

## **A Transatlantic Restoration of Religion: On the Re-construction of Yoruba and Lúkú mí in Cuban Santería**

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CLAUDIA RAUHUT

*Yoruba* is an important source of socio-cultural and religious belonging in the Atlantic World. Due to the transatlantic slave trade, millions of Africans identified as Yoruba came to the Americas, especially to the Caribbean, the USA, and Brazil. Their lasting cultural impact has been shown in nearly all sectors of everyday life – in Afro-American religions like Cuban Santería, Haitian Vodou, or Brazilian Candomblé, in music, language, material and popular culture, food, and so on. But Yoruba, as part of broader African heritage, is not just a historically constitutive element of Afro-Latin-American societies; it has also influenced certain people, practices, and locations in nearly all countires of the Atlantic World by means of cyclical processes of migration and globalization. The ongoing construction and appropriation of Yoruba identity by highly diverse sets of actors, as exemplified by their practices and materially tangible in their localities in the Americas, Europe and Africa, has been a central concern for anthropological research since the early 20th century. The assumptions of classical literature on African, and especially Yoruba, cultures and their transformation in the Americas between *survivals* (Herskovits 1941) and *creolization* (Mintz/Price 1976) has been reworked since the 1990s by groundbreaking *Atlantic approaches*. Authors like John Peel (1989), Stephan Palmié (2002; 2005), and J. Lorand Matory (1999a; 1999b) have stressed the transnational ethno-genesis and construction of Yoruba as a historical and ongoing process of an “Afro-Atlantic live dialogue” (Matory 1999a). Focusing on the long-term interweaving of connections among mobile actors, practices, and ideas circulating between Europe, West

Africa, and the Americas especially since the second half of 19th century, they all have convincingly shown that Yoruba religions are the result of active and continuous work on the past, and memory, influenced by missionaries, colonial powers, commercial, scientific, and religious agencies in different localities and temporalities around the Atlantic. A key observation is that identification with Yoruba is mainly achieved by religious agency – people “become” and consider themselves Yoruba as a result of being initiated into the Yoruba or into one of the Afro-American religions.

In Cuba, historically one of the most prominent locations for Yoruba practices (labeled as Lucumí) in the Americas, identification via religion has been analyzed as a constitutive element in the emergence of first religious groups of Lucumí at the end of 20th century (Brandon 1997 [1993]; Brown 2003; Palmié 1991).

In this article, I examine contemporary processes of identification with Yoruba and Lucumí in Cuban Santería. By focusing on the worshipers themselves, I aim to demonstrate how they re-construct their religious belonging and the historical, spatial and temporal references they draw upon. As an example, I highlight a particular contemporary project of transatlantic ritual innovation headed by a religious leader in Cuba and finally analyze how the categories Yoruba and Lucumí in Cuba are appropriated. The backdrop of this study is the ongoing religious globalization of Santería through migration which has gone hand-in-hand with the gradual official recognition and popularity of Afro-Cuban religions since the 1990s. In my PhD thesis, I analyzed the increasing relevance of transatlantic networks, whereby conflicts surrounding religious tradition and related references between Cuba and Africa have been important struggles for accessing power in the growing field of Yoruba religion and practice (Rauhut 2012).<sup>1</sup> While other contributions in this volume offer an impression of the recent global spread of Yoruba-based religions in the USA, Latin America, and Germany, my article deals with the impact of religious globalization in Cuba itself and the historical and contemporary meaning of traditions of Yoruba and Lucumí and how they are positioned by Cuban religious leaders within a global spectrum of Afro-Atlantic religions.

<sup>1</sup> Based on long-term empirical research in Havana/Cuba between the years 2004 and 2007, I analyzed several major conflicts concerning the globalization of Santería and its renegotiation in Cuba (Rauhut 2012).

## The Emergence of Santería Cuba

Santería is based on West African, mainly Yoruba traditions, which were brought to Cuba by enslaved Africans captured from the regions of the today south-western Nigeria and south of Benin during the transatlantic slave trade. Still not known by the term of Yoruba, in Cuba they have been labeled as Lucumí (analogous to Nagó in Brazil). Both terms were originally used by colonizing slaveholders to categorize supposed ethnic origins and classify the “value” of the enslaved Africans in the colonies (Law 1997: 205). Cuban historian López-Valdéz has shown how Lucumí became a generic concept in 19th century Cuba, which not only the Yoruba-speaking people have adopted, but also other ethnic groups like Bariba, Igbo, Asante, Hausa (López-Valdés 1998 [1990]: 339). Palmié and Zeuske understand Lucumí as a mode of cultural and ethnic integration concerning the assimilation of linguistically and culturally similar groups – a process that mainly took part within the urban colonial institutions called *Cabildos de Nación* (Palmié 1991: 76; Zeuske 2002: 118).

