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Eleguá Exits, Laughing: Revolution, Play, and Trickster Worship

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by

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For Dad, who made sure I knew how to prove my arguments.

For Mom, who made sure I knew how to tell a story about my people.

(Sorry I wrote about Santería.)

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topic was hard for her, and for my dad, who helped me logic things through when I was confused. Te amo, I dedicate this work to you.

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Prologue: Opening the Gate to the Hungry God

It's often said that, when making offerings to the orisha Eleguá, one should take caution; as Eleguá is demanding, greedy, and hungry. He is a trickster spirit, who will play jokes and set pranks, the sort of entity who laughs at videos of children falling over on a playground. When honoring Eleguá, you will need to offer him, and the practitioners he possesses, many plates of his favorite foods, in the forms of cooked sweet yams, sugarcane, and smoked fish, all seasoned well to warm his old bones, and many rounds of expensive cigars and good rum. You will not be able to satiate the hungry god.

I certainly should have paid closer attention to this warning, as I found my project slowly devoured and taken over by a hungry, attention-seeking orisha demanding more and more of my attention, like the petulant child Eleguá is said to resemble. With every found narrative, every written folklore, every tall tale, I found him lurking, ready to draw me in further to his cult of mystery and his trickster ways.

It is also said that in order to worship or invoke the orisha and the lwa, one needs permission from Eleguá or Papa Legba, respectively, before one goes forward. Santeros honor Eleguá first by tapping the ground three times before casting cowries for diloggun, a form of divination said to be the invention of Eleguá. Eleguá bears a permanent position of honor in practitioner's homes at the doorway, continuing to guard and protect those who worship him. Failure to do so may result in being denied access to the spirits (at best), or physical punishment up to death (at very worst). He is welcomed, as Papa Legba, to the beginnings of Voodoo ceremonies, with a chant asking him to open the gate and let the spirits through to the practitioners:

Papa Legba ouvri baye-a pou mwen / Pou mwen pase / Le ma tounen, ma salyie lwa yo.
(Papa Legba, open the gate for me, / So I can go through, / When I return, I will honor the lwa.)[1]

All this to say, I don't think I would have been able to write this project without first getting the permission of Eleguá. Thank you for opening the gate; the stories have made it through to me.

A Note on Terminology and Language Choices

Language determines how concepts are communicated and interpreted by others. Within scholarship, it determines what connects work with previous and future philosophy and thought. Therefore, it is important that this project clearly define the terms used within, as well as the meanings that this author applies to each of these terms. This is especially true where the study of Indigenous religious practices is concerned. Many of the words used to describe non-culturally dominant, usually non-Christian practices are not ones the practitioners themselves would use to describe their own practices and philosophy. To ensure that this project uses the preferred terminology and proper language, but also to root it in appropriate scholarly terms, the following will outline the history, definitions of, and the relevant opinions of the terms to be utilized in the project.

Firstly, what do we call this practice? Santería has long been the term most commonly used by religious scholars and generally by practitioners. The name Santería translates most directly to "the way of saints;" a title referring to the syncretization between the orisha, the divine figures of the practice and of African Yoruba tradition, and Catholic saints. While many

[1] Laënnec Hurbon, "Haitian Vodou, Church, State and Anthropology," in *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures*, vol. 8, no. 2, (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 72

practitioners continue to use Santería as a title, others claim that the title was given to the practice by Spanish colonizers as a way to mock the practice for its focus on "saints" instead of a larger entity.[2] Scholars such as Mary Ann Clark also explore the idea that the title itself is pushing for an academic overinflation of the relationship between saints and the orisha.[3] The extent to which Catholicism impacted and continues to impact Santería throughout Cuba's storied history is examined later in this project, but it is very clear from a basic understanding of the project that Santería is not merely Cuban Catholicism.[4] It is fundamentally different from each of the root religions that provided grandfathered traditions. The desire to reduce Santería to a specialized Catholic sub-denomination overlooks the other two religious beliefs that entered into the practice, and only serves to further the oversimplification issue. It is understandable, however, to conflate the two religions into one– Santería's origins, as well as the origins of its sister religions of Voodoo, Hoodoo, Candomblé, and others, seem incredibly impossible. How was it that a religion, that uses religious methods so different, so taboo under Christian doctrine, could not only form but **thrive** under the harsh rule of white, Christian slave owners and colonizers?

Despite the possible point of contention regarding the origin of the name Santería, Santería is still an accepted and oft-used name for the religious practice emerging from Cuba. While an accepted name, Santería is far from the only name for this practice, with names ranging from Abakua or Ayoba, Regla de Ifa, Regla de Ocha, and Lucumí or Locumí.[5] Of these, Lucumí

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[2] Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, "Creole Religions of the Caribbean," (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003), 32

[3] Mary Ann Clark, "¡No Hay Ningún Santo Aquí! There are No Saints Here" in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* Vol. 69, No. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

[4] Miguel A. De La Torre, "Santería: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America," (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 10-12

[5] Parvasani-Gelbert, "Creole Religions of the Caribbean," 32

and Regla de Ocha both are the most used secondary to Santería, and therefore the second-most recognizable. With the contention that Santería is a religion of its own right, separate from Catholicism, I maintain that it is possible to use the term without falling into the deceptive nature of "the way of saints." Santeros will be used to describe a collective of practitioners of Santería, following Spanish grammatical rules. Santero will be used to describe a singular male practitioner, Santera to describe a single female practitioner, and Santere to describe a gender-neutral practitioner.

No set of terminologies will be without flaw, especially in the case of a religion so deeply shaped by a contradicting religious authority. European Christianity has a tradition of suppressing local indigenous religion, as well as the practices African slaves brought with them, and even after two separate colonial owners, two revolutions, and two diasporas shaping the religion, it is a rarity to find scholarly sources on Santería written by an insider to the practice– this paper, too, is written by a non-practitioner. The legacy of colonialism maintains a hold on the study of Santería and the study of Religion as a whole.

A Note On Liberation Theology

For the purposes of this project, I am specifically speaking of a Christianity of a very specific time and setting, namely Spanish-influenced, colonial-era Catholicism from approximately the 18th century to the 1930s, the American Baptist Church in the American South and Cuba from the 19th century to the end of the Cuban Revolution in 1958, after which point Cuba was a fully atheist state, and the conglomeration of Catholicism, Calvinism, and Lutheranism that made up the most of Christian worship in France during the period of the

Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). As one can see from this spread of dates, Liberation Theology bears no relevance to my Senior Project, as its relevance exists more in the mainland of South America, not the Caribbean I am focusing on, and exists as a prevalent theory only after the periods of religion I am examining. It is misplaced, in my opinion, to include liberation theology in this project.

An Introduction to Santería and her Sister Religions

Many texts exist that fully explain the cosmology of Santería, in more depth and clarity than can be achieved in a section of a larger project.[6] However, a basic understanding of the cosmos according to Santería is vital in order to fully engage with the remainder of the project. This section will provide a basic background to the beliefs and myths that explain how the world–magical, physical, and spiritual– works; as well as begin to analyze the ways in which magic is integrated into religion.

Two such texts that have been greatly helpful in understanding the cosmology, magic, and rituals of Santeria are Miguel A. De La Torre's *Santeria: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America*, and Luis M. Nuñez's *Santeria: A Practical Guide to Afro-Caribbean Magic*. Both include in-depth information on the figures of Santería– the orishas, the ancestors, and the practitioners of Santería– as well as recordings of rites, rituals, and worship methods. De La Torre is both a religious scholar, having taught and written several texts on theology, Latin American Religion, and Santería; while also being an insider to the religion– both of his parents were practicing santeros who taught him the religion as a child. Nuñez, on the other hand, leans

[6] See Miguel A. De La Torre's *Santería: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America*; and Luis Nuñez's *Santería: A Practical Guide to Afro-Caribbean Magic*

more to the practitioner side, with a number of recorded ceremonies and rituals provided based on his own experiences. Throughout this project, De La Torre and Nuñez's respective texts will provide mythological background and philosophical notes on Santería, in addition to in-depth detailing of both rites and rituals.

Myths can tell us a lot about a religion. Myths can tell us a lot about the people who tell them. Therefore, when examining a religion less-frequently studied, and less ubiquitous than Christianity, it is not only deeply valuable but imperative to explore the religion's myths and stories. We must learn not only what they speak of in their houses of worship, but what stories mothers tell their children at night, what gets passed down as folklore and tales in homes, on back porches over coffee, on streets, in bodegas and botanicas, in secrecy and in public. In her text, *Other People's Myths: The Cave of Echoes*, religious and mythic scholar Wendy Doniger explores what role myth plays within religion.[7] According to Doniger, mythic interpretation plays a large role in the understanding of other people's religions, and our own:

> Indeed, I am inclined to say... that the best short definition of a myth is that it is a true story... it is regarded as true not literally, but in its implicit meanings. This assertion has serious consequences for the interpretation of myths. It means that one cannot understand a myth merely by telling it. but only by interpreting it. In other words, there is no myth devoid of interpretation...[8]

Doniger regards myths as true– not in terms of literal, physical truth, but true in the meanings it seeks to impart, in the ways that truth can be found in its metaphors and lessons. This project makes heavy use of myth, of stories and of narratives, in order to bring some semblance of understanding to the reader. Stories, in their nuance, their play, and their complexity, start to pull

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[7] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, "Other People's Myths: The Cave of Echoes," (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
[8] Doniger, "Other People's Myths," 31.

back the layers of belief that forms Santería. What is a myth, though? Why does it say such important things about a people and a culture, where does it get the authority? In his seminal text, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, social theorist Bruce Linclon examines and defines myth. Like Doniger, Lincoln claims that myths hold a level of truth to them, that the society which tells a given myth regards it as truth not through literalism, but true through interpretation. Myth, according to Lincoln, is a story that falls somewhere between truth and falsehood, yet with credibility; and not just credibility, but a sense of greater, spiritual and cultural *authority*. When myths are examined by outside culture, we miss this sense of great spiritual and cultural authority. Have you heard a Christian[9] call a biblical story, or the life of Christ, a myth? Rather, they call the works and narratives within their holy book "parables," "metaphors," tools to understand the divine with. Even when one doesn't assume the stories of the Bible to be a direct historical narrative, which some do, one skirts calling these narratives and parables and metaphors what they are: *myths*. Why is this? Why, for many, is *myth* a pejorative term, used to deride and minimize religious narratives and explanations of metaphysics? Why does *myth*, as a term, only apply to the religions of ancient societies, of the Romans or Egyptians or Greeks, calling their pantheons and religious narratives Roman or Egyptian or Greek *Mythology?* Linclon states:

> For myth most precisely signifies, in its pejorative and condescending usage, a story that some members of some other social group (or past era) regard(ed) as

[9] Author's Note: In this instance, I am referring to Christians outside of scholarship within religious studies. In my experience, it is common for Christians to refer to their own stories not as myths, but as somewhere between biblical truth and parable– which, as Lincoln also examines, is another word for a myth that simply skirts the negative overall social connotations we hold to the term "myth" itself.

> true and authoritative, but that the speaker and members of their group regard as false.[10]

Lincoln states, then, that *myth*, in its most common disambiguous usage, is used to refer to stories and religious narratives in a negative– colloquially, we think of the term *myth* as one that refers to a story patently false, therefore, it is an insult to apply it to our own religious stories. By calling our own stories myths, and calling others narratives myths, we legitimize our own religious beliefs and discredit the religious beliefs of others.

As we explore the myths and narratives of Santería, it is vital that we consider them with the weight and the importance that the originators of these tales held them in. Lincoln continues, stating that myths have credibility- in the sense that they fit with the logic of how the metaphysical functions, they have what Lincoln coins as *truth-claims*– in the sense that they make a statement about what is true within the logic of the magical and metaphysical, and they hold a sense of authority and reverence– where a legend or a fable has no authority, a myth teaches you something, a myth tells you a truth and a metaphor you must use in order to understand the wider truth about the spiritual.[11] In order to properly understand this religion, or indeed, any religion, we must think of these myths as holding that same weight, the truth-claims, and the mythic importance that the practitioners give these narratives. In short, we must try to believe them ourselves.

Santería does not exist in a vacuum, and its initial form did not come to be completely independent of other religious traditions. Santeria's origin within colonialism coincided with the colonial origins of a half-dozen religious traditions within Cuba, the Caribbean, and the colonial

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[10] Bruce Lincoln, "Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification," second edition, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 22
[11] Lincoln, "Discourse and the Construction of Society," 22-24

holdings in the Americas, namely from the Spanish, French, and British. A whole host of African-rooted traditions would come to be through the diaspora of the slave trade, leading to the creation of the category African Traditional Religion.[12] This includes practices such as Haitian and Creole Voodoo, Hoodoo, Brazilian Candomblé, Palo Monte, Espiritismu, Obeyah, Rastafarianism, Regla de Palo, and many more. These traditions share a common ancestor– the religious practices and beliefs of the Yoruba people, originating in present-day Nigeria, then the kingdoms of Benin, Dahomey, and Oyo.[13] The blend of Yoruba deities and cosmic beliefs, indigenous magical traditions and ties to the land, the location of this new world, and colonial religious practices of Christianity, specifically Catholicism, led to a syncretic boom. In Santería, we see the conflation of the orisha and the Catholic saints, by both authority figures and, in some instances, the practitioners themselves– another trend that spread throughout Latin America and the southern United States like wildfire.[14] This shared root, with many enslaved Africans going to the Caribbean coming from one coast, leads to a generally shared cosmology, along with shared rites, rituals, and metaphysical beliefs. One such vital text in understanding the basic structure and beliefs of African Traditional Religions of the Caribbean Diaspora is Olmos and Paravisini-Gelbert's *Creole Religions of the Caribbean.* In their foundational text exploring the shared traits of these religions, Olmos and Paravisini-Gelbert detail these usually shared features of these religions in Creole Religions of the Caribbean, those key traits being: a combination of

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[12] Author's Note: The term "African Traditional Religion", often shortened to "ATR" here refers primarily to the diasporic practices formed in the Americas post-Trans Atlantic Slave Trade. This is because those religions share a root in African religions, but are differentiated from religions that solely grew on the African continent. Throughout this project, when mentioning "African Traditional Religions" or "ATRs", I am referring to the post-slave trade religions of the Americas, not of religions also growing and forming in Africa.

[13] De La Torre, "Santería," 182-183.

[14] Luis Manuel Núñez, "Santería: A Practical Guide to Afro-Caribbean Magic," (Dallas: Spring Publications, Inc, 1992), 2.

monotheism and polytheism, the presence of ancestors influencing current practitioners, belief in an active supernatural force, animism, the ability to connect with the spirit world during mortal life, use of a central symbol or focus, and the "use of ritual tools and manipulation of the spirit and mortal world, called magic." [15] This family of Afro-Caribbean religions hold a shared, similar belief as to how the divine and the mortal interact with one another, as well as the roles of the interstitial figures in between one great divinity and the many practitioners.

Monotheism/Polytheism Hybrids

The relationship between the divine and the mortal is one of the key aspects explored in the field of Religious Studies. The way that humans attempt to get the attention of, interpret the divine will of, and act in a way that gods want and approve of forms massive swathes of religious practice and rituals. Within Santería, the way that practitioners interpret the divine will forms a large aspect of the materiality that makes this practice such an interesting one. In direct contrast with Colonial-Spanish Catholicism, Santería places aspects of divine to human communication in the hands of the practitioner; while a Santero may seek the services of a diviner, or *babalawo*– a priest specializing in divination– to further interpret messages, they are encouraged to be constantly looking for messages and signs in everyday things- such as the flight patterns of birds, the behavior of animals and insects, or the patterns of weather and natural phenomena. Santería holds that there is one major, overarching deity responsible for the creation of all other things, similar to the ways in which many other Afro-Caribbean religions imagine their gods to have come to be. Olodumare, the creator god, is responsible for life in the grandest cosmic sense. As the creator god, he is considered the ultimate authority in all matters. That

[15] Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, "Creole Religions of the Caribbean," 9-11.

said, he specifically does not take interest in the lives of humans and mortal things– these are too simple and too small to gain his attention:

> Olodumare is old. He is very tired and has been working long and hard on the universe, which is a very large job. He should not be bothered with small things. Santeros ask favors of the orishas who can directly solve their problems and do not bother Olodumare. [16]

Olodumare does not take center-stage in the same way as the Christian God takes center-stage in Christian worship. Olodumare is busy, and old, and tired! He's enjoying his semi-retirement; let the Creator rest! Instead, human-divine connection and interaction within Santería is focused on the divine creations of Oludarme: divinities referred to as the orisha.

The orisha and their cross-cultural counterparts– the Voodoo lwa,[17] the Candomblé orixás, the Yoruba oricha– exist as somewhere between man and god– they are still lesser divinities than Oludarme, yet they occupy a higher position than any human. orisha are closer to divine ancestors, revered spirits, or Catholic saints; rather than gods, they are more akin to divine personifications of natural force and strength,[18] as representatives of disease (Babalú-Ayé), war (Changó), water both fresh and salt (Oshún and Yemayá), luck (Ibeyi), and crossroads (Eleguá), as well as divination (Orúnla), magic, and human civilization (Obatalá).[19] As the divine heirs of Oludarme, the orisha are given the full divine authority and power over humankind. They are the ones in the day-to-day interactions, the figures providing guidance and a comforting hand to individual practitioners and families. Orisha are representative of the reachable, approachable

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[16] Nuñez, "Santería," 31
[17] Author's Note: Lwa, in some spellings, is instead spelled Loa. This is the French spelling of Kreole words. As a general rule, I will be prioritizing the Haitian Kreole spellings over the French interpretations of Kreole words.
[18] Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, "Creole Religions of the Caribbean," 33; De La Torre, "Santería," 45.
[19] De La Torre, "Santería," 48-49.

type of divinity.[20] They are still fully unknowable entities, but unlike the Christian God, or Olodumare, Chango, Babalu Aye, and Ogun sometimes will listen, better yet, the orisha will come and speak to practitioners; they will come and dance in the possessed bodies of santeros.

