [women] in the decorations, dressing up, and the dances.”

The association of Afro-Cuban religion with deviance, danger, immoral sexuality, and magical power has a deeply rooted racial source and still exists in the Cuban psyche despite the revolution’s attempts to eradicate racism and racial stigmas. Via *santería*, a deviant and outcast group can carve itself a socially accepted and respected space, one sanctioned by the divine embrace. Stigmatized groups can even gain an aura of power through their association with danger. In 1966 Mary Douglas wrote:

To have been at the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power. ... Magical power is related to the outside, and easily associated with those who are defined outside in sexual terms. ... Societies classify persons, objects and events into simple, tidy categories. In so doing, they classify that which defies the categorization schema as polluting and dangerous [and] ... in so doing furnish them with inherent power that they themselves, cannot have.

To understand the acceptance of marginalized people into the religion, including prostitutes and effeminate homosexual hustlers, it is important to understand one of the main philosophical differences between *santería* and the leading world religions. The essence of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism is the polarization of good and evil, heaven and hell, and so on. This allows its priests to condemn sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular as “sinful” or “unnatural.” In this world, God is asexual and the devil is associated with sexuality. Not so in *santería*, whose essence is motion, action, “making things happen.” This is the power of *ache*, the main energy source of the religion. It is neither good nor bad, but it makes things happen. In *santería* both good and bad have a place and exist as legitimate powers. Some of the deities are mischievous, and sexuality in all its varieties takes place in its cosmos, both in the “heavenly” sphere (the *orichas*) and in the “earthly” one, and even in between.

Another feature of marginalization is secrecy. “The secret makes the sacred in the religions of the Yoruba Atlantic,” wrote Karin Barber in 1981. “It is by being made into a ‘secret’ (*awo*) that a spirit being gets its authority.” Secrecy has been an aspect of homosexual identity throughout history, as it is in Cuba today. The main public gatherings of gays in Havana are clandestine parties held in secret places. Luis, a 33-year-old *santero*, told me, “If you are *discreto*, you can live as you want, sharing life with a man, without any problems. Everybody knows, but no one cares. But if you behave like a *loca* [crazy woman, meaning a ‘screaming queen’], the neighbors will start giving you a hard time. Only when I am with friends in the *malecón* [a gay cruising area in Havana] or in a *toque* [religious drumming] or a ceremony, can I bring my femininity out all the way.” Indeed the concept of the “open secret” is a way of life in Cuban homosexuality. Many people will enthusiastically tell you about the homosexuality of friends or even their own, adding “*pero es un secreto*” (but it is a secret). For this reason, homosexuals practicing *santería* feel comfortable with the secret aura of the religion, which resonates with the secrecy of their secular lives.

Transvestites and transsexuals are both accepted and respected within the world of *santería*. On the secular level, the phenomenon of *travesti* and their role in Cuban society is an interesting subject. Unlike in the U.S., in Cuba it’s the lower strata of society that show a higher tolerance toward transvestites. I was at “drag show parties” in private homes in the poorest areas of Havana, where non-gay neighbors and families enjoyed the show. A Cuban documentary film *Mariposas en el Andamio* (“Butterflies on the Scaffold,” 1995) shows how a women worker’s union in a poor suburb of Havana, supported by the local authority, “adopted” a group of transvestites who give a regular drag show to entertain the general public in the suburb, and how the *travesti* become an integral part of society there.

Abel Sierra Madero, an anthropologist and researcher in *Fundación Fernando Ortiz* in Havana, who has carried out extensive field research on transvestites in Cuba, has documented a number of transvestites who are *santeras*. In clandestine *travesti* drag shows that I saw in Havana, there were many references to the world of *santería*. *Santería* practice is about daring to cross the borders between the human sphere and the *oricha* sphere. Transvestites and transsexuals are known to cross the border between male and female, thus making them most suitable to “cross the borders” during ceremony and communicate with the *orichas*.

## CHANGES IN CUBAN HOMOSEXUALITIES IN THE *SANTERÍA*

Looking from a “Western” (American and Eurocentric) perspective at *santería* as a space for homosexual identity may prove confusing and frustrating for some people. It’s important to avoid the trap of essentialism, polarization, and simplification. *Santería* plays a role in establishing a unique space suited to the needs of its particular society and its homosexualities (note the plural form), perhaps contributing to keeping them from complete assimilation into a “global gay identity.” At the same time, due to its flexibility, its syncretistic essence, and unique social status, it allows for the absorption of new influences and processes. This balance of preservation and flexibility helps to maintain local homosexual identities and at the same time to nurture new “syncretistic” ones.