A central factor in “becoming Lucumí” was at that time, and still is, religion. People thus choose and achieve their belonging to Lucumí by initiation into one of the different religious groups of Lucumí (Brandon 1997). The first such group was initially founded by enslaved Africans as well as freed Blacks in the *Lucumí Cabildos*, probably in the second half of 19th century. At the turn of century, after the official abolishment of slavery in 1886, a standardized religion called *Regla de Ocha* (the rule of the Orichas, the Yoruba gods) emerged through the agency of several charismatic religious leaders of the *Lucumí Cabildos* and *Sociedades* (Brown 2003).

*Regla de Ocha* (consisting in the devotion to different Orichas, Cubanized gods of Yoruba people) was popularly known as Santería from the 1930s and practiced by male *Santeros* and female *Santeras*. The other branch, *Regla de Ifa*, centered on the interpretation of the oracle of *Ifa* by exclusively male *Babalao*s, who were considered as the highest ritual hierarchy within a religious family. Today, there are hundreds of independent, autonomous, and decentralized religious families, whose members are affiliated by ritual kinship and mutual social ties, loyalty, and support. As godfathers/mentors (*padrinos/as*), the *Santeros*, *Santeras*, and *Babalao*s transmit their spiritual practices and knowledge to their godchildren (*ahijados/as*) and initiate them as sons and daughters of the Orichas. The relationships within a religious family can thus be characterized in terms of kinship and reciprocity: While worshipers constantly devote different forms of worship to the Orichas, including sacrificial offerings and spirit posses-

sion, the Orichas, in turn, protect them through their spiritual powers and shield them from harm and misfortune in their private and professional lives (Perera Pintado 2000; Menéndez 1995b).

While Santería, like other Afro-Cuban religions, was stigmatized from many years as “African sorcery” or a “primitive, backward and criminal cult,” it is today the most popular religion in Cuba and has become a powerful symbol of the Cuban national identity.<sup>2</sup> At present, numerous practitioners prefer to (re-)use the terms Lucumi or Yoruba, instead of Santería, to refer to the religion. These shifts in terminology are part of broader tendencies to re-Africanize Afro-American traditions, which is closely linked to an increasing global connectedness and migration of these religions (Frigerio 2004).

### Global Networks of Re-Africanization

Re-Africanization refers to the wider appropriation of “African-style” rituals and cosmologies in the Americas for strengthening religious authenticity and legitimation. Those tendencies have been most prominently (and were also first) exemplified by Orisha voodoo practice in the USA, which is usually understood as a selective synthesis of elements from Cuban Santería, Haitian Vodou, and US-American styles of Nigerian Yoruba religion (Brandon 1997 [1993]; Palmié 1995). The followers of this re-Africanized practice, many of whom were affiliated with the movement of Black nationalism in the US, have been inspired by the establishment of Cuban Santería in the US since the 1940s as a result of different Cuban migration waves. In Santería’s strong African Yoruba-based practices, they have found connecting links to support their political and cultural interest in Africa and concern with identity affirmation. Since its foundation in the 1970s, the religious agenda of the Yoruba movement and Oyotunji<sup>3</sup> village in North Carolina has prominently been analyzed as Yoruba revisionism (Brandon 1997 [1993]), Yoruba reversionism (Brown 2003) or Yoruba revivalism (Clarke 2004, 2007). This means that creolized syncretistic Afro-American religions like Santería were revised in such a manner that their supposed Christian and Hispanic influences were claimed to be substituted by assumed “purer” and “more authentic” African versions. In their struggle with identity, the “Yoruba of the New World” (Capone 2005),