> *The white god doesn't talk. The white god does not come to visit. The white god does not like the things that the earth gives with such love. No singing. No dancing. No food. No perfume. He hates the feel of soft velvety flesh and laughter in the night. The white god makes no miracles… Santería was born. No one really paid much attention.*[21]

The orisha and their spiritual cousins are, akin to the Catholic saints with whom they are syncretized, figures who may act and intercede on behalf of the practitioner. Through the performance of Ebos, or rituals akin to spells, and prayers, often similar to the Catholic novena, the orisha are contacted and given offerings to provoke change. Unlike the saints they would come to resemble, orisha have a little more neutrality and gray areas when it comes to morality– as this project will explore, these Ebos can result in winning court cases, driving away unwanted persons, or even the death of one's enemies, regardless of if the person casting the Ebo is in the moral right or wrong.[22]

Of course, one cannot mention the structure of Olodumare and the orisha without looking at the ways in which Spanish Catholicism, to an almost-unknowable extent, has had a deep influence on almost all aspects of Santería.[23] Like Santería, Catholicism adheres to a structured

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[20] De La Torre, "Santería," 45-47.
[21] Nuñez, "Santería: A Practical Guide," 4.
[22] This severity is one of several reasons why Santería and Afro-Caribbean religions opt for a "closed" model, wherein the practice may only be done by those initiated into the religion. As such, some of the rituals and rites of Santería are hard to track down, and much more difficult to find scholarly texts on. This author has attempted to source the most reputable versions of Ebos, however as a non-initiate, much of this has been impossible to source and further verify.
[23] The full extent to which Catholicism influenced Santería, and how much of modern Santería remains somewhat Catholic is outside the scope of this project. For more on Catholicism's many interactions with Santería, check Mary Ann Clark's *¡No Hay Ningun Santo Aqui!* as well as De La Torre, "Santería," 6-12.

divine hierarchy: a creator deity exists as the overarching figure, responsible for the creation of all those underneath him in the hierarchy– the role of the Trinity or God the Father within this context. Over the course of Santería's development, the orisha began to take the names of Saints. There are several possible reasons for this addition, ranging from actual similarities between figures and proximity, to self-defense. The syncretism with Catholic saints may have been a protective method, seeking to hide heretical acts from the eyes of Catholic authorities and slave-owning colonizers. Many scholars theorize that the similarities between the two faiths were formed as a defense mechanism to save Santería and its practitioners from the onslaught of Christian colonial behavior.[24] One such author, George Brandon, argues in his seminal work on Santería, *Santería from Africa to the New World, the Dead Sell Memories*, that the connections between Catholicism and Santería were forged from a desire to save the religion from the colonizers:

> For some believers today the equation of the saints and the orisha is not real but is a historic residue, a practice standing over from when the Africans used the Catholic saints to mask the worship of their own deities... For them, syncretism was a study of subterfuge. It was assimilation in the service of preserving the tradition. The believer gave some to keep some.[25]

From the breadth of Santería traditions that currently remain, this strategy of assimilation for preservation has succeeded in preserving the practice under a variety of watchful eyes striving to control religious practice. Due to its shared aesthetics and general colonial disinterest in the individual lives of the enslaved indigenous and African peoples on their sugar plantations and farms, the illusion of Christianity was enough to excuse most Santeros from greater scrutiny.

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[24] See: Clark, *No Hay Ningun Santo Aqui!,* George Brandon, "Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories," (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 91.
[25] Brandon, "Santería from Africa to the New World," 91

Though the orisha may be conflated and syncretized with saints, there is a tendency for practitioners to consider this process to be a juvenile or immature practice, a spiritual crutch used to connect something so primal and ancient with an easier, constructed religion. Clark touches upon this as she notes that the very established practitioners, as well as the ones without roots in Christianity, do not include saint statues on their altars. Religious scholar of Santería, Miguel A. De La Torre furthers this, with the anecdote of how his father, a santero, would use the saint titles to ease practicing Catholics into the ways of the orisha:

> During the divination ritual, my father would never say "Obatalá understands the pain and suffering you are undergoing."… Had he done this, the Catholic seeking guidance would probably have wondered, "Who in the world is Obatalá? Is this some type of demon? What am I getting myself into?" If the primary function of the consultation is to restore harmony in the life of the seeker, what is needed is not a dissertation on the Yoruba pantheon… For this reason, my father would communicate the divine message in a language which the Catholic would understand.[26]

In his extensive book, *Santería: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America*, De La Torre maintains that the saint-syncretization is less relevant to the advanced santero, and exists mostly as a service to ease those with Catholic and Christo-centric backgrounds into the idea and philosophy of Santería without causing "satanic panic" and prejudiced worry. However, this is not to say that santeros discourage this syncretization, as many santeros continue with the above-described type of interactions with their Catholic and Protestant clients without discouraging this view of the orisha. The use of the pantheon of Catholic saints, especially in

[26] De La Torre, "Santería," 8

their interstitial role between God and man, is an oft-used tool to ease Christian and culturally-Christian people into Santería.

Ritual Manipulation of the Spirit and Mortal World, Called Magic

What are the components of religion? Some combination of belief, a somewhat shared conception of cosmology and of metaphysics, myths passed back and forth between storytellers and interpreters and grandparents on back porches all form orthodoxy– the mythological, narrative aspects of religion, the opinions and the beliefs. Mythos is not the only thing on which religion is based. Orthodoxy's sibling, orthopraxy, forms another large section of religion– the rituals, the ceremonies, the weddings and the baptisms and the funeral liturgies, the structure of the prayers, the rules that dictate how you correctly act in the religion.

In the instance of African Traditional Religions, such as Santería, this is where magic, the major ritual aspect of African Traditional Religions, enters the scope of religion. It's easy to theoretically understand magic as something from a fairy tale or out of Harry Potter– wave a wand, say a magic word, mix magical herbs together, and the result is a spell. But when one breaks from the fantastical, storytelling conceptions of magic, and treats it as a ritual practice that groups and individuals across religious disciplines engage with as a serious aspect of religion and spiritual practice, the practical aspects of how one engages with magic are harder to conceptualize.

It is not only possible but common for individuals to have a casual interaction with Santería: many Santeros will see clients who wholly identify as Roman Catholic or Protestant, who only see a Santero when they have an issue, and follow the advice given to them by the

Santero with great success. This is characterized by an issue, again, in the here and now, in the mortal world. Christianity, specifically the Catholic Christianity of the colonial era, may care for your soul, your eternal spirit, and its future place in the court of heaven. It asked practitioners to focus on the ultimate rewards waiting in heaven, not the discomforts of the physical or the challenges of the here-and-now. Any discomfort now will be comforted in heaven, where God will wipe every tear from every eye. Not now, but *eventually.* White slave owners used Christainity to preach submission and modesty to their human property, from Paul's letters telling slaves to obey their masters, to the Beatitudes, stating that the meek and humble would *someday* inherit the earth.

> In 1740, the celebrity evangelist George Whitefield published "A Letter to the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina." In it, he criticized the ideology of Protestant Supremacy and chastised slave owners for keeping their slaves "ignorant of Christianity." Specifically, he contested the widespread belief that "Christianity would make [slaves] proud, and consequently unwilling to submit to Slavery." Whitefield appealed to the "hearts" of slave owners and argued that Christian slaves would be more faithful after their true conversion. "If teaching Slaves Christianity has such a bad Influence upon their Lives," he asked, "why are you generally desirous of having your Children taught?"[27]

White, colonial Christianity is marked by the desire to continue the status quo– which, during Santería's development, was the continuation of slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean.[28] While Christianity was also practiced by enslaved Africans, it was clear to them the contradictions of slavery and Christianity. The Christianity of the slave owners was full of contradictions and conflicting theology that went largely unaddressed:

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[27] Katharine Gerbner, "Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World," (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 189.
[28] Gerbner, "Christian Slavery," 32.

> The irony is dark and yet unambiguous: the most self-sacrificing, faithful, and zealous missionaries in the Atlantic world formulated and theorized a powerful and lasting religious ideology for a brutal system of plantation labor. In the words of the Anglican missionary Morgan Godwyn, it was Christianity that "presseth absolute and entire Obedience to Rulers and Superiours . . . [and] establisheth the Authority of Masters, over their Servants and Slaves."[29]

That contradiction continually shapes the religion practiced by persons of color and those socially marginalized– Liberation Theology may have only reached mainstream success and widespread conversation in the 1960s, but the poor have always understood how Christ preached to love the least of your communities.

Unlike the colonial, white Christianity that preached submission, patience, and passivity; Santería is more comparable to the Christianity– that, oftentimes, wasn't entirely Christianity but further hidden syncretic African practices– practiced by the minority communities seeking to make social change. Santería is characterized by a need to impact individual issues, to solve problems in the here and now:

> The practice of Santería isn't confined to churches because that is the nature of Santería's gods. While the god of Christianity, according to their scriptures, walked among us long ago and promised to come again one day, the gods of Santería are *here*… They sing, walk, talk, dance, joke, heal, curse, and save, through a process that the West usually classifies as psychotic… That's not at all like sitting still while a minister preaches about some far-off divinity or a therapist theorizes about one's anima.[30]

Colonial Christianity's perceived apathy to the present situation may be good and fine for the white Christian, for the able-bodied Christian, for the non-disadvantaged Christian. For the

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[29] Gerbner, "Christian Slavery," 196.
[30] Michael Ventura, "Santería and the Idea of Sacrifice," in "Santería: A Practical Guide to Afro-Caribbean Magic", au. Luis Manuel Nuñez, (Dallas: Spring Publications, Inc, 1992), vi

average, white, Protestant or Catholic Christian, one doesn't need to worry about the physical world around you as much. Prayer, in those instances, are a form of reassurance, or over minor issues that need a gentle change from the hand of the white god.

The religious apathy and contradictory theology of slave owning Christians did little to serve the religious needs of those in need of **action** in the here and now, for those who needed change to their physical life. How is one supposed to focus on the future, on the bright wonders waiting for them in the afterlife, if one is ceaselessly sick? If one is oppressed?[31] While colonial Christianity tried to convince minorities their suffering was divinely ordained, Santería asks one to continue knocking at the door, to keep trying to create change. Santería exists, in direct opposition to the hand-wringing oft found in Evangelicalism, to assist the individual.[32] Cures for illnesses, such as persistent stomach troubles, or illnesses caused by the mal de ojo, or evil eye; solutions for when a court case appears to be unfavorable to your desires; making a better job offer come to you; or larger spiritual advice are all reasons to see your local Santero.[33] These are tools, ways to use the spiritual advantage of Santería to level the uneven playing field of racism, ableism, and sexism within communities.[34]

Santería, as a practice devoted to the here and now, operates in modes radically different from the sterile, Western religious practices considered "normal" and "safe." Specifically, Santería and her Afro-Caribbean cousins utilize two practices that Western society considers

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[31] This, of course, is not examining the Christian philosophies such as Liberation Theology, which argues that the liberation of the oppressed must be centered within active Christianity. However, as Santería developed in the century before Liberation Theology was a widespread concept, this author argues it's not fully relevant. See page 4 of this project.

[32] De La Torre, "Santería," 4.

[33] De La Torre, "Santería," 191-200. Nuñez, "Santería: A Practical Guide," 113-162.

[34] This is not to say that Santería is not free from these issues, this project will later go into the issues of babalawo corruption and issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia within Santero communities.

"taboo" or distasteful: animal sacrifice and possession. These practices cause a shiver down the spine, it makes your stomach churn. The very mention of them causes uneasiness. They make us question if the price for a here and now religion is too high. When Santería conflicts with the Western legal system, it is derided as the worst of us, the darkest parts of yourself. When a Santería worship center was legally challenged in Hialeah, Florida,[35] the opposing attorney gave the following descriptor: "Santería is not a religion. It is a throwback to the dark ages. It is a cannibalistic,[36] voodoo-like[37] sect which attracts the worst elements of society, people who mutilate animals in a crude and most inhumane manner."[38] This religion, through the eyes of the white outsider, is bloody, it is gory, it is violent and cruel; simultaneously it is titlizing, it is compelling; it is the object of derision and fetish at the same time. Cultural-Westerners want to stare at it like one stares at a particularly gruesome car wreck, slowing down on the highway to catch a glimpse at the mangled bodies. Though derided as a sinful, demonic action, it is the two acts of possession and animal sacrifice that make the connection between the mortal and the divine far more powerful and potent than Western religious counterparts.[39]

Magic, according to Santería, holds a set price, be it animal, monetary, herbal, physical comfort, or spiritual.[40] All of these solutions, in the form of rituals and workings called *Ebos*, come with the condition that the *derecho,* or "right", is paid to the orisha consulted, as is requested by the orisha, not the santero, oftentimes through a priest specializing in divination,

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[35] See: Church of the Lukumi Babalú Aye v. City of Hialeah.
[36] Santería is not only not cannibalistic, but fundamentally opposed to human sacrifice or offerings of human blood or flesh. Animals are used in place of humans, as human sacrifice is seen as offensive to the orisha. See: De La Torre, "Santería," 126-127.
[37] This is technically correct. Interesting here is how the speaker, a white lawyer, uses "voodoo-like" as a spiritual boogeyman of African-rooted religious practices, meant to scare the listening audience with no knowledge of Santería.
[38] De La Torre, "Santería," 101.
[39] Ventura, "Santería and the Idea of Sacrifice," ix-x.
[40] Nuñez, "Santería, a Practical Guide," 11.

called a *babalawo*.[41] The relationship that these individuals, casually practicing Santería to address a specific issue, have to the practice is not unlike the relationship that casual practitioners of other religions have. Their solutions, for small things like persistent medical issues, or luck in business, can be solved with the milder Ebos– taking a ritual herbal bath, for example, or the use of a specific floor wash; both washing away bad energy and welcoming in luck, fortune, money, or love.[42] The Ebos get larger in the instances of larger issues: releasing someone from prison, winning a court case, dominating a romantic partner, bringing someone back from the brink of death, killing an enemy, or initiating someone into Santería, preparing them for potential possession by an orisha. In the case of a ceremony such as the purification aspects of an *Asiento*, [43] or the ritual wherein an initiate is first possessed by their patron orisha, the animals are believed to take on the sins of the *iyawo,*[44] the initiate, making them a blank slate ready to take the orisha upon themself through ritual possession. The corpse of the sacrifice, when used to absorb the sins, must not be eaten; instead, these sacrifices are left at important locations related to the orisha who oversaw the sacrifice.[45] A sacrifice to Eleguá, when asking him to drive away your enemies, for instance, would be left at an iron railroad, a crossroad, or even a highway intersection or street corner. In the instance of thanksgiving offerings, the animal doesn't take on sin but instead represents the good fortune and joy that brought upon the thanksgiving offering. In these instances, the animal is often sacrificed, offered ritually, and then cooked, to be eaten by the community. Through sacrifice, the animal is sharing ashé and blessings with the community.

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[41] Trans. *Baba* meaning father, while *awo* refers to divination secrets. De La Torre, "Santería," 106.
[42] De La Torre, "Santería," 130-133.
[43] Trans. Spanish word meaning "to sit," referring to the orisha "sitting" and "riding" the initiate through ritual possession.
[44] Trans. Lukumí word referring to a bride, the betrothed of the orisha. Initiates are called Iyawo regardless of their gender.
[45] De La Torre, "Santería," 126.

At events, such as Bombes- ecstatic ritual dances with drumming and dancing- those possessed by orisha are offered chickens. The possessed, referred to as *el caballo*[46], will take the chicken and behead it, with either their hands or teeth, then drink blood directly from the chicken's neck. Once the orisha has been fed with the blood, the caballo will then take another mouthful and spray it over the gathered crowd to bless them with the ashé from the orisha, the practitioner, and the chicken.[47]

Now that we understand the actual practice of animal sacrifice, it's time to question why animal sacrifice in this context makes us squirm. We don't have a moral opposition to the death of these animals– instead, we eat most of them in some context or another, where they're treated far crueler by the meat processing industry than by a local Santero.[48] When, in Florida, a group of Santeros were going up against a local ordinance stating they couldn't sacrifice animals, they won by invoking the ritual animal slaughter involved in Kosher and Halal meat preparations– legally, our courts do not recognize a difference between butchering animals for Kosher or Halal consumption and slaughtering them for Santería rituals.[49] In the forward to *Santería: A Practical Guide to Afro-Caribbean Magic*, scholar Michael Ventura posits that this discomfort comes not from compassion for animals, or concern for the demonic, but due to the stripped-back nature of religion in Western religious practices, namely Christianity. Ventura claims that the nature of ritual in the United States and Europe is to have your rituals done for you– even services, until recent years, were performed in languages the average worshiper didn't even *speak* themselves.

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[46] Spanish, trans. Horse. In Voodoo, the possessed is called le chewal, Hatian Kreole for horse. The initiate is referred to as a horse because the orisha or Lwa is "riding" them, guiding their actions while "mounted" upon them- hence why the possession is called an *asiento,* or a "mounting."
[47] De La Torre, "Santería," 112-118.
[48] Ventura, "Santería and the Idea of Sacrifice," viii
[49] See: Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah

We're disengaged from our rituals, so to see them performed by the one asking for help is dramatically jarring:

> To do rituals yourself; to have no insulation between you and the sacred; to have to take the responsibility in your own hands, the passion in your own heart, the metaphysics in your own head; to stand before your own divinity with nothing between you and eternity but your frail intentions– most Westerners' engrained terror of things is expressed reflexively.[50]

Santería, by way of magic, fundamentally requires one to engage with both the world and the divine. Magic, throughout all of Santería's varied rituals, is the way Santería maintains itself as a force for change, as a religion that actively discourages passivity. Animal sacrifice, herbal baths, prayers, and offerings all operate as tools to manipulate the physical world when in disadvantageous, less-desirable situations. Fundamentally, it is a practical way to metaphysically change one's circumstances.

Revolutionary Tendencies Tied to Spiritual Authority

I posit, in addition to Olmos and Paravisini-Gelbert's stated shared characteristics of African Traditional Religions of the Caribbean Diaspora, one further similar trait can be applied to these religions: the connection to a revolutionary mindset determined to restore a sense of justice, and with it, an aversion to both religious and political apathy– none of this "that's the way of the world," practitioners of these religions frequently take their religious beliefs into the political in order to exact social liberatory change. This can be seen in the revolutions across the Caribbean and the American South: Fidel Castro's Communist Revolution in Cuba bore symbols and referenced the myths of Santería, many of his guerilla fighters were practicing

[50] Ventura, "Santería and the Idea of Sacrifice," ix

Santeros; the movements for Black social liberation in the Americas has often tied itself to the magi-religious practice of Hoodoo; and the Hatian Revolution's symbiotic relationship with Voodoo.

When we speak on the Haitian Revolution and Voodoo, it's easy to slip into arguments of the supernatural or the metaphysically miraculous. Voodoo, itself, as the most misunderstood African Traditional Religion and magical practice, draws much undesirable attention and many unflattering comments. One can make bold claims, one could argue that the major revolutionaries of the Haitian Revolution sold their soul to these African gods,[51] or that they enacted secret ceremonies and dark rituals, "black magic" to win against the French. Some of these claims can be somewhat substantiated, even proven to be historical events. One such event occurred on the night of August 14, 1791, when a group of Haitian rebels met in the woods, called the "Alligator Forest," the *Bwa Kayman* in Kreole, or *Boïs Caiman* in French, bringing with them a goblet, a knife, and a black hog, fattened for many years. They then undertook what would become known as the Bwa Kayman ceremony, named for the forest, where the group of revolutionaries swore that they would not rest until every enslaved African in Haiti was set free, and until every white French citizen had either been killed or driven from the island. Three revolutionary leaders allegedly drank the pig's blood as the priestess, Cecile Faitman, was ritually possessed by the lwa Ezili Dantò– the spirit of rage and revolution, called the Mother of Haiti.[52] Following this ritual, the land surrounding the colonial city of Le Cap burned for three

[51] Author's Note: wIf we needed to guess between two historical figures, Alexander Hamilton and Toussaint Louverture, who would be the more likely candidate to sell their soul to the devil, the act fits more closely with the character and actions of Hamilton, than of the actions and beliefs of Louverture, who remained a devout Catholic throughout his lifetime.

[52] Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, "Creole Religions of the Caribbean," 33; De La Torre, "Santería," 115-116.

days– so ferociously that those in the city could not tell night from day, as they navigated the ash and burning cane straw falling from the sky like snow.

The Bwa Kayman is a compelling story, one of many emerging from the Haitian Revolution that regards Voodoo to be the reason for the eventual success of the Haitians. This story makes sense, to an extent. To boot, it's a compelling, wild story– revolutionaries meeting in secret, drinking pig's blood, getting possessed by African gods and dancing naked under a full moon? It's so compelling, we want it to be true, we want to believe it is the cause for success. After all, who thought the Haitians would win? They'd lost a previous revolution, they had dozens of failed slave revolts over the course of their colonial history, they were going up against Napoleon, of all possible adversaries. It was an improbable victory over the French. Voodoo, a religion about which we in the cultural West know so little about, serves to explain a complex geopolitical situation occurring over decades, involving some of history's greatest thinkers and years of bloody war in a handful of oversimplifications. When our knowledge of Voodoo is limited to what we see in popular media, to Voodoo dolls full of pins and racist caricatures of priestesses doing "magic," it becomes an easy answer.