Strongman (2002) describes the Afro-Diaspora religions as “sites of local knowledge that can serve as cultural arsenals in the resistance to these hegemonic discourses [US gay identity] and as places in which Latin American homosexual identities can find the construction materials necessary to continue developing without total absorption by the hegemony of the mainstream gay and lesbian movement in the United States.” He criticizes heavily, and rightly so, Western gay scholars who “carelessly defer to such inefficient and dangerous models of cultural comparison without reflecting on the distorted evaluations that their privileged perspectives are prone to make,” starting with “the indiscriminate impositions of such gender categories of ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ without questioning the culture-specific conditions that gave rise to them in the United States and their non-correspondence to local Latin American categories.”

It’s worth remembering that three leading Cuban authors were openly homosexual (Virgilio Piñera, José Lezama Lima, and Reinaldo Arenas), and that the most famous Cuban movie is *Fresa y chocolate* (*Strawberry and Chocolate*, 1994), the main character of which is an openly gay intellectual. This knowledge can enlighten Western gays with the understanding that different sexual orientation identities exist within different cultural contexts, and that tolerance towards homosexuality and freedom in terms of sexual orientation is not necessarily a privilege of the “first world,” nor has to do with race, development, or economics. The ambiguity of male gender and sexuality in *santería* is not a “proto-gay” gay identity, as one observer claimed, but a unique space where gender is complicated and where ambiguity is not a compromise. This ambiguity and non-binary approach is a philosophical nucleus which is in the heart of Cuban gender and sexual identity.

That said, Cuba has not escaped the globalization process and is now in an interesting stage of absorbing it and adapting it to its needs. Some see this “global gay” effect as a threat to the distinction of existing homosexual identities. This claim seems a bit alarmist and patronizing to me, implying that local homosexual identity is easily reformed by the influx of “global gay” concepts. Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz coined the term “transculturation” referring to the unique process that occurred in Cuba—the blending and merging of cultural influences and the creation of a new cultural identity deriving from this blend, rather than acculturation which indicates assimilation and a cultural takeover. I would say that a transculturation process is evolving in Cuban homosexuality these days, an organic process of blending local

and global identities, creating a new kind of modern Cuban gay identity, with elements from both.

There’s a strong symbiotic relationship between male effeminacy and passive homosexuality and Cuban *santería*. The phenomenon has a long history, starting from the role of *adodis* in the Yoruba culture, leading to fashionable gay *santeros* in contemporary Havana wearing tight white T-shirts and *oricha*-colored Adidas sneakers. The evolution and historic processes were influenced by Spanish colonialism and the Catholic church, and later by Castro’s revolution, the financial crisis, and the “special period” in the 90’s, when the gates were opened to mass tourism. In the shadow of Cuban *machismo* and state-induced homophobia, even during “the dark ages” of the revolution in the 70’s, when homosexuals were sent to labor camps, effeminate homosexuals managed to find a safe space for self-identity and self-expression within *santería*.

The importance of this phenomenon is far beyond the functionalist need of the religion and the homosexual initiates and worshippers. It has a deeply-rooted cultural source and an important role in cementing the complex texture of Cuban society and culture. Matory (2003) writes: “Transnational social movements and diasporas, like nation states, propagate secrets and defend the intimate zones that are created around those secrets... any fact that a community can be persuaded to discuss privately and to silence in company of outsiders can serve the same community-defining function—a function that Herzfeld calls ‘cultural intimacy.’” The active role of homosexuals in *santería* can be seen as such an open “secret” cultivating Cuban “cultural intimacy.”

The unique space for homosexuals in *santería* is not to be seen as an isolated phenomenon of the religion but as part of a holistic system of philosophy and faith based on a cosmology where the spheres of gods and humans interact in different levels, including spiritual and sexual ones. This system also allows interaction of the sacred and the secular, gender ambiguity, and cross-gender manipulation. Performance (music, dance, possession) is an essential component of the system and provides the medium for contact between gods and humans, in which effeminate passive homosexuals play an important role.

While the leading world religions are still essentially homophobic and enlightened forces within them are fighting hard to break the hypocritical barrier which still locks worshippers and priests deep “in the closet,” Cuba’s *santería* has for decades been providing a safe haven for self-expression and self-realization to homosexuals.

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