2 Ayorinde 2004; Argyriadis and Capone (2004); Perera Pintado (2007).

3 In the Yoruba language: “Oyo rises again,” referring to the old kingdom of Oyo in today’s Nigeria.

especially the followers from the US, have traveled to West Africa in order to learn about and import current African-Yoruba rituals and to collaborate with spiritual mentors from Nigeria. Their assumption of a superior authority of a “true African religion” has been a source of conflict with other practitioners, mostly Latin Americans in the US who defend the conventional Cuban Santería style (Palmié 1995). While the activists from US-American Yoruba movement once strongly influenced other Afro-American religions in their own “re-Africanization” process, which is well documented in the cases of Brazilian Candomblé (Capone 1999) or the Orisha religion in Trinidad and Tobago (Henry 2003), the search for African Yoruba origins has since become a quite diverse religious agency of different local actors and groups throughout the Americas. Oyotunji is just one of many existing institutions, actors, and “networks of Yoruba-Orisa invention,” connected by transatlantic interacting geopolitical zones (Clarke 2007: 729), where “centers of canonization” (Matory 2001: 198) emerge. Palmié emphasizes the impact of Nigerian Yoruba practitioners and scholars like Wande Ambimbola, who have been engaged in teaching the (West African) Yoruba language and religion since the 1970s in Brazil, in the Caribbean, and also in Cuba and have thereby contributed to a “cultural work of Yoruba globalization” (Palmié 2005). Re-Africanization has further been researched in the so-called “secondary religious diaspora” – a term Frigerio uses to refer to countries like Argentine, Venezuela, Mexico or Uruguay, where Cuban Santería, Haitian Vodou, Brazilian Candomblé or US-American Orisha voodoo have taken root due to approximately 40 years of condensed migration and religious globalization (Frigerio 2004).

### Approaching Yorubización in Cuba

In Cuba the issue of re-Africanization has been conceived first as *Yorubización*, a tendency that Cuban scholar Lázara Menéndez observed in the 1990s at an international congress of the *Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba*.<sup>4</sup> According to Menéndez, several Cuban Babalaos advocated for a stronger ritual and linguistic orientation toward Nigerian Yoruba practices and religious authorities. In her article, deliberately entitled “The Santería

4 The Cultural Association of Yoruba Cuba was founded in 1991 in Havana with governmental support. Their leading members, like the controversial president Antonio Castaneda, claim to represent all the Santería practitioners in Cuba and even those living outside Cuba (Argyriadis/Capone 2004; Gobin 2007; Rauhut 2012).

that I know...," she criticizes those Cubans as a small elite manipulated by discourses "from the outside" who "discredit (the) established Cuban Santería of the majority" (Menéndez 1995a). Her view that Yorubización threatens to divide religious unity in Cuba and provoke an identity crisis (ibid: 42) has been shared by other scholars. Ayorinde believes that as a result of Yorubización Santería would lose its recognition and autonomy within the global spectrum of Yoruba practices in Nigeria and the African diaspora, where "[...] attempts to return to a 'nebulous orthodoxy' are futile and [...] such a return would imply an immobilization of living cultural practices" (Ayorinde 2004: 184).

To my mind, such assertions are misleading, insofar as they overlook the perspectives of the religious practitioners themselves. Should not the search for African roots, independent of any theoretical reflections of "essentialism" etc., be considered a "living cultural practice"? As my observations will show in the following, it is necessary to account for the fact that practitioners themselves indeed appropriate "African knowledge" and "African ritual practices" within their transatlantic networks in a very creative and obviously essentialist way – a relevant agency that we have to take into account. When Menéndez asserts that Africa does not have any impact as a source of identification apart from being the (past) origin of Santería and that "Lucumí is not used in Cuba, either as term or as practice" (Menéndez 2002), she is clearly ignoring a relevant religious current of recent years.

This radical position negating any affirmation of Africa may have changed in the last years. Recent publications at least differentiate more between certain institutions, actors, and strategies involved in the re-Africanization or Yorubización of different periods. Stephan Palmié has offered interesting insights into early 20th century "African lucumí religious morality," when Lucumí leaders mobilized alliances with scholars and politicians in order to gain more public recognition for African based religions (Palmié 2002: 259). Argyriadis/Capone as well as Konen have focused on current re-Africanization in Cuba, taking the example of Ile Tuntun and its leader Frank (Cabrera) Obeché (Argyriadis and Capone 2004; Konen 2013). As one of the first Cuban Babalaos to establish religious ties with Nigerian Yoruba practitioners (including the above-mentioned Wande and later his son Taiwo Abimbola) beginning in the late 1980s, he attempts to conduct ceremonies in an "African style" of Yoruba religion. I have also noted in my research that people often refer to Frank Obeché and other Babalaos of the so-called Linea Africana and so I finally contacted Víctor Betancourt Omolófaro, who was referred to me as one of

the most prominent representatives engaged in the re-Africanization of Santería.