Reality, as it usually is, is far more complex. Revolutions don't have one reason, one answer for success. This simple narrative falls too easily into religious fetish– we see the shock and awe of Voodoo, the spookiness, the horror tropes; dark spells done in woods in the dead of night, and we say that this was the reason they succeeded. Is it so impossible that enslaved Black persons were capable of winning? That they were capable of revolutionary thought, rivaling and often surpassing their French counterparts arguing, at much the same time as Touissant Loverture and Boukman Dutty, that they were men of equal status to the French elites, as intellectual peers

to Voltaire and Robespierre? Must we assume that, in order for the Haitians to have succeeded, they needed constant divine intercession from their gods, demonic deals, strange magics late at night, rituals in forests? When speaking of the American Revolution, do we argue that George Washington practiced witchcraft, or that Thomas Jefferson sold his soul to the devil for American success?

With this disclaimer made, and the understanding that Voodoo was not the sole reason for the Haitian success, Voodoo did have a deep impact on the Haitian Revolution. This took the role not of a magical edge, secret rituals, or demonic pacts, but with a combination of the physical attributes of a religion and the shared cosmology held by many of the revolutionaries. Structurally, Voodoo was, and is, a decentralized religion with no figurehead and no national leader. Like other African Traditional Religions of the Caribbean Diaspora, Voodoo operates on a social, family-like structure, where a priest– an *oungan*[53]- or a priestess– a *mambo*[54]- lead an individual group of worshippers and bring initiates through the rites of entering Voodoo.[55] As such, there was no one individual, one "bad actor", one rebellious prophet, one revolutionary upstart that the French could kill and have done with it. Madison Smartt-Bell, author of *All Souls Rising,* a historical fiction novel on the Haitian Revolution says of Voodoo:

> In terms of revolution, voodou was a definite advantage because of the way it's organized. It is cellular, it's non hierarchical and it might just as well have been copied from a manual on guerilla warfare, it's just that strategically sound. Especially because any participant can incarnate God. This means that it is a

[53] Also spelled *houngon/hungon.*
[54] Also spelled *manbo.*
[55] Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, “Creole Religions of the Caribbean,” 105-109.

> leaderless movement. You can't stop it by killing one leader. As one of Napoleon's generals said, you have to kill everybody.[56]

In addition to this, Voodoo and religious spaces devoted to voodoo allowed for cross-cultural religious interactions, where individuals across property lines could plot and pass messages. It became a hub for political thought, a space for an individual to think and collaborate outside the earshot of white French slave owners. On a physical level, Voodoo was predisposed to be useful in a guerilla, revolutionary war conflict. Due to its decentralized nature, Voodoo wasn't a religion or a figure who could be stamped out. Indeed, the Haitian Revolution isn't known for one individual revolutionary leader, but many– Toussaint Louverture didn't survive to the end of the revolution, and was replaced by Jean-Jaques Dessalines.

Not only was the Haitian Revolution shaped by the practices and religion of Voodoo, so too was the practice itself impacted by the actions and figures of the Revolution. Much of this has to do with Voodoo's perspective on death and afterlifes. The Haitian Revolution was ultimately successful, but at a great human cost: the French lost approximately 75,000, while the Haitians sustained losses of 200,000, over twice as many individuals. The Voodoo beliefs on death and afterlife played a massive role in this deep-set determination to continue onwards.

> Both Madiou and Ardouin recounted how blacks, "phantasiés," as Madieu put it, by sorcerers, threw themselves at cannons, believing the balls dust. When blown to pieces, they knew they would be reborn in Africa. The naturalist Descourtilz... remembered how "the Congo Negroes and other Guineans were so superstitiously affected by the utterances of Dessalines that they even let him persuade them that to die fighting the French was only a blessing since it meant that they were immediately conveyed to Guinea, where, once again, they saw Papa Toussaint

[56] Kristin L. Squint, "Vodou and Revolt in Literature of the Haitian Revolution," in *CLA Journal,* vol. 51, no. 2, (Columbia: College Language Association, 2007), 173.

> who was waiting for them to complete the army with which he proposed to reconquer Saint-Domingue.[57]

The idea that death, at one's own hand or at the hand of another, would not only free one from slavery, but would return the soul to the motherland is a prevelant idea throughout many African Traditional Religions of the Caribbean Diaspora. It was a common conceit that death, no matter how brutal, was often a better fate than continued bondage. Santería, in line with the shared cosmology of African Traditional Religions of the Caribbean Diaspora, teaches that there is a stagnant number of souls in existence, and therefore, through a process of quasi-reincarnation, the soul returns to Olodumare before rebirth, where the cycle continues until the soul's purpose has been fulfilled. Therefore, it was commonly reasoned that killing one's body would not only deprive the slaveholder of his human property, but that the soul would depart from the New World to be reborn in Africa.[58]

The Haitian Revolution is one such example of revolutionary ideals making religious beliefs manifest. Throughout Voodoo's history, the practitioner maintains the ideology that there is a spiritual superior, a correct answer, and that the social status of the world is not, as the colonizing Christians often believed, the natural, divinely blessed nature of things; but rather that inequality, discrimination, and violence all offend the sensibilities of their god, making it their responsibility to make this world just in the eyes of the spirits, lwa, and orisha.

We see the continuation of this shared ideology within the Cuban Revolution, and the actions of santeros during it– many performed ebos as a way of silently, but spiritually, siding with Castro's movement.[59] As a whole, Santería maintains that there is an inherent unevenness

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[57] Joan Dayan, "Haiti, History, and the Gods," (Oakland: University of California Press, 1998), 30.
[58] De La Torre, "Santería," 19.
[59] De La Torre, "Santería," 196

in our world, due to ableism, sexism, and racism.[60] Santería, after all, was formed as a direct response to inequality, social suffering, and religiously-sanctioned human rights violations. When paired with Cuba's tumultuous history of colonial Spanish rule, foreign-backed coups overturning power, and a string of facist dictatorships, all of which sought to repress or eliminate Santería[61], it would be difficult, if not impossible, for a religion born in these circumstances to not address societal inequities. This project will explore the history of Santería, Hoodoo, and Voodoo's uses as tools for rebellion and resistance, and how, specifically, trickster entities and spirits are used to help overthrow corrupt kings and white masters. Santería and her sister religions are, innately, a religion that constantly asks where power lies. Who has control and authority, should they have it? And, if we determine that they shouldn't, what are we going to do about it?

[60] This inequality can also emerge within the religion itself. See the last chapter of this project for more on inter-religious corruption.
[61] De La Torre, "Santería," 181-188

Chapter 1: The Social and Cosmic Functions of Tricksters

Ebo: To Facilitate a Trip[62]

If there are obstacles in the way of a business or pleasure trip, sacrifice a chick to Eleguá. Take a few of the feathers and go to a railroad line. Rub the feathers over your hands and feet and leave them there along with twenty-one pieces of hard candy.[63]

What is a trickster? Why, amidst pantheons of highly powerful gods and entities, spirits and ancestors, would tricksters be allowed to play their pranks and be permitted to cause turmoil and strife amongst gods and men alike? One answer may lie in who the given societal authority is. Against an unjust system of corrupt governance and cruel kings, a trickster is a hero– akin to the likes of Robin Hood, playing clever games and stealing from the wealthy to benefit the poor of Nottingham. The trickster causes you to ask, to doubt your basic social conventions. *What is a king, what is a leader? Why are they the ones in charge? And, if I'm not justly treated, if I feel a king is taking too much, what's so wrong with tricking an oppressor out of money and power?* A trickster, especially in this context, becomes a figure outside the social norms established by society and higher powers alike. The trickster hands a weapon to the oppressed, they press a rock into the palm of a protester, they give the underdog's cause a little more kick. In the case of African Traditional Religions, including Santería, tricksters represent the ability and power to rebel against white, colonialist authority. Within the early, developmental periods of these

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[62] Ebos are the basic method for Santería's magical workings. They are used, in addition to divination and worship, as tools to ask for things of the orisha. Ebos are used similar to a Catholic novena, only with the addition of physical tools. These tools either have their own ashé, or spiritual energy: herbs, animals and their excrement; or have other magical power or associations: cemetery candles, colored string and wax, and dust from the corners of rooms or crossroads. See: De La Torre, "Santería," 121-123

[63] Nuñez, "Santería: A Practical Guide," 118

religions, in particular, trickster gods and their tools were thought to give enslaved Africans the edge they needed to survive brutality at the hands of their white enslavers:

> While belief systems are important, religion also serves a social function. It can either legitimize the sociopolitical power structures that exist, or it can protest and resist those structures. This function is usually accomplished by binding together like-minded individuals for the betterment of the whole. In times of rises and tragedies, or festivities and celebration, religion functions to create community which can provide assistance or companionship. During times of persecution, religion can serve and empower a people to survive the adversity they face… in a very real sense. Santería was created by the disenfranchised to resist their annihilation, to be a religious expression that protested their subjugation. Thus it was a source of strength for a persecuted people who searched for a means of survival while challenging the forces of colonialism that employed social mechanisms of power to enslave Africans.[64]

De La Torre maintains that religion, and their trickster gods, served to empower the individual by aligning them with a group, and furthermore, giving them the metaphysical and social tools to enact real, tangible change against colonialist, oppressive, white religions. This view of the trickster entity is represented well in the history and trajectory of revolutions and social revolts associated with African Traditional Religions emerging from the diaspora of the Transatlantic slave trade.

All the orisha of Santería, as well as many of the Voodoo lwa, Hoodoo folk heroes, and Yoruba oricha, exhibit elements of trickery in their myths. The orisha Oshun, associated with love and river water, played tricks against the other wives of her husband Chango, including

[64] De La Torre, "Santería," 191

persuading his other wife Oba into cutting off her ear to get Chango to love her more.[65] Even the creator god, Olodumare, faked his death several times to trick and smoke out liars and cheats. However, none play the game and the role of the trickster better than the orisha Eleguá.

Eleguá is honored as the orisha of travel, crossroads, and fate.[66] He is celebrated at the public markets and is honored first at rituals, most Santero homes are adorned with an Eleguá to protect it: a stone made to look like a head, with cowrie shells for the facial features, painted half-black and half-red.[67] His colors are red and black, he likes rum and cigars. His altars are frequently adorned with whistles, noisemakers, mouse traps, and children's toys.[68]

Fig 1. Permanent altar devoted to Elegua at the Yoruba Temple in Caracas, Venezuela. Individual Elegua heads are representative of individual family members.[69]

[65] William Bascom, "Oba's Ear: A Yoruba Myth in Cuba and Brazil," in *Research in African Literature*, vol. 7, no. 2, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 149-165.
[66] De La Torre, "Santería," 59-60.
[67] De La Torre, "Santería," 60-61.
[68] This includes fidget spinners, in particular. Toys that are a little annoying or irritating (to adults) tend to be Eleguá's favorites. Nuñez, "Santería: A Practical Guide," 37.
[69] Ysamuir Flores-Peña, "Santeria Garments and Altars," (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 64

Fig 2. Offerings at altar to Elegua. Elegua "head" on left side of image wears a golden crown, is draped with red and black beads, and sits next to an offering of a whole cigar. Note plates of food, whole fruit such as coconuts and bananas, and pastries.[70]

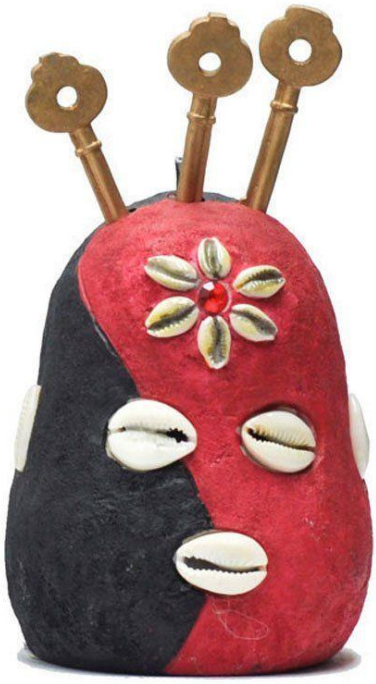

Fig. 3. Elegua head sculpture made of poured cement. The head is painted with Elegua's colors of black and red, with three cowrie shells for the mouth and eyes. Three keys rest on the top of the head, symbolizing both Elegua's domain as guardian of doorways, and his love for the number three. [71]

[70] Ysamuir Flores-Peña, "Santeria Garments and Altars," 65.
[71] Image sourced from www.wisdomproducts.com, online retailer of Santería metaphysical products.

Eleguá is the patron of doorways, messengers, tricksters, and justice.[72] He is known as Eleguá within Santería; but bears many names across traditions. The white Christians called depictions and stories of him a demon, or the devil. When syncretized with Catholic saint veneration, he is either St. Anthony of Padua, Benito the Holy Infant of Prague, or the Holy Child of Atocha– all guises that reference his love of children and frequent disguises as such.[73] He is called Papa Legba in Voodoo, Exu by practitioners of Candomblé, in Nigeria he was Eshu-Elegbara. In folklore, he appears as a man named John, as the devil himself, or as a wily trickster. No matter his name (or, if he has a name), Eleguá maintains these traits across tales.

Eleguá is called both old and young. In the Yoruba tradition, he is described as a very short old man, or a large man with a very old face. One such praise song depicts him as being so small he is too short to reach things easily: "Because of our father's size / His head scarcely shows / He stands on tiptoe / To put salt in the soup."[74] As Eleguá's worship moved to the Americas, his appearance, too, changed: Santeros say Eleguá looks like a young child with the face of an old man, wearing a fedora and smoking a cigar, he carries a shepherd's crook or *garabato* to give those who misbehave or displease him a good, solid whack; whereas Voodoo practitioners describe Papa Legba as an old, wiry, lanky, tall man using a thin cane.[75] Eleguá is associated with these things due to his social position: he is old, therefore wise, and young, therefore playful and capricious. We accept an amount of rebellious spirit and childishness from young children, in some contexts we give consideration and additional time to the disabled, and

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[72] De La Torre, "Santería," 48.
[73] De La Torre, "Santería," 61.
[74] Joan Wescott, "The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegba, the Yoruba Trickster. Definition and Interpretation in Yoruba Iconography," in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Oct., 1962, Vol. 32, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962).
[75] Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, "Creole Religions of the Caribbean," 110.

we give a great measure of forgiveness, respect, and general allowance for chaos to the elderly. These two subpopulations– the young and the elderly– are given an amount of social leeway we do not allow for the able-bodied, sound of mind, mature adult members of society:

> His age is reflected in his cunning and the wisdom concealed in his trickery; his extreme youth in his wantonness and caprice and in his impulsive behavior. Whether old man or child there is a disregard for the normal code; he enjoys the natural license of the innocent and the privileged license of the aged. As a child he is the experimenter who breaks rules; as an old man he enjoys the wisdom that takes him beyond rules.[76]

Through his image as simultaneously an old man and a young child, the Eleguás let us know that we must treat him with respect; and that he will tease, prank, and make playful fun.

The character of Eleguá comes, in part, from the uniform spiritual experience of the Santeros who undergo rituals to become possessed by Eleguá. Within the rituals of Santería, possession acts as the main way Santeros learn about the distinct personalities, likes and dislikes, and behaviors of the orisha. Those possessed by Eleguá oftentimes will trip others, play childish pranks, and laugh at those who he makes the butt of his jokes. They will usually stand watch at a doorway and plan their jokes from just outside the space set out for the ritual- be it a room or open land. His dances are full of large gestures and "buffoonery."[77] He is frequently described as a childish, greedy character– he is welcomed first, and given offerings first to honor his role as the guardian of the paths the orisha take to join humans in ritual dance, but also because he, like a petulant child, must be fed first lest he throw a tantrum.[78] He might ask for double, or triple, the offerings given to the other orisha, and will torment and bully the Santeros present until they

[76] Wescott, "Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 341.
[77] De La Torre, "Santería," 119.
[78] Wescott, "Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 342-343.

acquiesce and offer him more roosters, smoked fish, yams, rum, and sugar cane. In the Yoruba versions of his altars, a spoon is one of the most frequently used altar decorations, in reference to Eshu-Elegbara's unbridled hunger and desire for offerings.[79] Unlike human children, the damage Eleguá can do when he feels slighted is significant, and can escalate as far as premature death if Eleguá decides, in a fit of capriciousness, to open the paths that Iku, death, travels to take life.[80]

As fits with his character as a playful trickster, Eleguá is the only orisha who does not need to account for his actions with a higher power, whereas all other orisha are bound by the rule and law of Olodumare, their creator and the creator of all things large and small. While other orisha may act in ways that humans do not understand, or in ways that inconvenience their followers, they do so in accordance with the divine fate outlined by Olodumare. Eleguá is uniquely tricky; and as is true for many traditions with trickster spirits and gods of mischief, his myths are deeply complex, interesting, and humorous. Eleguá's trickery, overall playfulness, and his lack of divine oversight are often explained through a myth, or a *pataki*,[81] which, across multiple sources, goes like this: [82]

Narrative: Eleguá, Olodumare, and the Mice

Olodumare was the king of the orisha from the beginning of time, ruling over their actions and making judgments on what they could do. He was the creator of both the earth, heavens, and orisha, after all– it was what he was owed as the oldest being in existence and the

[79] Wescott, "Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 346-347.
[80] Nuñez, "Santería: A Practical Guide," 40.
[81] De La Torre, "Santería," 31-33.
[82] These myths have been sourced from a number of different sources, and are presented with some slight variations. I have written my own versions of these, condensing them slightly, and pulling the interesting different tellings together. I have cited the individual tellings in footnotes, where the original, longer versions may be found.

creator of all things. Eventually, many of the orisha grew tired of his rule and decided to overthrow the king. He was growing old, they reasoned. His age was making him senile and weak, they argued. None wanted to fight Olodumare, though; he was far too powerful. If they could not fight, they then reasoned that they could scare him into death or surrender. However, they could not find a way to do so, as Olodumare, the creator, was not scared of them, nor of most things that lived on the earth or in the heavens. That is, save for mice. Mice were the one creature that Olodumare feared. The orisha then plotted to fill Olodumare's house full of mice, and so terrify him into running away or else dying of fright.

The plotting orisha filled the house with mice, then invited Olodumare to come to a party. He came quickly and gladly, as he knew the orisha did not like him very much. Once inside the house, the orisha shut the door tightly and released floods of mice to attack Olodumare. The frantic Olodumare ran throughout the house, looking for somewhere to hide, but he only found more and more mice. Every cupboard, every closet, every bedroom of his house was overrun by the small, squirming, brown and white and gray bodies of squeaking, crawling mice. He then set his mind to the door, and went to rush at it and break it to the ground. Only then, Eleguá entered from the doorframe. The group of plotting orisha had forgotten that Eleguá lived by the door, as the orisha of roads, travel, and entrances. He had heard their treasonous plot, and hid behind the door to rescue Olodumare.

Having made his dramatic entrance, Eleguá soothed the stressed Olodumare, reassuring him that no mice would harm him. How? Eleguá began to catch the mice, and as he caught each one he ate each mouse until there were none left. Once the house was clean, Eleguá let out a loud belch, patting his satisfied stomach. Then, he pointed to where the traitors were, who were

punished by Olodumare. Olodumare, once calmed and reassured that there were no more mice in the house, recognized that he owed a great deal to Eleguá.