### Claiming a Crisis of Cuban Santería.

Víctor Betancourt founded his own religious group, *Casa Templo Ifá Iranlówó* (which means "the salvation is in Ifá" in Yoruba), in Havana in the 1990s. In this programmatic undertaking, he "reformed" established rituals in order to "restore" popular Santería. Some of the ritual innovations (to be described later) have caused intense debates between different religious groups, both inside and outside of Cuba, around different aspirations to define "legitimate" tradition.

Already in the late 1980s, Betancourt established an informal school of Ifa, where Cuban Babalaos discretely came together in private houses and exchanged and systematized their sources of oral history and knowledge in order to improve and refine Ifa divination and liturgy in the Yoruba and Lucumí language (interview with Betancourt; Havana/January 2007). During that time, when the majority of Cubans still did not have many opportunities to establish relations to people outside Cuba, Betancourt already had some transnational contacts to practitioners in Mexico and USA, who helped him to access written sources on the Yoruba religion from Nigeria. He furthermore enjoys a high reputation as the second leader of the *Comisión Organizadora de la Letra del Año* due to his knowledge, especially of liturgy.<sup>5</sup>

According to Betancourt, Santería at present is experiencing an ethical crisis and decline due to its on-going commercialization and the fast and uncontrolled spread of initiations in Cuba, a tendency that "banalizes and splits religious knowledge" (interview with Betancourt; Havana/January 2007). The discourse on negative changes in the religion is quite common among Cuban practitioners, who point to the problems of globalization and the increasing participation of foreigners.<sup>6</sup> However, for Betancourt the

5 The Commission on Ifa's prediction for the year is, in contrast to the Cultural Association of Yoruba, considered to be a more legitimate state-independent association of Santería practitioners. It was founded by Lázaro Cuesta in 1986.

6 Emma Gobin (2008) has analyzed the impact of the "initiation of foreigners" in its normative discourses; cf. also chapter seven in Rauhut (2012). I would interpret the normative borders around the anxiety of having foreign members in one's own religious group – and thereby accessing (or not accessing) better resources of transnational practice – as an integral part of increasing global ex-



crisis of Cuban tradition already began with the system of slavery, which forced a radical rupture with the "original" Yoruba culture. Many rituals, according to him, did not even reach Cuba or could not be developed under the dominant colonial catholic society, resulting in their disappearance over the years. Furthermore, he asserts that several rituals have been transmitted "incorrectly" due to "failures" in the oral tradition that have prevented any teaching of knowledge.

As a result, Cuban practice remains incomplete and deficient. Betancourt advocates for a stronger religious exchange with the followers of Yoruba living in Nigeria and other places around the Atlantic. He calls them "our brothers" (in terms of religious and genealogical kinship) and emphasizes new possibilities for Cubans to establish cross-border contacts. Indeed, following the internal and global changes in and around Cuba after 1990s, this represents quite a new option for mobility, ritual exchange, and knowledge transfer within increasing transnational networks of Yoruba practitioners. To overcome the proclaimed crisis, Betancourt makes an appeal for a restoration of religion through a larger project of ritual innovations. These innovations are, on the one hand, based on a revitalization of an older Cuban praxis. On the other hand, he also introduces, with the support of his contacts outside of Cuba, some ritual elements of present Nigerian practice which were previously unknown in Cuba.

### The Renewal of the *Lúkúmi* Religion

Betancourt, nevertheless, presents his own model of religion not as being African inspired, but much more as a restoration of an "original" Cuban practice which went lost partially at the beginning of 20th century but can be recuperated in present times. He calls this early Cuban practice *Lúkúmi* and considers it an authentic form which is much closer to the "original" heritage of the enslaved Yoruba (Lucumí) people than what later became known as *Santería*, "corrupted" by syncretistic changes due to catholic-patriarchal influences, from which he distances himself. He uses the term *Lúkúmi* instead of the very usual Cuban form *Lucumí*, and also presents other religious termini as the "correct Yoruba form." He consequently rejects popular Afro-Catholic terminology like *Santería*, *Santero*, *Santera* and instead calls himself and his godchildren "followers of *Lúkúmi*."

change. In a growing competitive spectrum of Yoruba practitioners, Cubans struggle to defend their ritual expertise.

Betancourt argues that this early practice can be revitalized today, because there are still some "isolated ritual elements" conserved by elder families, especially in and around the region of Matanzas. In order to "bring them up to light," Betancourt and his followers have been conducting their own field research in different provinces of Cuba since the late 1980s. Similar to the work of an anthropologist (he in fact considers himself to be a self-taught anthropologist), they collect and record primary sources such as ritual chants, Ifa verses, participant observations during ceremonies, and finally conduct interviews with elder worshipers. He emphasizes his own exclusive access to "authentic" and revered religious persons and the confidential knowledge he gained as an experienced and respected Babalao. According to Betancourt, these hidden sources of oral history and knowledge have simply been overlooked for a long time because of the "disinterest" and "ignorance" of the majority of practitioners and still have not been investigated by researchers (interview with Betancourt; Havana/January 2007). He started to collect, systematize, and reorganize those oral sources and, finally, published them in combination with other "sources of Yoruba" containing philosophical and cosmological fundamentals.

A first step in the rediscovery of hidden sources was the revitalization of the former initiation style *Pata y Cabeza* in the early 1990s (feet and head, also known as *Pie y Cabeza*), which is distinct from the leading Cuban initiation style.<sup>7</sup> Other Babalaos have also applied *Pata y Cabeza* and usually refer to it as an African style initiation, similar to the common style among the Yoruba in West Africa (cf. interview with Lázaro Pijuán; February/Havana 2007). Again, Betancourt refers to *Pata y Cabeza* as an early Cuban style (not an African one) practiced especially in Matanzas between 1860 and 1939, before the consolidation and unification of various Orichas into one initiation ceremony became the predominant style in Cuba.<sup>8</sup> While scholars have explained the frequent adoption of *Pata y*

7 "Pata y Cabeza" is a reduced form of initiation with only one major Oricha in the head (*dueño de la cabeza*, owner of the head) and Oricha Elleguá in the feet. Unlike in the predominant *Santería* style, adepts do not receive five or six additional Orichas.

8 Víctor Betancourt: Casa Templo Ifá Ìrànólówó. Para todos los Líderes Religiosos de Cuba y el Mundo; unpublished document, owned by the author. Many scholars agree about the existence of "Pata y Cabeza," but differ with regard to its historical references in terms of the time, region, and content of this practice (Brown 2003; Ramos 2003). The initiation of "head and feet" is also well-known and practiced by the Yoruba of Oyotunji in the USA, who acquire their

*Cabeza* as a pragmatic response to the economic crisis of the “special period” in the 1990s, which forced people to reduce their initiation costs (one Oricha alone costs much less than five or six Orichas, cf. Fernández Robaina 2003; Ayorinde 2004: 176), religious practitioners legitimate it as a purer, and more authentic style.

However, the ceremony of *Pata y Cabeza* is controversial among Cuban Santería followers, who mostly continue to adopt the conventional style. But obviously the most conflictive innovation has been the first initiation of women into *Regla de Ifa* as *Íyáonifá*, introduced by Betancourt in 2004. Previously unknown in Cuba, this revitalized ceremony for women has caused a deep trans-local religious conflict dealing with competing models of tradition. This conflict especially brought to light the already existing struggles for power, legitimization, and leadership among the leading religious institutions in Cuba.

#### Transatlantic Restoration on Both Sides of the Atlantic

These innovations could not have been accomplished without support from affiliated practitioners living in Nigeria and other places, who aided Betancourt with sources, rituals, finances, and logistics. However, Betancourt never describes his innovations as African, but much more as a former Cuban practice of Lúkúmi that he has revitalized based on the above-described field research. He argues that it is not necessary to search in Africa for what already once existed as part of a Cuban practice. He suggests that this former tradition can be easily restored because there are still some isolated Yoruba elements that have been maintained by elder families, in some cases even better than in Nigeria itself:

»[...] las formas de culto y de liturgia que conforma la variante cubana de esta práctica forman parte de un legado mucho más antiguo del que están divulgando los africanos actualmente. Por fortuna, se conservan en escasos ilé Òṣà, todo el caudal legado de forma original. Hasta me atrevo a decir que poseemos valores

knowledge exclusively through exchanges with Yoruba priests from Nigeria (Brown 2003: 281).