"What can I do for you?" He asked Eleguá.

"Oh, I couldn't *possibly*," Eleguá says, voice thick like velvet. Eleguá insisted he didn't want anything at all, that he was just being a loyal subject of Olodumare.

"You saved me and you saved my crown and you want nothing?" Olodumare didn't believe a word Eleguá had said.

Again, the trickster denied him. "It was my duty, nothing more. I couldn't accept payment from you!"

"ELEGUA. Tell me what you want!" Olodumare shouted, heart still pounding in his throat from the attempt on his crown and his divinity.

"Well, if you insist," Eleguá says modestly, "There's just one thing I would want from you. It's small, I promise."

"Whatever you want, I will grant it." Olodumare swore he could have whatever he wanted, anything at all.

Eleguá then gave his request: "I want the right to do what I want. I want to have the right to do what I will, whatever that may be."

His request was granted by Olodumare, as promised, and from that moment on, Eleguá was permitted to do whatever he desired, whatever the cost, with no oversight or punishment from Olodumare. Eleguá exits Olodumare's house, laughing all the way.[83]

[83] Nuñez, "Santería: A Practical Guide," 29-32.

Narrative Analysis: Eleguá, Olodumare, and the Mice

There is much to explore in this myth– the plot to overthrow the Creator, the use of mice and their meaning, the unfavorable position Olodumare holds amongst his children, the orisha. This myth can tell us a few important things about Eleguá– which is where we'll focus our analytical efforts. It tells us that Eleguá is clever. He listened carefully to the plotting orisha, he chose when he would reveal himself to Olodumare and the plotters, and he came up with an unorthodox, unusual plan to solve the mouse infestation. His plan, to eat the mice, humorously showcases the massive, unending appetite Eleguá has– he eats and eats and eats, and he uses eating or swallowing as a way to solve a problem.[84] Eleguá eating mice is further reminiscent of the ways in which animals are sacrificed to those possessed by orisha, where the *cabello*, or the possessed santero, will rip the heads off roosters or doves with their teeth, then drink their blood. Usually, however, mice are not a sacrificial offering.[85] This, possibly, refers to Eleguá's connection to, and love of, the things that are considered taboo.[86] He could have come up with another solution to the mice; another orisha, instead of Elegua, could have been the one to swallow the mice– metaphysically, all of them could have conceivably done such a feat. Eleguá's actions here were intentional, they were slow– imagine: the orisha systematically and deliberately moving through every room, every cabinet, every closet, every nook and cranny of Olodumare's house to find, catch, and swallow every mouse.

The story also tells us what Eleguá thinks about power– a useful thing to know about a trickster so often associated with revolt, revolution, and regime changes. This myth holds that Eleguá had the opportunity to overthrow Olodumare. He could have joined the plotters, or he

[84] Wescott, "Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 346-347.
[85] De La Torre, "Santería," 124-125.
[86] Wescott, "Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 347.

could have asked Olodumare for his power. He is portrayed as the one standing in the way of the plotter's success; he's the tipping point between Olodumare's dethroning or sustained hold on power. Instead, Eleguá wanted to simply operate outside the given structures of power entirely, not become the next king of the orisha. In exchange for his loyalty, Elegua then gains the ability to not answer to anyone– and, across his myths, he continues to have this ability.

When we return to Nigeria, where we can find more about Eleguá's origins, we see even more mischief and trickery. Amongst the Yoruba, Eshu-Elegbara is omnipresent, he exists in every doorway, every crossroad, and every public marketplace. While the different Yoruba cults sum possibly thousands of distinct entities, Eshu-Elegbara is worshiped across nearly every single cult.[87] His altar is at the entry of most homes, as it is in Santería tradition, and most towns bear an earthen pillar devoted to appeasing Eshu-Elegbara that receives daily offerings of palm oil. He is present in every argument, every conflict: Eshu-Elegbara is said to be representative of the anger of the gods. His praise names, used at ceremonies that invoke him, call Eshu-Elegbara "the anger which prompts retaliation out of all proportion," "the one who is wicked onto death," and "the one who turns right into wrong and makes the innocent guilty."[88] Eshu-Elegbara turns things on their head, he flips situations and people. In her article on the visual representation of Eshu-Elegbara, Joan Wescott describes him as a chaos loving creature, with no regard for authority or for social standing: "His unscrupulous tricks define him as a creature who has no regard for authority and in his myths he fights kings and gods as well as ordinary men.[89] In one of his Yoruba myths, Elegbara is said to have convinced the sun and moon to switch homes, completely reversing the patterns of night and day. The world was briefly thrust into chaos until

[87] Wescott, "Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 337.
[88] Wescott, "Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 338.
[89] Wescott, "Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 340.

things were put right again.[90] In another Yoruba myth, Eleguá broke apart the relationship between two deeply close friends:

> Elegba decided to walk down the path which divided their farms wearing a hat which was black on one side and white on the other; he put his pipe at the back of his head, and hooked his club over his shoulder so that it hung down his back. After he had passed, the two friends quarreled about the direction the old man had taken and over the color of his cap-one asserting he went one way and wore a black cap, the other insisting he went in the opposite direction and wore a white cap. The quarrel grew to such proportions that it was brought to the attention of the king. While each of the friends was still hotly accusing the other of lying, Elegba told the king that neither of them was a liar, but that both were fools, and then confessed to his mischief. The enraged king sent his men after Elegba, but Elegba was able to outrun them all. In his flight he managed to set many houses on fire. As the people ran from the houses carrying with them their belongings, Elegba offered to take care of their possessions, but instead gave each bundle that was given to him to a passer-by, so that the belongings of the fire-victims were sent on in every direction.[91]

Eleguá exits, laughing. There's no reason, no rationale behind any of his actions here, Eleguá simply does it. When he confesses his mischief to the local king, it seems like even Eleguá himself doesn't have a reason for why he did what he did other than seeing if he could do such a thing, seeing if he had the power to break up such close friends. It seems he just likes to watch the world burn, he likes to watch chaos unfold, he likes to cause havoc sometimes.

If Eleguá, Papa Legba, and Eshu-Elegbara make wrong things happen to good people, make the innocent guilty, and are the sources of violent, unproportionate anger, why is he so integral to Santería, Voodoo, and Yoruba worship? If he takes joy in the misfortune of others and

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[90] Wescott, "Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 340.
[91] Wescott, "Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 340-341.

will cause misfortune for his own entertainment, why honor him? If he is so wrathful and such an unreliable trickster, why is he a god to pray to, not just to pray against?

The scapegoat is another character archetype, occurring frequently in mythology, especially in relation to tricksters and prankster entities,[92] wherein the function of the scapegoat is to take the blame for the bad. "Why does evil exist when [insert god/pantheon/spiritual belief] exists?" is one of the most central questions a religion must ask. In Christianity, oftentimes Satan is the reason for bad things happening, for evil existing on earth. Lucifer is the easy answer, the simple, one-word, one-name solution. The answer to the question becomes "Satan tempted someone into wicked actions." When the instance is not at the fault of individual action, but of fate or the universe, it is simply the direct action of the Devil or one of his minions. This question, of why evil is allowed to occur, becomes more complex in African Traditional Religions, such as Santería, where no spirit is wholly bad or good. Here, Eshu-Elegbara fills the role of instigator, agent provocateur, as through his games and trickery he prompts worshippers into sin. A pattern occurs when people sin: human worshippers do something that upset the orisha, who in turn, demand restitution in the form of offerings or ritual devotional actions. The orisha are, through this cycle, fed by the sins of man. Eshu-Elegbara, the messenger of the orisha, is the one who provokes man into sin, and therefore is the ritual way the orisha are fed: such is the pattern of the scapegoat. As opposed to Christianity, where humans still choose to commit evil acts, the Yoruba belief system maintains that humans and Eshu-Elegbara are equally at fault for the sinful, evil, and wicked acts. Eshu-Elegbara may live in the heavens, but his work and his hands are on the earth.[93]

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[92] Wescott, "Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 351-353.
[93] Wescott, "Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 341.

The personality of Eleguá, as we've explored thus far, is one of sheer, unbridled chaos. If it brings him joy, he will forge ahead with hardly a second thought. He also is not blind to the nature of power, and who wields it– as seen with his protection of Olodumare's kingship, Eleguá will help those in power remain in power if it continues to benefit him. The remainder of this project will apply Eleguá, his myths, and his trickster spirit, to historical instances where he gave a helping hand to those whom he favors, who he thinks are fun, and to the causes he chooses to back.

Chapter 2: Hoodoo and High John amongst Enslaved Africans

Ebo: To Make a Man Impotent

Write the man's name on a piece of paper. Wrap the paper around a cotton ball with the man's semen on it. Place the paper at the bottom of a pot. Cover it with poppy seeds, balsam, incense, and amansa guapo. Pour in enough turpentine to cover it and insert a wick. Place the lamp before your Eleguá and burn it for three days. Take it to a cemetery on the third day and dispose of it into an empty grave.[94]

Following the unprecedented successes of the Haitian revolution, the next decades would result in scores of slave-owning white men migrating from free Haiti to the slave-dependent American South. This mass migration, of both the colonizers and their enslaved human property, led the way to the continued development of another Afro-Caribbean magi-religious practice– this time, Hoodoo. Like Santería and Voodoo, Hoodoo developed out of the practices and people coming from present-day Nigeria, from the Yoruba people.[95] Hoodoo deviates from its sister religions in two major ways: focus on ritual practice, with less emphasis on myths and folklore; and emergence out of Voodoo, a preexisting religious tradition. Hoodoo maintains the practice and magical beliefs of Voodoo, while further incorporating American culture and Christianity.

Slave owners in Haiti had noticed Voodoo's strength in the Haitian Revolution. Allowing enslaved Africans to practice their own religion had strengthened communities among enslaved persons, even across property lines, allowing them to communicate and plan revolts and revolutions.[96] As seen in the Bwa Kayman ritual, there was a blending between what was a religious meeting and a gathering of revolutionaries. In the eyes of white, Christian slave

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[94] Nuñez, "Santería: A Practical Guide," 126.
[95] De La Torre, "Santería," 160.
[96] Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, "Creole Religions of the Caribbean," 103-106.

owners, it also, quite possibly, gave them connections to otherworldly, demonic powers. Possession, a hallmark of the African-Traditional religions practiced by enslaved persons, within the Christian context was wholly done by demons, as was magic, the other mainstay defining action of Afro-Caribbean religions. To the white, Christian slave owners, the actions taken by their human property were almost certainly the result of interference with demons and the Devil himself. The slave owners would learn their lessons from the Haitian revolution– these new Americans suppressed any and all religious practices they saw. Enslaved voodoo practitioners had their practice destroyed. Yet, magic, religion, and rebellion will always find a way. The religion of Voodoo was suppressed, the names of the gods were lost. But the practice itself of Voodoo, the magical techniques of conjure, rootwork, and African-Traditional magic adapted and developed further into secrecy, developing into what one could call "harmless superstition." It wasn't hard, even– after all, it's what all African-Traditional Religions had done, time and time again, giving some to keep some.

Ritual is often the remaining aspect of religion, even when the religion is suppressed and hunted, ritual keeps holding on. Doniger explores this trait of ritual in *Other People's Myths*, where she writes about the suppression of Judaism in Spain during the Inquisition.[97] Even when ritual loses all meaning, the habit is so deeply ingrained that it is not easily lost– Spanish Jews forced to perform rituals in secret would set up a guard outside to warn them of the approaching Inquisition, who would play cards so as to not arouse suspicion. After some of these Jews converted to Catholicism, or after they ceased to perform their rituals, they still set out a card table and played outside on the days of Jewish holidays: "This process is quite closely parallel to

[97] Doniger, "Other People's Myths," 126.

the one that Max Müller postulated for myths: through a 'disease of language,' the word for a god remains when its true, original, naturalistic meaning has been forgotten."[98] In the instance of Hoodoo, where myths were changed and lost, and oftentimes gods with them, ritual was the way to preserve religion. In the words of George Brandon again, it was the way the practitioner gave some to keep some.[99]

Eshu-Elegbara, known as Papa Legba in Haitian and Louisiana Voodoo, would, like all his other fellow orisha, lose his name and identity. Yet, his stories, and the stories of other lwa and orisha, survived as legends, tall tales, and folk stories. In the mix, lwa merged together, they split, they changed, and were called by other names. It is our responsibility as scholars of Afro-Caribbean religions, to pick them apart and put the pieces of the stories back together. One such example is that of High John the Conqueror– both a folkloric figure and a botanical ingredient used in Hoodoo and Voodoo alike.

High John was the son of an African King, a strong warrior of regal heritage, kidnapped and sold into slavery in the Americas. Not one to accept the cruel hand of fate, John became a rebel leader, a maroon general, stirring uprisings and encouraging other enslaved persons to revolt and turn on their white oppressors. He became infamous, well-known for certain moxie, an unbreakable strength, and a strong-willed spirit that he would never surrender. He was caught after reigning holy hell on the white slave-owners. Standing on the execution block, before being hanged in front of his compatriots, before he was killed he swore to his compatriots that before his spirit returned to Africa, he would leave a little of his power in the black-brown twisted roots

[98] Doniger, "Other People's Myths," 126.
[99] Brandon, "Santería from Africa to the New World," 91.

that grew abundantly in the woods. All looking for a little bit of courage, rebellion, or, as the youth of today say, the audacity, could use the root to summon High John's energy.[100]

Ipomoea Jalapa, and its botanical cousins, *Ipomoea Purga* and *Convolvulacea Jalapa*, are a class of root indigenous to Veracruz, Mexico. *Ipomoea Jalapa* would be spread throughout Europe and the Americas, sold and used as a purgative, laxative, and treatment for disorders of the kidneys. Due to the massive European interest in the root, it was brought across the Americas, to be grown in domestic farms and sent out from port cities. *Ipomoea Jalapa*, *Ipomoea Purga*, and *Convolvulacea Jalapa* would be found growing wild in the forests of the American south. There, in particular, the dark black-brown root would come to be called High John the Conqueror. *Ipomoea Jalapa* and its cousins would become a staple of Hoodoo folk magic, with a vast myriad of magical properties ranging from sexual potency and virility to otherworldly protection and courage.[101]

Indeed, should the original biological origin of *Ipomoea Jalapa*, *Ipomoea Purga*, and *Convulacea Japapa* be considered, we find the more-biographical narrative of Gaspar Yanga. Yanga, an Afro-Mexican rebel, bears many close similarities to the narrative of High John the Conqueror: Yanga was a kidnapped member of one of the royal families in present-day Gabon, who became one of the Spanish authorities most feared rebel leaders. He lived, free and unruled by the white colonizers, for nearly forty years, in the mountainous region between Xalapa and Puebla, later establishing his own Maroon community in the hills of Veracruz. And, when

[100] Katrina Hazzard-Donald, "Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System," (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 71-72.
[101] Hazzard-Donald, "Mojo Workin'," 75-77.

Gaspar Yanga was caught by the Spanish colonial authorities, he was executed amongst the geographical area where *Ipomoea Jalapa* and its cousins grow abundantly.[102]

In another historical record of High John's use as a tool for evading and withstanding slavery, *Ipomoea Jalapa* makes a cameo in Frederick Douglas' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Douglass, in his account of his early life as an enslaved person, reflects on the sly methods he used to teach himself and others how to read, then to gain a semblance of financial independence and at last, to escape. Notably, Douglass mentions a specific root given to him by another enslaved man, who claimed that the root would keep any white man from being able to beat or whip him:

> He [Sandy] told me, with great solemnity, I must go back to Covey; but that before I went, I must go with him into another part of the woods, where there was a certain *root*, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it *always on my right side*,[103] would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me. He said he had carried it for years; and since he had done so, he had never received a blow, and never expected to while he carried it. I at first rejected the idea, that the simple carrying of a root in my pocket would have any such effect as he had said, and was not disposed to take it; but Sandy impressed the necessity with much earnestness, telling me it could do no harm, if it did no good. To please him, I at length took the root, and, according to his direction, carried it upon my right side.[104]

Douglass would keep the root on his person during his continued period of enslavement, and his later journey North. Past this point, he says white men were unable to whip him, though they did

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[102]Hazzard-Donald, "Mojo Workin'," 75-77.

[103] The "right side" mentioned here may be in reference to the "right-hand path" and the "left-hand path." Across several traditions, the "right-hand path" is used in reference to healing, protective, and "good-natured" magical workings, whereas the "left-hand path" is used to describe malicious magics such as hexes, cursings, and crossings. See: Squint, "Vodou and Revolt in Literature," 170.

[104] Frederick Douglas, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave," (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 34 (Emphasis added by author).

often beat him. Douglass does not credit the root with having that effect, sometimes eschewing that it had done anything at all. He instead credits his changed internal philosophy and the shared knowledge that the next man to whip him would be the one to kill him. Sandy, the other man who gave him the root, however, would frequently credit the root as the success.[105]

John the Conqueror could be any number of Yoruba orisha. He could be an amalgamation of any number of male Yoruba deities, or he could instead be a folk hero like Tortoise or Anansi. John could be Hoodoo's preservation of Shango, the orisha of war and storms,[106] or that he's an interpretation of Ogun, the blacksmith who forges the great warrior spirit.[107] There is also, of course, the interpretation of John the Conqueror as Eleguá, the entity who loved many faces and many images.[108] The voice of dissent, he who recognizes no authority either divine or mortal, the orisha who was the most likely to spit in the face of white authority. Eleguá, dancing along the waves of the Atlantic, playing his flute as his name and knowledge splintered. His name might change, but his divinity could not be erased, the descendants of the first enslaved Africans taken to the New World would find him, again and again. This interpretation of Eleguá as John is best proven by the number of less-grand stories about John the Conqueror; when he wasn't a warrior or a king but an enslaved man in a white household, where he wouldn't bow to white authority. He was more than just the bold, dramatic resistance. He was also the small, strong voice of resilience. This is demonstrated beautifully in the following tall tale, presented below:

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[105] It's also worth mentioning that Douglass did include mention of the root in his narrative, several times. Regardless of if he thought the bit of High John was helpful, it did bear an impact upon him.
[106] Hazzard-Donald, "Mojo Workin'," 71.
[107] Carolyn Morrow Long, "Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo: Sin, Fraud, Entertainment, and Religion," in *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions,* vol. 6 no. 1, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2002), 151.
[108] Long, "Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo," 51-52.

Narrative: Mr. Jim's Bawdy John Tale

John was so defiant that he promised himself he would never respond to a question from whites with the proper answer of "yes'm" or "yes, sir." And he never did. There was nothing that the white folks could do to make John say "yes, ma'am" or "yes, sir"; he just wouldn't do it. Whenever John was asked a question by white folks that would normally solicit a "yes'm" or "yass'r" answer, John would answer affirmatively like this. If the white folks asked John, "John, did you chop the wood?" John would reply, "Stacked it, too." "John, did you water the horses?" "Groomed 'em, too." "John, did you weed the garden?" "Watered it, too." John always avoided the deferential answer that the white folks wanted to hear.

Well, the white folks decided that they had had enough of John's impudence and they devised a plan to force John to answer appropriately. The twenty-year-old unmarried daughter, Lisa Belle, was to hide in the shower naked and surprise John with a question that would force him to reply "yes'm." So, Lisa Belle went upstairs and hid behind the shower curtain, naked in the shower. She called out to John as he cleaned the bathroom, "John, did you wash the dishes?" John replied, "Dried 'em, too." "John, did you cut the hay?" "Baled it, too." Finally, in total frustration, Lisa Belle threw back the curtain, revealing her naked white body to John. As she stroked her breasts, she demanded that John look at her as she asked him the final question, "John, have you ever sucked a white woman's tittie?" John replied, "Pussy too." And with that reply, he left the bathroom.[109]

[109] Hazzard-Donald, "Mojo Workin'," 73-74.