- 9 Emma Gobin (2007) has convincingly shown the chronological dynamics and ambitions of this institutional conflict. I myself have focused on the women's legitimization discourses referring to Cuban and African sources and on how the ceremony contested gender roles in religion, as it is supposed to attribute more ritual competences to women (Rauhut 2012).

tradicionales que los actuales yorubas no conservan.» (Awo Òrúnmílà/ Betancourt Omolófaoró/Selier Crespo 2004)<sup>10</sup>

Betancourt underlines the presumed authenticity, pureness, and even superiority of a strong Cuban oral tradition. He presents the latter as older and therefore “closer” to the “original” African Yoruba practice (in the form as it reached Cuba) compared to contemporary Yoruba religion in Nigeria. He further argues that the predominance of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria since the 19th century and internal wars have deeply affected the Yoruba religion and caused the disappearance of Orichas, liturgy, and rituals. As a result, the Nigerian tradition today remains deficient and incomplete; he further sees the present Cuban tradition as also being in a state of constant decline. In order to overcome the crisis of religion, he suggests selectively searching in Cuba and Africa for ritual elements that can restore the respective missing parts in both religions:

»No se trata de hacer una copia de Africa. Aparte, la misma [religión] que está aquí está allá. La misma. (...) Mis bisabuelos que llegaron aquí son los hermanos, los primos de los mismos bisabuelos que están allá. Lo que nos enseñaron aquí, lo que dejaron aquí como legado es lo mismo que dejaron como legado allá. Eso es lo que hay que buscar (...). Para ver lo que aquí se perdió está allá. Y que ellos [los Nigerianos] ven también lo que han perdido está aquí. Entre ambos hacemos el trabajo ese y restauramos.» (interview with Betancourt/January 2007 in Havana)<sup>11</sup>

The idea of a once shared and unique Yoruba religion that slavery disrupted is quite pervasive among other practitioners as well. Most, however, would emphasize Cuban Santería's specific history and transformation and would reject substituting established Cuban tradition by introducing new elements

- 10 “[...] the forms of cult and liturgy that the Cuban variant of this practice contain are part of a legacy much older than what Africans actually divulge. Fortunately, they have been preserved, the entire legacy in its original form, in a few ilé Òṣà [religious houses]. I would even argue that we have traditional values that the present Yoruba has not preserved.” (free translation by the author)

- 11 “It's not about making a copy of Africa. Above all, the same [religion] that is here is also over there. The same (...) My great-grandfathers who arrived here were brothers and cousins of the same great-grandfathers who were over there. What they have taught us here, what they have brought us as a legacy, is the same legacy they have over there. That is what we have to look for (...). To see that what has been lost here is *there*. And they [the Nigerians] also realize that what they have lost is *here*. Between both of us, we make that work and restore.” (free translation by the author)

from outside of Cuba (cf. interview with Lázaro Cuesta; Havana/ February 2007). In contrast, Betancourt highlights the possibility and, indeed, necessity of restoring the religion's disrupted and widely dispersed local variants and of unifying the "here" (Cuba) and the "over there" (Nigeria) in a transatlantic religion which, he argues, would be stronger and more effective.

He enacts this active religious work by creating new possibilities, of mutual exchange between practitioners dispersed in different locations around the Atlantic world regarding specific rituals, mythology, liturgy, and oral and written sources. He thus considers the rituals found in Nigeria to be as fragmented and incomplete as those in Cuba – which is why the ritual repertoires of the respective sides depend on and need to complement each other in a mutual process of "restoration...on both sides of the Atlantic" (interview with Betancourt; Havana/January 2007). The restored rituals can then be reintroduced in Cuba, as well as in Nigeria. This vision certainly seems innovative compared to other well-documented practices of "re-Africanization" in other Yoruba-based religions in the US, Brazil or Trinidad and Tobago, which often refer to a timeless and boundless Africa in a unidirectional and essentialist way (exemplified most prominently in the case of Oyotunji movement in the US, cf. Palmié 1995; Capone 2005).

Betancourt, on the other hand, enacts a different strategy: Instead of only importing African rituals with the support of Yoruba practitioners in Africa, he considers himself and his followers to be Cuban experts who are themselves able to export ritual knowledge into the world. Behind this affirmative stance is the self-conscious assertion of Cuban notions of religion shared by a large number of Cuban practitioners, especially those who defend the autonomy of Santería (interview with Ernesto Valdés; Havana/February 2007). Of course, most of them would respect Nigerian authorities and the African origins of Cuban Santería, but only inasmuch as they represent the roots of the religion, not as relevant points of reference for the present. By contrast, Betancourt examines contemporary African rituals as legitimate sources, which – because of their selective integration – allows him to achieve a more complete version of a religion, but one that still envisions a very Cuban notion of tradition.

#### On the Current *Lúkumización* in Cuba

While the central discursive reference for Víctor Betancourt's own model of "restored religion" still remains the "original" *Lúkumí* practice in Cuba itself, he has only been able to re-construct it by means of selective recourse to present rituals, sources, and knowledge from Nigeria and other

localities of Yoruba practice. Within transatlantic networks of re-Africanization, he enacts a specific form of approaching African authenticity, which, to my mind, is better suited to the term *Lúkumización* than the above-mentioned term *Yorubización*. *Lúkumización*, in my view, is a religious program generated within global practices and discourses on Yoruba religion that is strategically referred to as a unique and "renewed" Cuban tradition. By constructing his own specific model of *Lúkumí*, Betancourt confronts established models of Yoruba Atlantic tradition in three different ways:

First, he rejects a too predominantly influence of Nigerian scholars and Yoruba leaders like Wande Abimbola, who considers himself a "spokesperson" for the Yoruba worldwide<sup>12</sup> and closely collaborates, for instance, with above mentioned Frank Ogbeché, another Cuban Babalao of the *Linea Africana*. Even if Betancourt has some commonalities with these leaders, including the desire to unify different local variants of Yoruba practice, he categorically refuses the realization of this goal by means of the unilateral spiritual guidance of Nigerians. He insists on mutual exchange between Cubans, Nigerians, and other experts on a level playing ground. Second, Betancourt distances himself from US-centered Yoruba practice of the Oyotunji movement. He confirms that he knows their claims, but considers them too extreme, radical, and misleading – especially when they deliberate suspending the Cuban tradition in favor of a Nigerian version. Third, with regard to the positioning of Betancourt's model within variants of the Cuban tradition itself, he constantly distances himself from popularized and "corrupted" versions of Afro-catholic Santería as propagated, according to him, by the Cultural Association of Yoruba who claims an "illegitimate" representation of Yoruba practitioners in Cuba (interview with Betancourt; Havana/January 2007).

Towards these ends, Betancourt's model of the *Lúkumí* tradition claims to be "new" and "original," while Betancourt constantly mobilizes "innovation" as a strategic discourse. It is, however, not a historic continuity of a supposed former original *Lucumí* practice, but rather a retrospective projection based on present access to new practices and (often written) sources.

12 <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/abimbola.html>. Accessed on April 1, 2010.



### Accessing Transatlantic Networks – Confronting Imbalances

The extent to which Cubans are able to introduce new or restored old ceremonies depends highly on their access to resources of transatlantic practice which encounter quite unequal pre-conditions. Betancourt gained a privileged position due to his longstanding connections to practitioners, scholars, artists and journalists from Nigeria, the US, Latin America, and Europe going back to 1980. Many were initiated as members of Betancourt's group and invited him to travel for religious purposes or academic events to countries like Mexico, Argentina, and the US. Those networks have provided him with rituals, books, and Internet sources on different local variations of Yoruba. In turn, he first selectively incorporates them into his religious model, and second compares, researches, systematizes, and publishes a very specialized knowledge. Betancourt therefore can be considered a leading proponent of new processes for the religion's intellectualization (cf. also Gobin 2008).

Betancourt is a well-known and respected Babalao and enjoys a great deal of support and admiration from affiliated and non-affiliated worshippers, scholars, journalists and sympathizers in Cuba and abroad. However, most Cubans do not pay much attention, or even know about, his model of the Lúkúmi tradition. He is, however, a good example of a newly emerging and powerful transatlantic religious "elite." Even if they are never able to control the so-called religious "base" and undermine the autonomy of the very heterogeneous and decentralized religious families, they nonetheless possess a certain power of representation. This obviously influences the larger process of redefining Santería, Yoruba and Lúkúmi in a transnational context, as well as its leadership both inside and outside of Cuba (Rauhut 2012). Within Cuba, Betancourt has been accused by other religious leaders and scholars for "confronting and attacking Cuban tradition and for being too concerned with Africa" (interview with Ernesto Valdés; Havana/February 2007; interview with Maria Faguaga; Havana/February 2005). Betancourt, however, sees his confrontation with established Cuban tradition as central to his reform project and considers it necessary from a religious point of view (interview with Betancourt; Havana/January 2007).