Narrative Analysis: Mr. Jim's Bawdy John Tale

Here, we see how John wasn't just for those with the courage to run, nor for only the battlefield. John, in all his bawdy, humorous, bravery was for the larger practice of humanization. His ability to circumnavigate tricky social situations gave him the ability to disrespect the white master, therefore disrupting the order and nature of slavery. In Haiti, as the slave owners noticed they were losing control over their human property, they remarked that the power they had once weilded, the psychological nature of their authority, was starting to slip: "Even in those areas where the revolt had not yet impacted, such as Port-au-Prince, a lack of 'respect' towards white planters was noted. As one planter noted, "The magic [of racism] has disappeared, how will we replace it?"[110] These men recognized that slavery needed to have a pseudo-magic behind it, that the idea that white men were superior needed to have some sort of metaphysical, heaven-ordained mandate behind it in order for such a thing to have any chance of success.

Mood, attitude, and individual nature were also actions blessed, protected, and ordained by High John; disrespect and malicious compliance highly valued in his mythos. This disrespect, in this narrative, comes to us in the form of a sexual context: John doesn't bring the interaction to sexuality, to "low-brow" topics of conversation; he instead goes exactly as low as the white woman trying to rile him, then is able to exit the dangerous encounter. Hazzard-Donald explains, after introducing the story, that John became a representative of all Black men, with his witty solutions becoming representations of the cleverness Black Americans needed to embody to

[110] Forsdick and Høgsbjerg, "Toussaint Louverture," 44.

survive. He wasn't just a folk hero, he embodied the way out of a solution with no wins, exemplary behavior that would ensure his continued success and survival.[111]

The bawdy nature of this text also gives us the opportunity to explore the sexual nature of both High John and Eleguá. Frequently, Eleguá's myths and narratives center around his sexual prowess, his utter sexual dominance. In his Yoruba praise songs, Eshu-Elegbara is cited as taking other's wives and outperforming their husbands at their marital duties: "If he leaves his wife behind / Husbands must go searching for their wives." [112] High John's root was said to look like the testicles of a black man, wrinkled and dark, mostly round, something akin to whole walnuts, but softer and less perfectly round.[113] Perhaps this phallic imagery of the root was part of what lead to its use as a sexual talisman. The root could be chewed for increased virility, stamina, and fertility. It could be placed under the bed as a way of ensuring one's sexual activities would continue occurring often and satisfactorily.[114] Madame Ducoyielle, a hoodoo practitioner, was interviewed by Robert McKinney for the Louisiana Writers' Project in the 1930s, where she highly recommended High John for increasing female libido:

> I knows another way to make de Johnny Conqueror rootwork. Mix it with some cayenne pepper and sugar and take it to ya woman's house. If she is not treating ya right just put de Johnny Conqueror root under her bed, and child, I mean she is going to function from then on. *She is a conquered fool but doesn't know it*, ... A man had trouble wid his old lady. But when he put dat root under de bed his woman went crazy. She was too much for him. Dat Johnny Conqueror root had her jumpin' and doing all kind of funny things at night. Yes sir, Johnny Conqueror is de best stuff fo' women.[115]

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[111] Hazzard-Donald, "Mojo Workin'," 74.
[112] Wescott, "The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 343.
[113] Hazzard-Donald, "Mojo Workin'," 68.
[114] Long, "Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo," 50.
[115] Long, "Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo," 50 (Emphasis added by author).

The root, in this instance, is doing the conquering– according to Madame Ducoyelle, it has the ability to change the mood or the attitude of a woman, alongside with her and her partner's physical sexual stamina, it makes her more amenable to sex, drawn to it supernaturally by the root itself. High John's powers here are used to conquer and dominate a sexual partner, loosing any inhibitions they may have– "She is a conquered fool but doesn't know it" making it a powerful sexual tool.

Eleguá, across his myriad of interpretations, is often seen as a facilitator of sex; as well as a lover and an active participant in intercourse. His altars in Nigeria still take the shape of large, phallic mounds made of earth, consistently lubricated with palm oil and corojo butter.[116] Should the pillar ever go dry, it is said the village will enter a period of chaos and wild destruction. The phallic imagery of Eleguá goes further within Nigerian Yoruba worship of Eleguá; indeed all his symbols can be seen in a priapic, sexual light.

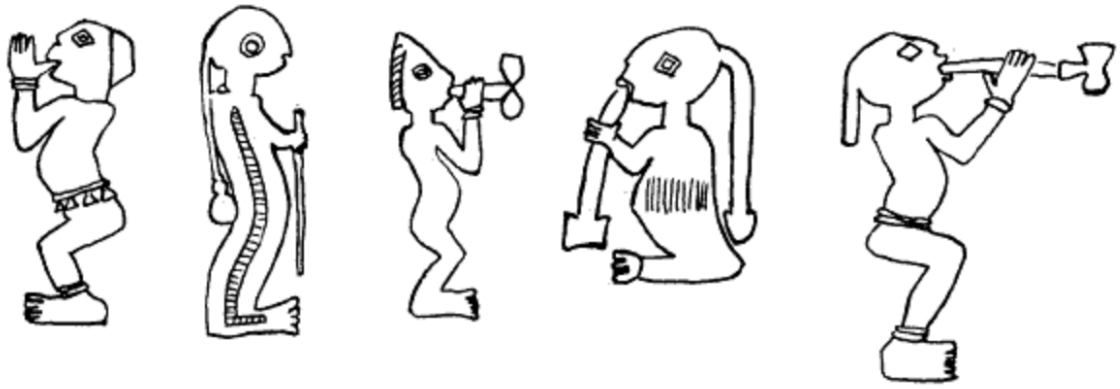


Fig 4. Figures of Eshu-Elegbara as found on doors of Yoruba temples. (After Drawings of Carl Arriens in Frobenius, The Voice of Africa, vol i, p. 228.)[117]

[116] Wescott, "The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 338.
[117] Wescott, "The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 340.

In addition to the penile earth pillar, his braided hairstyle, the long-necked Calabash, and his club are all suggestive, euphemistic symbols reminiscent of the penis: long, with a rounded base evoking testes, and a pointed head similar to the foreskin of an uncircumcised phallus.[118] In her article on the religious symbology of Eshu-Elegbara in Nigeria, Joan Wescott cites the phallic imagery surrounding the worship of Elegbara as a symbol of masculine energy, strength, and sexual possibility. Eshu-Elegbara's overall penile imagery is tied to his strength and role as a warrior, a masculine protector. Beyond the visual ties and symbols of masculine strength, it also ties with his mythos and his role as a deeply sexual being. His worship, so connected with penile images, is not just for a display of strength; Eleguá is a figure who can provoke sexual desire much like the root can:

> Eshu devotees told me that 'If a man goes to Eshu and offers him his taboo food [palm-kernel oil],' and mentions the name of the woman, then Eshu will get angry and meet with the woman in her dreams night after night until she accepts the man she has refused.' It is in fact Eshu who is held responsible for erotic dreams and for adulterous or other illicit sexual relations.[119]

When we turn to his mythos, we get a little more specificity. In these stories, Eleguá is also the facilitator of several relationships, though these usually are focused on lust, rather than love. The following story, found across several Santería folklore sources, tells of how Eleguá brought Oshun and Orunmila for a short-lived romance.

[118] Wescott, "The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 349.
[119] Wescott, "The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 343.

Narrative: Oshun's Secret Name

Oshun, the orisha of rivers and love, was the most beautiful of the orisha. She is lovely in demeanor and in her appearance, and her very nature exudes sexuality; as a honeycomb drips with honey, so did Oshun drip with desire. As such, Oshun constantly had suitors asking her and her mother for her hand– which, quickly, grew tiring. They brought mountains of gifts, their horses crushed their garden, the men set up camp in their land and close to their house, and yet, no man caught the eye of the beautiful Oshun.

"Enough!" A camel was eating one of their prized rose bushes. Oshun's mother shouted to the cluster of suitors outside the door to their house. "Get out of my garden! I understand you wish to marry my daughter. There are just too many of you. So, there must be a fair way to determine who can marry her."

The crowd listened, enraptured.

"My daughter's name is secret." Oshun's mother started shooing the camel away. "Only I know it. Whoever has the cunning and cleverness to discover her name will win her hand in marriage. His skill will melt her heart and will win my approval."

Orunmila, the god of oracles and fortune telling, was in the crowd. "This should be easy!" He celebrated, after all, there was no secret that he couldn't learn. But, no matter how many coconuts he threw, or cowries he consulted, he could not find her name.

Orunmila was also very wise, wise enough to know when he needed to ask for help. And, while Orunmila was the orisha of divination, he knew that Eleguá was the originator of these things, as well as his good friend.

"Eleguá, old friend, you must help me!" Orunmila cried out, taking his friend by the shoulders.

"Do you need money?" Eleguá asked.

"I'm in love and I need your help," Orunmila explained.

"Even worse," said Eleguá.

"Please, I need to find the name of the most beautiful girl in the region! She's the one for me, I know it." Orunmila pleaded. "She won the hearts of all men, but I need her to be only mine. She's the most beautiful!"

"And where do I come in?" Asked Eleguá.

"Only your wit, Eleguá, could figure out such a puzzle! Please, help me find her name."

Eleguá smiled modestly. "I'll try."

Eleguá made his way to Oshun's mother's house and hid there for days. Sometimes, he disguised himself as an old man, or a small child, or a fool in the market. He pretended to be asleep in Oshun's doorway, listening in on the conversations between mother and daughter.

Eleguá knew that patience would always be rewarded. After days of waiting and listening, Eleguá heard an argument while dozing in the doorway. Oshun had accidentally knocked over a fresh pot of Omiero while trying a new dance step, and her mother, usually so careful about her daughter's name, slipped up.

"Oshun, look what you've done!" Her mother shouted.

Eleguá heard. "Oshun," he said to himself. Quickly, he made it to Orunmila's house.

"Well, did you find it?" The anxious Orunmila asked.

"This has been very hard, Orunmila," Eleguá stated.

"What did you find out?"

"I spent weeks sleeping in doorways, in such uncomfortable positions," Eleguá groaned.

"What is her name, Eleguá?"

"Weeks and weeks I spent, listening to them chatter back and forth, while wearing itchy old man beards, crouched over, do you know how bad that was for my back? You know I have a bad back, Orunmila–"

"PLEASE," Orunmila cried out.

"Her name is Oshun, my old friend." Eleguá scarcely got the words out before Orunmila, burning with desire, fled to her house. "You're WELCOME!"

Orunmila and Oshun would later wed, though their marriage would grow stale. Eventually, Oshun would move on, marrying Changó, the orisha of thunder and war.[120]

Narrative Analysis: Oshun's Secret Name

Here, we see how Eleguá's trickery is wrapped in his ability to provoke desire and facilitate relationships. He is patient where Orunmila is not, and he both understands and respects the nature of lust– Orunmila, like the rest of the suitors, is lusting, not loving, after Oshun. Like High John's root, Eleguá can spark sexual encounters, and ensure an amount of romantic interaction. However, it's loosely implied, especially within the myth of Oshun's name, that Eleguá won't be able to provide lasting, true love– that's something that seems to be beyond even the orisha, determined by something more mystical and elusive.

[120] De La Torre, "Santería," 75; Nuñez, "Santería: A Practical Guide," 48-51.

We also see, throughout these myths and stories, through the root-charms and the use of High John the Conqueror root, that even without direct connections to Eleguá, the root maintains the same characteristics of the orisha: sexual potency, courage and boldness, trickery and escape from authority. Returning to Doniger's theories on the staying power of ritual, even when faced with the forcible, violent, and oft-aggressive elimination of myths and stories, we don't forget what something was used for. Ritual stays, even when religion is suppressed and myths are burned. Groups of practitioners who had once, perhaps, called for Eleguá in order to bolster their sex lives, to give their partners more stamina and drive, continued to use similar practices with similar figures, even without the names or the identities of Eleguá. Even if a Hoodoo practitioner couldn't name Eleguá, or even High John, they would still know, on some level of the social subconscious, that the root would bring you a little courage when you had none, a little sex when you wanted some, and a lotta luck when you needed it to come.

The narratives of figures like High John, throughout their bawdy myths, their physical manifestations in plants, and in their historical tales that tie them to real figures, are part of the wide-ranging lore and myth that make up African Traditional Religious practices. While these practices grew in secrecy, hunted and repressed by white authority figures, the disparate pieces of physical root, historical figure, and remaining stories and tall tales, help us piece together a fuller image of who Eleguá was to Black Americans leading up to, and following the Civil War.

Post-Civil War, as Hoodoo continued to develop as a secret magical practice amongst many Black Americans, High John the Conqueror Root became one of the most popular spiritualist products of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While African Traditional Religions used to lean more heavily on animal sacrifice as the primary mode of magic, the

oppressive situations of slavery shaped how practitioners of these religions and rituals managed their problems. As Santería, Hoodoo, and Voodoo developed in secrecy and in opposition to white Christian authority, they leaned more upon the use of plants, acknowledging that plants hold spiritual energy, similar to the life-force in all living things, that can be used when the plant is picked, ground, or otherwise used in magical workings.[121] Plants were cheap, easy to locate, easy to hide in both raw components and in their final forms as cleaning and hygiene products: both spiritual and practical. "In Santería, every plant is alive, complete with personality (some cooperative; some shy; still others volatile!) and temperament, and is guarded by a spiritual entity and infused with ashé." [122] This knowledge, and the increased use of plants by the family of African Traditional Religions, carried over as aspects of African Traditional Religions merged into the popular spiritualisms within White communities. High John's root, in particular, became a deeply popular product.

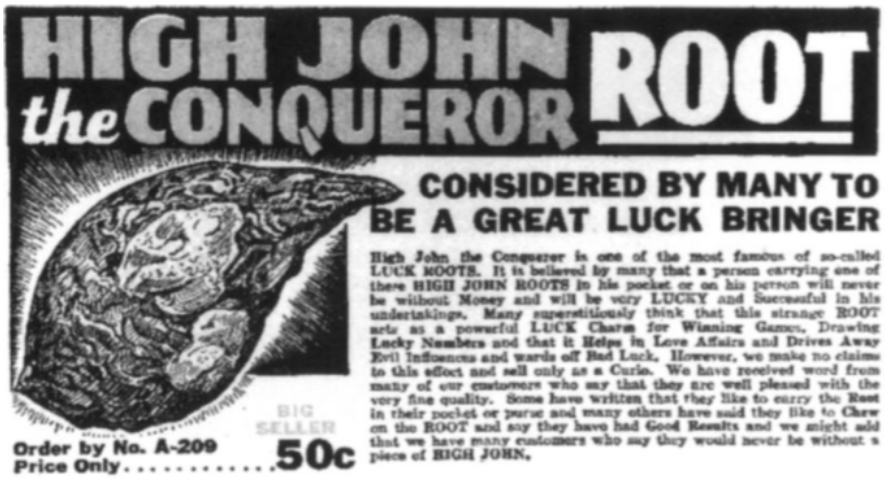


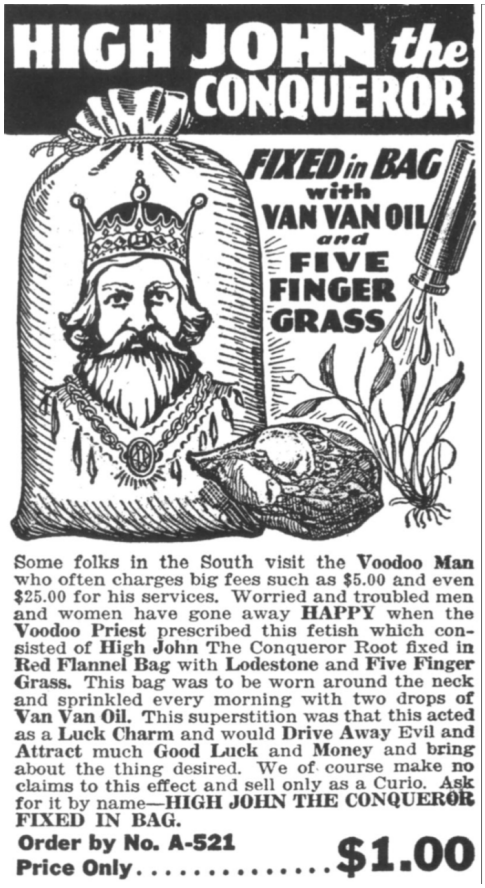
Fig. 5. Advertisement for High John the Conqueror Root from the 1936 King Novelty Curio Catalog. Photo by Eric Long, Smithsonian Institution.[123]

[121] Maha Maoran, "Santería in Cuba: contested issues at a time of transition," in *Transition*, no. 125, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 68-69.
[122] De La Torre, "Santería," 130.
[123] Carolyn Morrow Long, "John the Conqueror: From Root-Charm to Commercial Product" in *Pharmacy in History*, vol. 39, no. 21, (Madison: American Institute of the History of Pharmacy), 49.

High John's root was blended, crushed, and mixed into powders, placed into mojo spell bags, was turned into incense cones and floor washes, magical medicinal tonics, and spiritual cleansing bath products. His name was on bottles of products in spiritualist stores, the air thick with incense and the windows lined with rich purple curtains. High John would bring revitalized strength to your bedroom, courage in the boardroom, and luck everywhere else. High John would remain a popular, regular tool across occultism and spirituality through to the modern day– one can, if they know where to look, find incense and floor sweeps and crushed High John root in Red Hook, New York, of all places.

While his product grew famously popular, present in cities and even some towns without a large minority population, his credits were short-changed and his narrative tweaked. His face wasn't on the bottles of his product, not on the bags of his incense- sometime in the 19th century, as the root grew popular with a white audience, John the Conqueror himself became a white man.[124] Rather than the dark-skinned face that John, had he been a real man, would have borne, the face that Gaspar Yanga had, this new John the Conqueror was instead depicted as a white king, akin to European legends of King Arthur or other benevolent leaders, with long blonde or red hair, piercing blue eyes, and a circular, costume-like crown.[125]

[124] Long, "Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo," 50-51.
[125] Long, "Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo," 51.



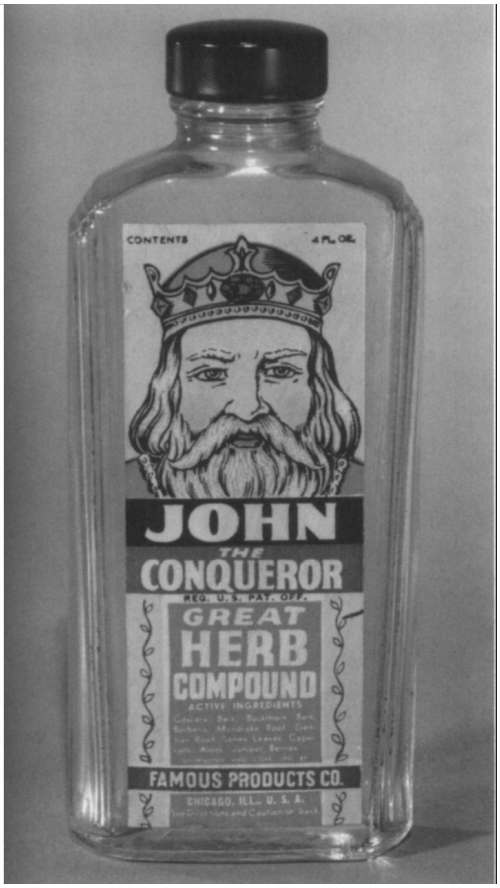


Fig 6. Bottles of High John in oil and bag with oil, bearing a white depiction of High John. Product compounds include other luck bringing items, such as five-finger grass and lodestones. Note the first image description states that the "Voodoo man… often charges big fees" while the product is sold for 1/5th the cost of the price of a stated Voodoo consultation. Sold by the 1936 King Novelty Curio Catalog. Photos by Eric Long, Smithsonian Institution. [126]

While the root grew in popularity, spreading past the bounds of Black spirituality and magic in the south to the metropolitan, white communities, the being behind it was busy working with his people. He changed on the bottles of product sold to white spiritualists, but he stayed a black man for those who he followed to the New World.