### Conclusion

By way of concluding, I interpret Betancourt's recourse to the Lúkúmi tradition as a particular appropriation of an African past and present incorporated in a Cuban tradition of Lúkúmi that is supposed to restore the historical "purity" of religion in terms of "originality." This purity is not a given, but rather has to be produced *ex post* through a process of remembering and re-inventing that, moreover, needs to be backed by an assertion of a supposedly broken tradition. What Betancourt presents as the original Lúkúmi religion in Cuba is not a direct continuity of the existing tradition of the beginning of the 20th century, but rather a retrospective projection based on contemporary practices, sources, and knowledge. In short, "originality" is always constructed in hindsight from the present perspective as original. However, through the very selective and fragmentary use of oral and written sources from different historical periods and localities, Betancourt successfully shows how tradition can be reworked by individual agency in terms of "re-making history" or "re-writing" history – a history of Afro-Cuban religions, which according to Betancourt and many others, has been too long misrepresented by colonial narratives and hegemonic powers like the church, academics and state officials.

While a lot of anthropological work has been done on the construction and invention of traditions, Stewart and Shaw (1994) have convincingly demonstrated that theoretical concepts often risk obscuring the perspective of religious actors. For believers, traditions are not invented but frequently performed as phenomenological realities which they appropriate, obviously in an essentialist way. Through their strategic recourse to the past, they stabilize and legitimate their practices in the present. Consequently, it is not our task as anthropologists to empirically show whether ethno-historical categories like Yoruba or Lúkúmi really exist or are constructed or if ritual innovations are "authentically" African or "originally" Cuban. We simply have to take account of the fact that Cuban religious leaders assert they are African, Yoruba or Lúkúmi in order to strengthen their religious authority and to narrate their own versions of African past and present. A central part of their agency is building up strategic bridges to Africa – a quite new possibility they have been denied for a long period, be it through slavery, colonialism or political ideologies.

The way Cuban worshippers of Santería refer to Africa is, of course, as complex and heterogeneous as Cuban religious practice itself. Betancourt's agency is just one example of how Africa, Yoruba, and Lúkúmi are selectively appropriated as sources of identification in order to underline an



exclusive Cuban notion of tradition. In a global field of Yoruba religions, Betancourt reinforces and defends a Cuban ritual expertise that is still symbolically and territorially located in Cuba. His model of Lúkúmi practice further offers a more differentiated perspective on a development that religious leaders and scholars have propagated quite generally as "Yoruba world religion" or "Yoruba worldview" (Frigerio 2004; Olupona/Rey 2008; Abimbola/Miller 1997), see also the contribution of Félix Ayoh'Omidire in this volume.

My case study, however, contributes to a more concrete understanding of how Yoruba world religion can be constructed: Betancourt envisions a restored transatlantic religion in terms of a unified world religion, but which also accesses Cuban, more than Nigerian, practices as sources of legitimation. In this sense, he discursively declares Cuba, and not Africa, to be the center of a religious authenticity, indeed of an appropriated African authenticity. This example further shows that there is no single Yoruba worldview, Yoruba World religion, or Yoruba religious culture (as for instance assumed by Olupona/Rey 2008). Yoruba means very different things in different localities and temporalities as well as individual and collective processes of identification within the Atlantic World. By means of a stronger micro-perspective emphasizing religious agency, we can reach a truly empirically grounded and much more differentiated understanding of what it means precisely to be Yoruba or Lucumí or a part of what recently has called "the Yoruba Atlantic" (cf. the contribution of Stephan Palmié and Félix Ayoh'Omidire in this volume). As this paper has demonstrated, the re-construction of Yoruba and Lúkúmi in Cuba is part of a self-asserted re-presentation of untold versions of Afrocuban religions by the perspective of worshipers strategically placed within a highly interconnected transatlantic field of Yoruba religions and practitioners in the Atlantic world.

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