[126] Long, "John the Conqueror," 51-52

Chapter 3: Devil on Your Shoulder– Eleguá as Satan

To Cause Fights:

Burn human bones and powder them. Dry and powder cow, dog, pig, and goat excrement. Powder also a crab shell, a turtle shell, snakeskin, antler, red, white, and black pepper, red ants, boneset, ironweed, coal, a dried wasp's nest, sesame seeds, peony seeds, cemetery dust, and wind-blown dust. Sift together all ingredients until a fine powder is formed.[127]

To use, set out three sheets of paper. Place a pinch of the mixture on each. Fold the papers up and place them before your Eleguá for three days. On the third day, write the victim's name on a piece of paper. Burn the paper and add the ashes to the three small packages. Sprinkle this activated powder where you want the fight to take place.[128]

The actions of Eleguá in the Americas' post-slavery are widespread and well-known, famed throughout American folklore and mysticism, though their connections to Eleguá, Eshu-Elegbara, and Papa Legba are not always explicit. His fingerprints, no matter how faint, can be connected back to him through careful examination of folktales, symbols and mythology. As we learned from Doniger, it is hard, if not impossible, to fully erase a religion. Even when one is able to wipe away most of it, you are still left with reliefs where it once was, and the subconscious, unexplained ritual habits of the people who used to worship.[129] When looking for Eleguá, several things about him still remain. In particular, his calling cards are travelers and journeys; tricksters and sly characters; keys, doorways, entryways; and choices made at crossroads.[130]

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[127] Author's Note: This ebo also calls for urine (of unspecified origin or type). It is unclear where the urine should be used in this working.
[128] Nuñez, "Santería: A Practical Guide," 128.
[129] Doniger, "Other People's Myths," 126.
[130] De La Torre, "Santería," 91-93.

Oftentimes, his actions and his folklore are immortalized in the lyrics and music of blues music from the Southern Mississippi Delta. This region was densely populated with formerly-enslaved Black Americans, who kept the shape and form of their religions if their names were lost. The highest level of Christian-Yoruba syncretism thusly was born, with little to no knowledge of the gods these saints were masquerading as remaining within Hoodoo. Eleguá, Eshu, and Papa Legba then became the Devil, time and time again– as De La Torre and many others attest.[131] Their colors, of red and black, and their trickster, sexual nature aligned better with the man downstairs than any of the saints he was previously aligned with. In this new form, Hoodoo changed the way in which we treat the separate figure of the Devil, how we personalize him, and how we share information about what the Devil (or Eleguá) is.

The Devil is a recurrent character in folktales from the American South, as well as in most folklore and tall tales from Christianized regions of the world. The literal boogeyman of scary stories, he comes to steal away souls, to trick them into surrender or Faustian pacts. He drinks, dances, plays cards, tunes musical instruments, and he lives and walks amongst the shadowy elements of human society– as is said of Eshu-Elegbara, he may live in the heavens– or, in this case, hell– but his work and his hands are on the earth. Contrary to his adversarial, evil character in much European folklore, or the cartoonized, over-the-top, red-horned version of him children dress as for Halloween, in the folklore traditions of the American South, especially the Mississippi Delta, he plays the role of trickster, or the *agent provocateur*, more than a direct adversary against all of Christendom. The Devil within these stories is less of a direct, heavenly

[131] De La Torre, "Santería," 61; Ayana Smith, "Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster," in *Popular Music,* vol. 24, no. 2, (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 185; Wescott, "Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegbara," 343-344.

adversary or opposition to the will and love of God, as is found in the book of Job; and is instead represented as a clever, tricky figure with no moral compass other than his own desires.

A number of these myths and legends from Black communities in the American South can be found in *Mules and Men*, an anthology written by famed author Zora Neale Hurston, collected and recorded in the 1920s. Called the "Trickster's Bible," *Mules and Men* reveres and honors the trickster spirit, following it throughout myths and tall tales.[132] Hurston, who would later undergo initiation as a Hoodoo priestess, traveled through the Mississippi Delta, interviewed Black elders, and recorded stories about God, the Devil, the social and mythical history of Black Americans, and the larger-than-life figures that outsmart, outlast, and overcome an ever-rotating cast of adversaries. Like the myths of High John, where John became the archetypal Black American man, needing to outwit white folks, the characters presented within *Mules and Men* too must be more clever and courageous than their white adversaries, overcoming obstacles with wit in order to survive. The myths are all unique, of different lengths, and have different moral lessons, but Hurston called attention to a few key elements in her introduction, four things we should know about the Devil before reading:

1. The Devil is a deeply personified figure, with a sex drive, an appetite, a need for sleep, and a physical location of his home, making him reachable to those who'd like to have a cup of coffee with the Devil and make a deal. These stories often include the Devil having a family, usually a wife and one to three daughters, rarely if ever sons. Unlike God, who does not have familial or mortal ties mentioned in these

[132] Teresa N. Washington, "Mules and Men and Messiahs: Continuity in Yoruba Divination Verses and African American Folktales," in *The Journal of American Folklore,* vol. 125, no. 497, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 262.

stories, the Devil has connections to those around him, and to the mortal world he influences and plays in.

2. The Devil is always smarter than God.[133] God is usually quite busy and doesn't always notice when the Devil is playing tricks, else he doesn't quite seem to care.
3. The Devil oftentimes isn't the ubiquitous villain, but instead is the sly trickster archetype that aids humankind as much as he hinders them. He follows his internal moral code, and acts in accordance with what seems to be the most fun. The Devil is as likely to harm as to help.
4. Though the Devil has time, he often gets outsmarted by a scrappy hero– the third character in these stories, usually named Jack or John.[134] These heroes don't have time and don't have supernatural abilities, like God or the Devil do, but they have a fast mind, a clever tongue, and oftentimes can persuade further help from those with some stronger, more magical abilities– described, oftentimes, in a way deeply reminiscent of the construction and performance of Hoodoo spells and magical workings.

This second character trait, that the Devil is smarter than God, is one of the ways in which we can identify these stories as not native to the Christian context they are presented to us in, but that they are connected to older, Yoruba tales. God, here, does not act like the Biblical God we are accustomed to, instead he is more akin to the central, paternal deity of African Traditional Religions, Olodumare. The God of *Mules and Men* makes mistakes, he misses things, he is far from the Christian narrative of God as omniscient, omnipotent and infallible:

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[133] Zora Neale Hurston, "Mules and Men," (New York: Harper & Row, 1935), 3.
[134] Hurston, "Mules and Men," 3.

> These Supreme Deities [the Christian God and Olodumare] are twins in many respects, especially in the fact that both consistently overlook and forget things and regularly go back to refashion their creations. They create entities who initially do not appear to fit properly into the Grand Design, but the Grand Design, like the ese Ifa´, is malleable and open to rewrites, revi- sions, deletions, and additions. Indeed, it is these Gods' apparent shortcomings that lead their creations to full actualization. Rather than being omniscient, omnipotent, and infallible, these Gods take naps, overlook details, and can be queried, chastised, or outwitted by their creations.[135]

It's almost too easy for the Devil to outsmart God in these situations– when the Devil has a keen eye for detail and time to spend lying in wait, it's clear how he is able to outsmart the overworked, overtired God. While God is busy creating, governing, setting the stars in the sky and the fish in the sea, the Devil has plenty of time, the ability to spend a good long while playing cards and watching folks as they come to a cross in the roads.

In one story recorded in *Mules and Men* entitled *Why Women Take Advantage of Men*, Hurston records a narrative told by a woman that explains gender dynamics; why men labor in fields and women keep the house, do the cooking, and mind the children.[136]

Narrative: Why Women Take Advantage of Men

In the beginning, men and women had the same amount of strength, the same amount of responsibilities, they lived in the same house together. They shared all tasks equally, as both were evenly suited to cooking, cleaning, tending the land, and keeping the animals. Though this work was split evenly, Man would frequently argue with Woman, trying to pile more of his tasks

[135] Washington, "Mules and Men and Messiahs," 268.
[136] Hurston, "Mules and Men," 31-34.

onto her plate, trying to physically subdue her– but, as they had equal strength and stamina, Woman was able to wrestle with him just as long as he could. Sometimes, their fights got so big and so loud, God himself needed to come down and resolve their issues, splitting the tasks as evenly as he could. It would be best, Man reasoned, if he could force her to do all the things he didn't want to do. If only he was just a little stronger than her, he could beat her into submission– why, then he would hardly have to do any work at all! Early one morning, the Man snuck out and marched up to the throne of heaven.

"Maker," the Man said, "I am getting tired of needing to sort out this Woman and make her do her tasks, and I'm sure you're not looking to come down to earth and sort her out yourself– you're busy! You don't have the time for that! If you'd just give me a little more strength than the Woman, I'd be able to make her do what I want and we'd not need to involve you in our affairs."

God agreed with the Man, and gave him more power than the Woman. The Man leaped down the stairs to heaven, grinning and eager to show his Woman his newfound strength.

"Woman!" The Man hollered, "Here's your boss. God's given me the strength to make you mind me and do as I say."

The Woman, who used to be able to fight back when the Man fought her, found that she was weaker and incapable of fighting him back anymore– and that she now was stuck doing all the unpleasant tasks she used to share with the Man, while he fancied himself a king, sleeping in their bed and getting fat off her good cooking.

The Woman decided to set out and speak with God herself, she had not been consulted about this new world order, and by God, she was going to give her maker a piece of her mind. The Woman marched up to the throne of God and began to speak: "God, why have you taken

away my strength? I used to be able to fight the Man, but now I can't do anything. I'm stuck doing all the work while he just lazes about, and if I say a word otherwise he strikes me. Give me my strength back!"

"I'm sorry, Woman, but I can't fix that." God explained to her, "I didn't give him more strength, or steal it from you. I gave him more strength than you, if I gave you more, he'd get more. And what I give, I can't take away."

The Woman didn't particularly find this a fair answer, not in the slightest. So she turned on her heel and walked right down to the home of the Devil. She cried on his doorstep, miserable. He wiped away her tears, letting her spill out all her frustrations, and handed her a hankie to blow out her nose. After she'd told him her sorry story, the Devil told her just what to do.

"Woman, go back to the Throne of God, march to him with confidence and your head held high." The Devil straightened her shoulders, lifted her chin with his gentle hand. " This time, ask him for the ring of keys he has on his mantle, and when you come back here I'll show you how to use them."

The Woman marched back up to the heavens, her brow sweaty from the climb up to heaven and down to hell, then back again. This time, she speaks to God, praising his nature and his elements, sweet and sugary in her tone. "Oh Maker, creator of the sun and moon and stars, of all things beautiful and wonderful, I have a request for you."

"Woman, speak plainly what you want." He interrupts her, frustrated. God was busy.

"God, may I please have the keys from your mantle?" She asked, sweet as any honey. The Lord God gave the Woman the keys, which she promptly brought back down to the Devil.

"The ring has three keys," The Devil explained, pulling them apart to show her. "With them, you can lock up what matters most in the world to Man. This first key locks up the kitchen, and no man wants to be apart from his food. This second key locks up the bedroom, and no man can be deprived of his bed and the woman in it. This third key locks up the cradle, and a man will do anything to keep access to his lineage and generations. Now go, lock everything up nice and tight, and don't tell him you have the keys. Wait for him to ask you where you got them."

The Woman went back to the house and locked up the kitchen, the bedroom, and the cradle. Just as the Devil said, when the Man found the house bolted up, he flew into a rage, banging on the doors and begging to be let back in. This time, when the Man went up to speak with God to dispute his actions, it was Man who didn't get what he wanted.

"I can't take back what I have given," God explains, "The woman keeps the keys."

"Then why," Man cries, "Did you teach her how to use them!"

"I gave her the keys, but it was the Devil who taught her how to use them," God says.

"How am I supposed to feed myself?" The Man asks, "How am I supposed to rest? And how, Maker, am I supposed to keep in contact with my generations? A man cannot be cut off from these things, it's immoral!"

"Ask the Woman," God said.

Stuck and unable to get his way by divine means, the Man returned back to the house. "I'll give you half my strength, Woman, if you'd just give me the keys!"

The Woman considered, tempted by the offer of equal power with the Man again. But the Devil, standing in the doorway whispered in her ear, telling her no. She had something better

than strength now. Thus, the Woman retook her power by controlling what mattered to the Man, at the council of the Devil. He is stuck mortgaging his strength to get access to the kitchen, bedroom, and cradle. The Devil? He exits, laughing.

Narrative Analysis: Why Women Take Advantage of Men

The first, fairly notable aspect of this myth is that the Devil, despite his name, is not the villain. Nor does God punish the Woman for taking the Devil's advice. Whereas in the Garden of Eden, Eve is punished for listening to the serpent, the Woman is allowed to take the advice of the Devil and implement it into her life. The Devil, as previously mentioned, is craftier than God. He sees the vulnerabilities in the social order and directly points to where the Woman can take control. Unlike God, who is busy creating and ruling, the Devil has time to teach her. Unlike traditional Christian narratives, the Devil is somewhat right– hence, possibly why the Woman is not punished for taking his advice, but gets all she wants and more. As Elegua, the trickster who needs not answer to divine authority figures, the Devil evades punishment or rebuke from God. Instead, God blames the Devil for the power imbalance, instead of shouldering the blame for starting the uneven power dynamic by making Man stronger; once again casting Eleguá as the scapegoat, taking the responsibility and blame even when those are not also associated with punishment, for the actions of others.

He may be called the Devil in this narrative, but his mannerisms, narrative, and actions align sharply with Eleguá, the wily trickster. Like other folktales from similar origins, this story features the Devil archetype aiding those in need in order to rebel against unjust rule from cruel masters. The powerful and mighty are overthrown, and the meek and oppressed are given the

tools they need to fight the authority. Unlike the archetype of Deus Ex Machina, where God appears to fix all that is wrong, God is incapable of fixing the problem, and the Devil doesn't solve all problems, but instead points the hero in the direction she needs to fix her issues herself.

As further evidence that Elegua was the original entity of this myth, the Devil presents a solution for Woman in the form of doorways, and, specifically keys– one of the integral symbols of Eleguá, Papa Legba, and Eshu-Elegbara. Eleguá, as the controllers of doorways and entries, would be the figure to give and take control over who enters, exits, and is permitted in specific places. Not only is the solution presented in the form of keys, a frequent item used to decorate the altars of Elegua, but the solution is presented in the form of *three* keys, the sacred favored number of Eleguá. These breadcrumbs, the smallest hints of a wink from Eleguá, indicate that this myth was, indeed, an initial myth created about Eleguá's protection and blessing of women.

As illustrated in the previous myths *Mr. Jim's Bawdy John Tale* and *Oshun's Secret Name*, Eleguá has strong sexual connotations. He gives one the ability to navigate tricky sexual situations and come out on top, and is a fan of romance and love– to a reasonable extent, Eleguá will help you secure a romantic relationship. In *Why Women Take Advantage of Men*, Eleguá's control over the sexual and romantic manifests in giving the Woman the ability to close her bedroom door and lock it tight. While High John's root might be used to "conquer" female partners, her innate status as detailed in this myth gives her the authority to close a door in her partner's face, locking the door tight. It is the knowledge that she bears the authority, that she maintains Man's access to her food, her bed, and her womb, that puts Man and Woman back on a more-even playing field.

But what *proof* do we have that it was Eleguá, and not the devil? Where is the proof, the firm evidence, the clear statement made that this story was always the trickster in disguise? As we learned from Doniger, myths are a hard thing to erase from a culture. This is, largely, due to the staying power and intrinsic value of symbols, of the image we keep in our minds of a religious story or a ritual. Doniger states:

> The symbolism of the Eucharist survives no matter whether the cup holds wine or grape juice or South African sherry. *When the archetype is truly powerful, it does not need a powerful manifestation to carry it.* Outside the realm of organized religion, too, myths often survive, at least in their crude outlines… Some archetypes seem to be able to exert at least a semblance of their power in almost *any* manifestation.[137]

Eleguá, like so many other strong archetypal figures that resonate with us, managed to survive in the smallest, least significant manifestations. Much of reassembling the image of Eleguá in the Caribbean and the American South is a scramble, fitting puzzle pieces together when you're missing over half and don't have the image that was once on the front of the box. We need to scramble for the smallest fragments, for every instance of the number three; every appearance of keys; every slightly scandalous, sexual narrative, every doorway opened and every threshold crossed by our protagonists. We have to trust, as best we can, that the pieces of Eleguá we find will fit together, carry a semblance of the image we think we'll wind up with when the puzzle is done, holding an element of archetypal power that enabled Eleguá to survive generations of suppression and forgetting.

Mules and Men is not the only instance of Eleguá manifesting in American Folklore as the Devil. Across American folklore he appears, oftentimes dressed in red with little pointy

[137] Doniger, "Other People's Myths," 39.

horns, as an archetypal figure showing us possibility, change, opportunity. The trickster, here presented to us as the Devil, gives us the chance to question the way of the world and the nature of things. One such instance of Eleguá's influence in American folklore comes to us through musicians, specifically the Delta Blues musicians of the 1920s and 1930s. There are a few reasons for this connection. Firstly, the Delta was a region in the American South with a high number of formerly-enslaved Black Americans, who were familiar with the culture and tall tales of Hoodoo. Eleguá has a regional connection to this area and these people. Should we opt for the narrative argument, it follows with the overall story of who Eleguá is that the entity who traveled with enslaved Africans to the Caribbean and the American South would stay with his people, and many myths discussed this far maintain this argument. Secondly, many of these musicians invoke common tropes from folklore of their region, which have their own ties to Eleguá. In particular, the myth of the crossroads and the crossroads bargain bears an incredibly strong connection to Eleguá, who is, across all his iterations as Papa Legba, Eshu-Elegbara, and Eleguá, the master and owner of crossroads, all journeys, all railroads, and all travel, especially the long travel that the itinerant musician would take as they sought fame and fortune, and the choices said musician would make over the course of a long, tumultuous career.[138] In order to further examine this, we will look at the tall tales surrounding some of the prominent blues musicians of the 1920s and 1930s, and try to unpick who exactly is casting such long shadows over musical folklore.

Robert Johnson, considered to be one of the best Blues musicians to ever walk the earth, lived a short, fast, and wild life– one that resulted in a number of myths, legends, and musical

[138] Smith, "Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster," 185.

folklore stories sticking to his name and his few recordings. Stories say that Johnson made a deal with the devil at the crossroads, that he sold his soul to gain great fame, that he was constantly pursued by hellhounds and smoke and brimstone, flames licking at his heels as he played his guitar.[139] According to musical folklore, a young Robert Johnson, determined to be a great blues musician, brought his guitar to the crossroads. He plucked at the strings idly, until from the shadows emerged an imposing, tall black man. The man, thought by both Johnson and many folklorists to be the Devil, tuned the guitar for Johnson. The now-impeccable instrument, perfectly pitched by the touch of Satan, was returned to Johnson's hands, along with the gift to play like nobody else on earth.

When asking most Blues historians about Robert Johnson, they will likely turn away from the folklore surrounding his life, focusing on his music and his legacy, not the rumors surrounding his life and death which are, after all, entirely unsubstantiated. It's a dirty little bit of "scholarship," mostly rumors and sketchy stories someone heard once, hardly academic information about a deeply prominent and influential Blues musician. You cannot exactly prove, directly, that someone sold their soul to the Devil- Lucifer himself tends to be an unreliable academic source, even if you could get him on the phone or ask him to sign an affidavit claiming his possession of Robert Johnson's soul. *Delta Blues* author and Blues historian Ted Gioia explains why he doesn't shy away from talking about Johnson's supernatural history, even when it's considered less than academic to discuss:

> At this point in the story, the Devil typically enters our drama, stage left. Ah, if we could only skip this interlude, what hand-wringing, this part of the Johnson biography is an acute embarrassment, the most shameful calling card of our trade.

[139] Ted Gioia, "Delta Blues: The Life and Times of the Mississippi Masters Who Revolutionized American Music," (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2008), 149-150.

> But it is– oh woe!– the best known chapter in the saga of the Delta blues. When I meet people with only the most remote understanding of the music, this is the one "fact" that they are sure to have heard, "Robert Johnson? Isn't he the guy who made a deal with the devil?" The story makes for great drama… And it sells more than just music. The state of Mississippi incorporates it into its tourism literature, growing the local economy greatly, all at Lucifer's (and perhaps Johnson's) expense.[140]

The tall tales around Johnson are the best known part of his story, they're the inescapable question everyone asks about. They're far from factual, derided as the non-academic, the sore spot of Blues musical scholarship. Yet, we keep telling these stories, we keep finding them compelling, we keep asking if it could be true. Over the past hundred years, we have been speculating as to who has possession of Robert Johnson's soul– the angels or the devils. For better or worse, most of the modern world after Johnson's death thinks that he made a deal with the Devil for musical talent.

Johnson may have thought he made a deal with the devil, indeed, his discography can tell us as much. We only have two studio albums of Johnson's singing, a relatively small number compared to his contemporaries. In these tracks, Johnson has an undeniable, haunting rhythm. One of his most celebrated songs, entitled "Hellhound on my Trail" is a haunting song, reflecting the way Johnson felt compelled to keep moving, unable to stop traveling and playing blues for fear of a hellhound on his trail:

> I got to keep movin', I've got to keep movin'
> Blues fallin' down like hail, blues fallin' down like hail
> Mm mm mm, blues fallin' down like hail, blues fallin' down like hail
> And the days keeps on worryin' me of a hellhound on my trail

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[140] Gioia, "Delta Blues," 160.

Hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail[141]

Travel is a key theme in Johnson's music, deeply prominent in both his lyrics and his lifestyle as a traveling musician. He would have spent many months on the road, staying at grimey hotels or sleeping on the road, traveling across the Delta gaining fame and renown. Alongside the theme of travel is the theme of running away, travel away from something pursuing oneself. The hellhound on his trail may not just be the mythical creature, but a reference to the dogs that slave hunters would use to track runaways– earlier musician Clara Smith wrote a lyrically similar song where she was chased by the devil's bloodhound.[142] Here we see one of the markers of Eleguá's connection to Johnson's story: the number of crossroads this man passed, the number of roads walked by him, all lend themselves to the Black American culture infused entity associated with every crossing and every path traveled. Considering the themes which Johnson includes, and the extent to which American Hoodoo reset and created the character of the devil from the parts and stories they had of Papa Legba and Eshu-Elegbara, the entity Johnson met may have indeed been the Yoruba deity, looking to cause a little chaos.[143]

Johnson had an ear for melody and tune; he likely had perfect pitch. Stories say he could write guitar parts for songs he had just heard; he never learned how to read sheet music or chord tablature notations; he operated entirely off of memory and hearing to become one of the most well-known blues musicians within an insanely short period of time.[144] Part of his legend comes from his humble beginnings in the Mississippi Delta– surely nobody from the middle of nowhere could be that good– with another substantial part of it coming from Robert Johnson's suspicious

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[141] Robert Johnson, "Hellhound on my Trail," Genius Lyrics, Accessed May 1, 2022. https://genius.com/Robert-johnson-hellhound-on-my-trail-lyrics.
[142] Smith, "Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster," 185.
[143] Smith, "Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster," 185-186.
[144] Gioia, "Delta Blues," 158.

death. Johnson died young and rather unexpectedly, with the cause of death being cited as everything from alcohol poisoning to untreated syphilis, or something more sinister, such as mothballs being stirred into his whiskey, a common poisoning method in the American South during the time. Johnson was said to have behaved immensely erratically in the hours leading up to his death– "the guitarist was crawling on the floor like a dog, howling in agony– in the eyes of the credulous, a sign that the devil was come to take his due… [he] was unable to tal, heaving and bleeding at the mouth. Later that day, he died."[145] Whether his death came at the hand of poison, medical mystery, or untreated syphilis, thus ended Johnson's mythic life.[146]

While Johnson may be one of the best-known blues musicians, he was far from the first and only to write songs about making crossroads deals. Songs naming the devil as the big black man standing at the crossroads, willing to play a game for your soul or give you a gift in the form of a Faustian bargain: mortgage your soul, surrender it in the afterlife for the pleasures and dreams and wonders of heaven here and now. Why wait until you die, live life lavishly and famously now, never mind when the bill comes due.

While Robert Johnson may be the more famed, and certainly more dramatic example of a musician making a deal with a shadowy figure at a crossroads, he was certainly not the only one, nor the first. Before him, Clara Smith sang of selling her soul to the devil: "He trails me like a bloodhound he's quicker than a snake / He follows right behind me every crooked turn I make."

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[145] Gioia, "Delta Blues," 185.

[146] If we concede that Robert Johnson made a deal with Eleguá, Papa Legba, or Eshu-Elegbara, one could tie his strange, premature death with the deal made with the orisha. All three are associated with controlling the roads that death takes to reach someone, and shorten or lengthen the path depending on their capricious feelings. See: De La Torre, "Santería," 59-62.
Johnson's death then follows with the lore surrounding Eleguá as a larger figure, and within the mythical logic around Eleguá, Johnson's death could be attributed to the actions of the orisha- sexually transmitted diseases and poisonings made by jealous husbands of the women Johnson seduced both fits with their collective associations with sexual interactions and quick-witted revenge. If, of course, we allow for the possibility that Johnson could have made that deal.

Across these several narratives, there is a very clear pattern, akin to what one finds in mythology. First, the musician appears. They want greatness, they want musical prowess, they want money, sex, power, respect– all things they want through making a name for themselves. They're also all things associated with Eleguá's domain, with his worship, his symbols worthy of respect and worship and awe.[147] The musician goes down to a crossroads, somewhere that should be bustling with people but is strangely quiet, unnaturally, unnervingly still. Perhaps a crow calls out, or a tumbleweed rolls lazily past. The artist is alone, or they think they are, but not for longer than a moment. Out steps the second character, long and dark and mysterious, dark skinned or shadowed, tall and lanky or fat and stout. He is the Devil, he is Papa Legba, he is Eshu-Elegbara, he is Eleguá. He promises all the musician wants, and more than they could have ever dreamed of. The musician hands over their instrument, and watches as the figure tunes it, blesses it, curses it– whichever strikes the narrator's fancy. The musician gets their instrument back, and they walk away towards great success and fame, towards sex, money, power, respect. The Devil walks away with their soul, tucked away safely for a rainy day. Papa Legba and Eleguá trail the musician, they follow and cause havoc, enjoying the chaos. Eshu exits, laughing.

This myth of the crossroads bargain is an ancient one, maintained across cultures and time.[148] Apparently, we've been making Faustian pacts at crossroads for centuries. Its appearance in Blues music, however, is particularly distinct, where the crossroads itself is thematically baked into the culture of Blues. Railroads, a central theme throughout Blues, are seen as characters themselves, arbiters of change, a trickster in of itself. Railroad tracks, made of steel and iron, cut across towns and neighborhoods, splitting groups into the right and wrong

[147] De La Torre, "Santería," 59-62.
[148] Smith, "Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster," 187-188.

sides of the tracks.[149] The trains that take them represent all forms of possibility, the ability to hop on a train going one way and loosely take it, jumping on and off when the ground looks good and the place looks promising, with the points where trains cross being deeply representative of choosing the way between two roads one may take in life. The railroad might represent the more symbolic, as well; such as important cultural touchstones, akin to the Underground Railroad used to smuggle runaway enslaved persons to freedom. As a physical successor to the Underground Railroad, railroads became not only the sign of opportunity and freedom, but of duality, of hard choices, of the burden of freedom of choice, and as a representative of the quasi-spiritual, highly liminal space train cars serve as– if you've ever zoned out on public transport, you understand exactly the liminal power of transportation such as buses and trains, where the going is full of infinite possibilities but also intense responsibilities.

The important distinction here, between the myths where the figure is merely the Christian-cultural Devil and the myths where it is one of the African trickster spirits, is in what happens afterwards, and what he gets out of the deal. The musician gets the same benefits every time- they get fame and all they were promised. But what the other figure(s) want always remains more shady. The Devil wants the soul, and he gets it– most of the time, that is. But Eshu-Elegbara, Eleugá, and Papa Legba get something more nebulous out of the deal– possession, vicariously living through the arbiters of their chosen talent. The musician, through making a deal at those crossroads, be the figure Eshu-Elegbara, Eleguá, or Papa Legba, gains not only talent, but is transferred some of the trickster energy. The musician becomes a trickster, akin to the one who gave them the power of music, with their music then becoming emblematic

[149] Smith, "Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster," 189.

of Eshu, of Papa Legba, of Eleguá, almost akin to acts of holy musical worship to the spirit of the crossroads.

> The musician's performance retains the original qualities of Esu. The guitarist becomes the mediator; the music becomes the text that must be interpreted. The act of performing becomes one of signifying. The music also assumes a mediating spirit in its virtuosity; it is neither tangible nor imaginary, neither attainable nor surreal, but lies at some point in between. The music thus personifies Esu.[150]

The roving, moving life of itinerant traveling musicians in the golden age of jazz and blues is so shockingly close to the legends and lore of the African trickster, it's extraordinarily easy to believe that Robert Johnson, Tommy Johnson,[151] Clara Smith, James Son Thomas, and Skip James all might have met with the spirit and enacted a bargain with them.[152]

Music as a tool for worship in the African Diasporic religions is far from a novel practice. Regularly, worship services and rites for different traditions almost always include drumming and some form of possessive dance. De La Torre directly calls Santería "a dancing religion," the music and the movements associated with it are inseparable from the religion itself.[153] The drumming, a deep and pounding rhythm, calls the orisha or the lwa to the dance, inviting them to come sit asiento on the devotees in the circle, ready to be taken over by spiritual music. Music has always been used to worship, honor, and invoke those to come and take over the devotee, allowing them to do things that seem physically impossible– they eat lit cigarettes, they speak languages they never learned, they walk and dance and move in a way that affects all those possessed by a specific spirit in the same way. In theory, they could provide, themselves, the

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[150] Smith, "Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster," 188.
[151] Author's Note: No relation to Robert Johnson.
[152] Smith, "Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster," 185.
[153] De La Torre, "Santería," 118.

musical talent that many of these itinerant Blues musicians say to have "spontaneously gained" after a dark, mysterious meeting at the crossroads. Of course, this is all speculation, not provable within the confines of academia. But it sure makes for a nice theory as to what exactly the tricksters got out of their deals with Johnson, Smith, and far far more young musicians looking for sex, for money, for power, and for respect.

Whether or not Robert Johnson made a deal with an entity at a crossroads, and who or what that entity was, is never going to be known. His life and death, so far ensconced in mythos and shrouded in the past, will never be conclusive. However, I argue that the legends surrounding him give us a glimpse into what Eleguá wants in the modern-day. He is here for a good time, for sex and music, for alcohol and party culture, for joy and dance. He is capricious, and when he pulls his favor, it ends tragically and suddenly. He will make you famous, and not just for the sake of fame–he will make you worthy of the fame he bestows. As long as the ride is fun, beautiful, sexual, and as long as you give him enough praise, worship, alcohol, and credit, he'll give you the ride of your life. They will make you a trickster too, playing and laughing and loving the whole time through. But eventually, when Eleguá is bored; when Papa Legba has had enough of you; when Eshu-Elegbara grows tired of your disrespect and doesn't feel honored, they will shorten the path to death. And the lot of them will make that fun for them while they're at it.

Chapter 4: Modern Santería: The Cuban Revolution and Commodification

Ebo: To Drive Away Unpleasant People

On a plate, mix together three spoonfuls of honey, three pieces of ginger, and amansa guapo. Place the plate in front of your Eleguá and wait until it is covered with ants. Mix all the ingredients together, including the ants, and smear the mixture over your mouth, petitioning Eleguá to drive the person away.[154]

One of the most poignant photographs taken during the Cuban Revolution of the late 1950s is of Fidel Castro, the Revolution's most notorious leader. Taken during his inauguration speech, after years of guerilla fighting tactics in a brutal civil war against the US-backed Fulencigo Batista, Castro wears his signature combat fatigues and flat-topped green cap. His beard is bushy and unkempt, his eyes are haggard as he speaks into a handheld microphone. On his shoulder and on his podium sit two perfectly white doves. While the Western media covering Castro's takeover sensationalized them as the symbols of peace, the Cubans watching got a different kind of message– one that symbolized Castro's regime as legitimate and divinely blessed. White doves are the symbol of, and primary sacrificial animal to, Obatalá, the lord of the head and the king of purity, owner of the color white itself. As the ruler of all human heads, he calms troubled minds and provides serenity and clear thought, making him a particular patron of lawyers, writers, and doctors. Within the cosmology and folklore of Santería, the white dove became a symbol of both Obatalá and peace by Obatalá appearing as a white dove hovering over Oggún and Changó when they were quarreling.[155] In addition to this, Obatala is the messenger orisha, who acts as the mouthpiece to Oludumare and imparts his divine message through an

[154] Nuñez,"Santería: A Practical Guide," 129.
[155] De La Torre, "Santería," 58.

oracle. His authority is unparalleled, unquestionable, as Obatalá is the highest-ranking, greatest authority of the orisha on earth. To many Santería practitioners, it was as if Castro had been divinely selected by Obatala, and, by extension, the creator Oludumare, to rule Cuba.

Fig 6. Fidel Castro at his 1959 Inaugural Speech, with two doves on his shoulder and at the podium. Photo from the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, Calle Reina, Havana.[156]

This was far from the first instance that would use the visual cues and symbolic images of Santería as a visual political tool that spoke more than the politicians using them. Rumors would abound as to who was secretly a santero, who had the power of the orisha behind their political might. In the governmental figures before Castro, Gerardo Machado and Fulgencio Batista both utilized the stealthy cues of Santería to closely endear themselves to the Santeros. By wearing white suits– so frequently that the white suit became a stylistic image of Cuban men, used frequently in film and visual media of the 1930s– these politicians could associate themselves

[156] Ivor L. Miller, "Religious Symbolism in Cuban Political Performance," in *TDR*, vol. 44, no. 2, (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 31.

tangentially with Santeria without explicitly isolating themselves from Christians and Atheists on the island and abroad.

Fig 7. Fulgencio Batista wears a white suit at a public civic ceremony, circa 1950s.[157]

The white suit was a strong visual cue, alluding to part of one of the key initiation rites of Santería– Santeros who had just completed asiento were required to only wear the color white for a full year.[158] Additionally, many initiated santeros, and especially influential *babalawos,*[159] would continue to wear mostly white, mixed with the colors of their orisha.

Despite Batista, Machado, and Castro's apparent, rumored connections to Santeria, Santería was still illegal– practitioners faced fines, seizure of their paraphernalia, and were not

[157] Miller, "Religious Symbolism in Cuban Political Performance," 35.
[158] Miller, "Religious Symbolism in Cuban Political Performance," 34.
[159] Babalawos are a type of priest within Santería, specializing in divination. See: De La Torre, "Santería," 149.

allowed to practice in public. Cuba, first Catholic from connections to their Spanish colonizers, then generally Catholic– though many would practice "Catholicism" while calling The Virgin Mary Yemaya, and St Anthony Eleguá in their own practice– would go on to be tangentially Catholic, to fully Catholic, to Baptist, usually from the American Baptist tradition, and so forth. At the same time, political change swept the country with a series of different governments interrupted by US-backed coups, occasionally changing the state's official policy on Santería.[160] Santería would not be legal to practice in Cuba until the 1990s. This made the connections and the hushed religious secrecy more prominent amongst Cuban santeros– the idea that one of the leaders could have a secret statue of Eleguá, that one could make hidden, private visits to a babalawo under cover of night, felt like a hushed, whispered secret only the Santeros were privy to. Less powerful political figures too were swept up as possible, scandalous santeros within Communism and Socialism: union organizer and member of the Socialist party Aracelio Iglesias allegedly worked as a babalawo, and Secretary-General of the Cuban Workers Confederation Lazaro Peña was said to have practiced Ifa. The whisper of Santería, the hidden-in-plain-sight nature of it, was so ingrained within it that one needed the smallest visual cue to gain or lose political favor.

In addition to its role as an elusive, slight set of visual cues, Santería took a role as the proof one needed that a leader was legitimate, without corruption or foreign influence affecting their choices and actions. Political Scholar Ivor Miller argues that a rumored connection to Santería made you "more Cuban," in his article *Religious Symbolism in Cuban Political Performance:*

[160] De La Torre, "Santería," 181-188.

> Because these symbols often derive from secret religions, their use dramatically implies that the leader is privy to local secrets and esoteric power. By sharing a symbolic language created from the legacy of African bondage, their use demonstrates a leader's ties to the local population. The intimacy of this discourse implies that a leader is 100 percent Cuban… and not a puppet figure sent from Washington, DC.[161]

Not only was it a useful political tool to allude to connections with the orisha, the act "proved" that a leader was, indeed Cuban– with the understanding that outsiders, when they try to practice Santería, oftentimes face harsh physical punishment at the hands of orisha, surviving the visual, subtle cues that you were, indeed, a santero, meant that you were Cuban, in both blood and in ideology. Santería thus became a tool to collect and maintain power, to legitimize your rule akin to European nobles claiming the "Divine Right of Kings."

The connections between Santería and a legitimate Cuban leader grew ever stronger at the end of Batista's regime. As the Cuban Revolution began to increasingly threaten Fulgencio Batista's position of power, he thrust himself further into the mire of suspicion regarding his ties to Santería. Batista started spending money– not just on what despots usually spend money on to maintain power, but on sacrifices and on paying babalawos to see what it would take for him to keep control. Batista and Castro and their supporters performed ebos to ensure their success:

> For many Cubans, the battle between Batista and Castro was as much a spiritual war as a physical one, and in their view Castro won because of the ebbos (offerings) done on his behalf. Ebbos done by the vulnerable disenfranchised became a "safe" alternative to directly challenging the dictatorship of Batista, allowing them to participate safely in the triumph of Castro.[162]

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[161] Miller, "Religious Symbolism in Cuban Political Performance," 30.
[162] De La Torre, "Santería," 196.

While the Batista government of Cuba during the beginnings of Castro's revolution tried to forge stronger connections with the Santeros, Castro was steps ahead of them. Castro set up his main encampment in a town with a high number of Santeros, connecting with them in order to strengthen his relationships with the religious leaders. Later, when Castro marched on Havana, he did so under a black and red banner– the ubiquitous colors of Eleguá.

> As these colors triumphantly arrived in La Habana, spectators familiar with Santería saw Eleguá (not an inappropriate symbol for what was to be a self-espoused guerrilla society) enter the city, ready to provide protection to Cuba and her people.[163]

Once again, the image of the trickster turning things on their head would be used to overthrow a government, this time offering the promise of religious, monetary, and political freedom under Fidel Castro's Communist Party.

The use of religion, of the whisper of Santería, in order to uphold the Bautista regime or to support the Castro revolution, is a clever sociopolitical tool. While most of this project has examined the political use of myth and magic by groups marginalized by society, here, with Castro and the doves, or with the symbols of Eleguá, we see what happens when the religion of the minority becomes, for a brief moment, the tool used to install and legitimize a new regime, to throne a new king. When one looks closely at the instance of Castro and the two white doves, his manipulation of the myths surrounding Santería demonstrates his understanding of how image and story would resonate with his people. Bruce Lincoln, in his scholarly work *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification*,

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[163] De La Torre, "Santería," 197

describes how those in a position of sociopolitical authority manipulate and use the power mythic stories have to change narratives for their benefits:

> Among the ways in which those agitating for sociopolitical change can make use of myth, the following are some of the most common:
>
> 1. They can contest the authority or credibility of a given myth, reducing it to the status of history or legend and thereby deprive it of the capacity to continually reconstruct accustomed social forms.
> 2. They can attempt to invest a history, legend, or even a fable with authority and credibility, thus elevating it to the status of myth and thereby make it an instrument with which to construct novel social forms.
> 3. They can advance novel lines of interpretation for an established myth or modify details in its narration and thereby change the nature of the sentiments (and the society) it evokes.
>
> Obviously, these strategies can be combined, for instance, when a group seeks to deprive one narrative of authority while claiming authoritative status for another…[164]

These strategies can be combined to change familiar myths in all sorts of deviously clever ways. If we are to think that the Castro regime, like the Batista regime before him, utilized the myth of Obatala and the dove to further cement his rule as divine, as blessed by not just the gods but the stories of Cuba, it fits Lincoln's descriptor of how mythic narrative is not just a tool for sociopolitical, revolutionary change– utilizing one of the most powerful tools for such a type of change. Theoretically, then, Castro faked the stunt with the doves and in so doing, enacted a combination of Lincoln's toolbox for change, where Castro was able to insert himself into the myth itself– something he did several times over the course of his revolutionary campaign. His march on Havana, with his army of men draped in the colors of red and black, dripping the

[164] Lincoln, "Discourse and the Construction of Society," 24.

symbols of Eleguá,[165] inserts himself into the narrative of who Eleguá is. From that point, is it possible to think of Eleguá as something other than a communist fighter with Castro? As an entity backing not just the revolution, but the regime change occurring after it? As a figure other than a guerilla? Is it possible to then separate the god from the ideology?

Despite this promise of a free, open Cuba, that would be more accepting of religious practices than the previous governments, the promises made to religious practitioners were almost immediately broken. Cuba's new constitution, penned in 1959, declared the state fully atheist, as well as a communist state. In order to join the Communist Party from this moment on, the state required the individual to fully renounce and withdraw from superstition and religion. Those denied entry into the Communist party were financially and socially stigmatized, barred from most jobs, denied representation, and not allowed to partake fully in society.[166] Religious practitioners, of not just Santería, but of any religion, either chose to hide their practice, practice publicly with risk of retaliation, renounce their practice, or move abroad. Santería, as a consequence, changed based on the actions of its practitioners. Those who moved abroad brought Santería with them, forming powerful expat Santería communities in the United States, Mexico, and Spain. Those who renounced often continued to practice in private, at risk of arrest, fines, and further legal troubles. And those who practiced openly would frequently interact negatively with the atheist law.

Indeed, Castro's party broke many promises upon securing leadership of the country. Afro-Cubans, amongst the most stigmatized and disadvantaged groups under Castro, saw very little change in their political and social standing. In his article, *Santería in Cuba: Contested*

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[165] De La Torre, "Santería," 196-197.
[166] Maha Maoran, "Santería in Cuba: contested issues at a time of transition," in *Transition*, no. 125, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 64.

Issues at a Time of Transition, Maha Maoran recounts some of his time spent in religious communities in Cuba, specifically amongst Afro-Cubans and others further disenfranchised by the Castro regime:

> As I sat listening to my friends banter in a cafe in Old Havana, someone blurted: "The Revolution should apologize to gay men, prostitutes, and religious practitioners!" Then, not to lose the momentum, he continued playfully, "It is not me who is making this statement. It is the ancestors who are speaking through me!"[167]

The decades following the revolution would not bring the promised social liberation. LGBT persons who supported the revolution under the idea that they would be free without the biases of Catholicism were similarly betrayed. The 1960s did not bring open society to queer Cubans; instead, it brought a sweeping round of dozens of anti-LGBT laws, fueled and pushed by the Soviet Union. Gay men, in particular, would be targeted and brought to forced-labor encampments. These social stigmas, though later overturned in the 1980s and 1990s, would remain major factors in the development of Santería. Babalawos would frequently refuse to read for or initiate gay men into Santeria. White practitioners would be favored by white babalawos, and would more commonly be offered initiation.[168]

Santería, eventually, caught the government's eye again– this time, not as a political tool to endear a population to themselves, but as an opening and an opportunity for tourism income. Much like the "vintage cars" became, not a sign of financial and economic distress, but instead the overall island aesthetic, an image printed on souvenir t-shirts, a way to appeal to nostalgic Americans; the rituals, tools, and practices of Santeria were presented to tourists as cultural

[167] Maoran, "Santería in Cuba," 57.
[168] Maoran, "Santería in Cuba," 64.

heritage and practices for them to witness and interact with while on vacation. The bombes, ritual drumming and dancing, turned from a closed religious practice not open to nonbelievers and the uninitiated to a beachside entertainment designed to catch the eye of white tourists looking to experience a beautiful tropical retreat. Readings of Ifa and Dillogun attracted white tourists looking to get a mystic experience, not people looking for advice from the orisha. Artifacts and items used to worship and interact with the orisha stopped going to live on home altars and shrines next to saint candles and offerings; they went home in the suitcases of tourists who put them on bookshelves and coffee tables, to say "look at this wonderful pagan thing I picked up from a poor man selling them on a cart in Old Havana!" For the practitioners of Santería, their tools became financially exorbitant for them to access, as white American and European tourists have more money to burn on anything that strikes their fancy.[169] Items and tools necessary for rituals, such as the sacred plants used to make offerings and ritual cleanings, are sold at a higher and higher cost, closer to where the tourists are than to where the practitioners live.

> With tourism at the heart of the economic recovery plan, new patterns of social mobility and commerce arose, and some of the structural inequalities of the early years of the revolution were exacerbated…Afro-Cubans found themselves at a disadvantage and unable to compete in a tourist economy in which whiteness was privileged, and their religious practices were marketed and engaged as a commodity.[170]

Even ritual possession, what was once the most closely guarded secret of Santería, where even initiates into the religion were not allowed to witness an asiento let alone strangers with no

[169] Marouan, "Santería in Cuba," 59-60.
[170] Marouan, "Santería in Cuba," 59.

connection to Cuba or Santería, has been commodified and turned into a performance, a dramatization of ritual and magical events. Not legitimate, biblical possession, of course! We don't do that here, that doesn't happen here. No, this is a performance, it is a reenactment! Buy your ticket here!

Throughout all of this, the economic systems set up by the Cuban government and the biases of white, American and European tourists, have led to the favoring of white practitioners and babalawos. The white tourists seek to have their fortunes read by the white-Cuban babalawos, the American-born initiates lean to the white-Cuban babalawos, and those buying souvenirs look for white-Cuban vendors to purchase from. Religion, here, is a way to make money, a way to draw the attention of outsiders and tourists.

The change to "open religion" has resulted in the Cuban government making tourism money by encouraging American-born santeros to come to Cuba to be initiated. Instead of going through the asiento in your community, why don't you come *home* to join the orisha? Come *home*, to the land where they live. Initiation into Santería has steadily become more and more expensive. There are legitimate costs to this– namely, the cost of the animal sacrifices, followed by the ideally Cuban-made and Cuban-style white clothing that the iyawo wears for the year after their initiation. This money, in addition to paying for the material objects, is also supposed to further enrich and support one's community.[171] Yet, by taking advantage of the inherent diasporic desire for home, practitioners are falsely led into undergoing their ceremonies abroad, instead of at their cultural home.

[171] De La Torre, "Santería," 116.

Internal Religious Corruption: Standing Against Corrupt Babalawos

Babalawo corruption, more common in the highly-commodified modern Santeria, has risen as a cause for concern. Where there is intimacy there is vulnerability; what is sacred can be weaponized and exploited. The babalawo is the community builder; they are those who lead and who hear the clearest voice from the orisha. These select few are entrusted with the divination system of Ifa, and the more complex, fuller readings from the Dillogun– cowrie shell divination. They are the ones who communicate with the querent or the santero what must be done to fix their problem: what sacrifices should be made and to whom, what rituals should be done and invoking whom, and who should be honored and thanked when the act is completed successfully. They are the facilitators of magic, oftentimes also the practitioners of this magic, existing at the most vulnerable and most intimate threshold of Santería– communication between the mortal and the divine. Where a just babalawo is supposed to honor and respect this connection, and never ask for more than what the orisha wants, corrupt babalawos, some not even properly initiated into Santeria, give low-effort readings and ask for more and more from those who seek readings from them. They exploit, they take, they ask for offerings past what the orisha want. And, despite being in the "spiritual wrong", many of them continue to give inaccurate readings at exorbitantly high costs. A song by Cuban reggaeton group Kola Loca details the extravagant asks a corrupt babalawo may try and milk from his clients:

> To remove the curse, the priest asks for five hens, a can of gasoline, tangerines, chicken feed, duck eggs, a phone card (in US dollars), a painting of the Mona Lisa, a baby turtle, a bald frog, six hundred-dollar bills, etc… The song ends with a tongue-in-cheek statement: "One has to respect the babalawos!"[172]

[172] Maoran, "Santería in Cuba," 67.

These babalawos will also restrict and limit the religious power and authority of women and minorities within Santería- where women were the first, and likely most powerful initial practitioners of Yoruba magic,[173] as well as formative religious figures within Santería until the 1980s, male-exclusivity within babalawos shuts female practitioners of Ifa off from the higher diloggun readings, and from casting ifa readings altogether. "This current reality contributed to the growth of a strong heterosexual tradition that turned the culture of divination into a masculine enterprise saturated with sexist claims against women."[174] The white, male, heterosexual babalawo has become the face of Santería.

Gatekeeping and Protecting the Practice: Eleguá, with Large Stick

This seems like a dark turn for the future of Santería; faced with constant cultural whitewashing and an onslaught of tourism and religious fetishization. Yet, the purpose of a figure such as Eleguá is to gatekeep and protect the sacredness of Cuban religious practices. Eleguá is the one to turn on corrupt babalawos who do not keep their promises, he is the one to reveal deceit and lies, and the one to turn all things on their heads again. When the state corrupts the religion, the practitioner turns against the state. Many Cuban santeros are now using Santería as a method to rebel against the government. Groups such as the Free Yoruba Association (Asociación de Yorubas Libres de Cuba, or "Free Yorubas") actively rail against state-sanctioned santeros and Santería-tourism.[175] Embodying the spirit of Eleguá, these individuals are in the

[173] See the Iya Mi Group, originators of Feminine Magic in Nigeria, and Oyeronke Olajubu, "Seeing through a Woman's Eye" Yoruba Religious Tradition and Gender Relations," in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 20, no. 1, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).
[174] Maoran, "Santería in Cuba," 61.
[175] Maoran, "Santería in Cuba," 61-63.

process of carving themselves a new, free space for their religion, away from the greedy eyes of the state and the fetishizing gaze of the tourism industry.

People may be greedy. People often, indeed, are evil. They take, they lie, they cheat, and they put words in the mouths of the orisha to take advantage of individuals. In the past and in the stories, when this occurs, Eleguá is the one to stand watch, to guard the practice, and to take action against those seeking to corrupt and contaminate his worship and his chosen children.

Narrative: Orunmila and the Greedy Babalawo

Orunmila is the holy diviner, the god responsible for divination and Ifa, who taught the babalawos to read cowrie shells, coconuts, dominos, and rarer forms of divination, like Chinese numerology or the flight patterns of birds. He loved to teach, to show, and to watch his students succeed and excel. One day, Orunmila decided to leave the heavens to see how his students were doing, check in on them and give advice or just catch up.

One after another, his students greeted him, but turned him away: "Orunmila, how nice to see you! I have an appointment, I don't have time to talk." "Orunmila, how are you? I could meet with you on Wednesday if you come back then." "Orunmila, I have too many clients today, could you come back in a few days?"

Orunmila was furious. His students, his friends, were ignoring him! Not one of his beloved students could make time to speak with him for more than a moment, let alone sit down and have at least a cup of coffee with him! Clearly, they needed to learn another lesson from their old teacher– Orunmila would make them respect him again.

Orunmila set out a challenge to all the babalawos, all his former students. Whoever could cast the most accurate oracles would win a sum of money, and, more importantly, bragging rights as a better babalawo than Orunmila, the teacher of the babalawos! Orunmila knew he would win, and that the babalawos, shamed by his skill and schooled by their teacher, would learn to respect him properly again.

The competition was held in a local town, where Orunmila faced their local babalawo. Orunmila was, as he knew he would be, the best reader of all the divination methods. He read the most accurate oracles for many, beating all the greedy, busy students.

The babalawo Orunmila beat, though, refused to pay him the winnings. Eleguá, who is never far away, came up to the fuming Orunmila. "Orunmila, my old friend, how are you today?"[176]

"I am furious, Eleguá," Orunmila said, steaming with anger.

"And why would that be, dear Orunmila?" The trickster asked, suppressing his laughs. (For Eleguá had seen all that had occurred, and knew exactly what was happening.)

"This cheating babalawo has lost a bet to me, and now he refuses to pay!" Orunmila said, in a shout that released yet more anger from the hurt orisha.

Eleguá stared down the now-nervous babalawo. "Is that so, babalawo? Are you trying to cheat my friend Orunmila?"

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[176] Author's Note: Orunmila- sometimes called Orunla- and Eleguá are deeply close friends. This is the same friendship seen earlier, where Eleguá helps Orunmila court the orisha Oshún. Orunmila, once, was trying to gauge who his true friends were and decided to fake his death. His widow was flooded with false friends who, while offering condolences, also asked for his property, his possessions, and claimed they were owed debts by Orunmila. When Eleguá came, Orunmila's widow asked if he was owed anything. Eleguá, taken aback, insisted that if either of them owed a debt, it was him who owed Orunmila. Orunmila's generosity and friendship left Eleguá indebted. Orunmila, hearing this, left his hiding place and came to embrace his true friend. Ever since the two are the closest of friends amongst the orisha, and frequently feature in each other's myths. See: De La Torre, "Santería," 63.

"Well, I..." The babalawo stammered.

Before the babalawo could make out an answer, Eleguá wrapped his meaty hand around the babalawo's scrawny neck, staring him down.

"Tell me," Eleguá said softly, "Are you looking for trouble, babalawo?"

"No," the babalawo squeaked, small as a mouse in the hand of Eleguá.

Eleguá raised his club over the babalawo's head. "You wouldn't do anything to make me angry, would you?" Eleguá growled.

The babalawo timidly squeaked again, "No."

"And what are you going to do now, babalawo?" Eleguá asked, lightly rapping the babalawo on the nose with his club.

"I'm going to pay Orunmila?" The babalawo asked, uncertain.

"What was that?" Eleguá shouted, shaking the babalawo like a rag doll.

"I'm going to pay Orunmila! I'm going to pay Orunmila!" the babalawo stammered out. He took out his purse and handed the whole thing to Orunmila– far more than the debt owed to him.

"I thought you wanted to cheat my friend Orunmila, but now, I see you are a man who pays his debts." Eleguá let go of the shaking babalawo, giving him a solid thud on the back. "I'll leave you alone now."

Eleguá took Orunmila's arm, the two of them walking away. The babalawo shakingly came to a stand, dusting off his white clothes.

"One more thing," Eleguá said, turning back. The babalawo cringed. "Since you clearly don't understand that the oracles are meant to communicate with the orisha, and not to grow the wealth of the babalawos, I'm prohibiting you from ever using diloggun again. Goodbye now!" Orunmila and Eleguá walked off together, to the protesting, moaning cries of the corrupt babalawo, and when Orunmila got to the next town over, his students miraculously had enough time for him. Eleguá, having served his friend once more, exits, laughing.

Narrative Analysis: Orunmila and the Greedy Babalawo

Like in the earlier myth where Eleguá sought to find Oshun's name to help Orunmila, this story also features the friendship between Eleguá and Orunmila, where Eleguá stands as a good friend, looking to help Orunmila regain his respect. We also see another nod to Eleguá's position as the originator of divination methods such as cowrie casting,

While Santería, like other African Traditional Religions, operates on a decentralized system of authority, where there is no one given human authority, nor is there a power structure outside of the individual clustered groups of padrinos and iyawos, there is still the opportunity and the chance to take advantage of those looking for spiritual guidance. Babalawos, as the interpreters of the words of the orisha, often find themselves in positions of power over individual devotees, with the potential for corruption and greed virtually unchecked. Unchecked, that is, aside from the orishas themselves.

Santería sometimes can get a little freaky– rumors abound of those who disrespected the orisha dying of mysterious illnesses, of sudden misfortune befalling those who falsely dance as if possessed, of individuals outside the religion dying when they tried to make contact with an

orisha. This story showcases this last aspect of Eleguá, and perhaps his greatest attribute: his role as the gatekeeper and the enforcer. Who restricts who can practice, who limits the power of corrupt individuals? Why, that's the role of Eleguá! The great man standing there at the gate to the orisha and the ancestors, wielding his club, ready to prevent trespassers from entering into his practice.

Conclusion: Possession and Social Liberation

To Feed the Head (Eleda)

Feed Eleguá with smoked fish and jutia. Feed Obatala with slugs and black-eyed pea tamales. Make a paste of coconut, eggshell, and cocoa butter. Light two candles and place them on the center of two new white plates. The person whose Eleda is being fed should be sitting with their shoes off and holding onto their knees. The paste is placed on the plates around the burning candles. The Santero holds a plate in each hand and presents the offerings to the petitioner's forehead, shoulders, chest, the palms of the hands, and the feet. The paste is then applied to the petitioner's head. While still wet, apply cotton to the paste, then the head is covered with a white handkerchief, and the paste is allowed to dry.[177]

Possession, as this project has loosely explored, is one of the key religious rites of African-Traditional Religions. It is the driving force, the beating heart of these religions, the way in which humans interact with the divine. As also discussed earlier, possession is something that makes most Westerners quite squeamish, and generally apprehensive of Santería and Voodoo. I think that this word, "possession," might be giving the wrong sort of impression. In our Christian-dominated society, we're predisposed to think of possession as scary, as horror, as evil. In the same way that "voodoo," as a disambiguation for any evil magic, usually called "black magic," became a pop-culture trend, a mainstay of horror media from the last century; possession is known to us primarily as a horror trope. We hear "possession," and we see the floating body of a possessed person, eyes rolling back in their head, ominously chanting a dead language– usually Latin, and usually nonsensical faux-Latin– projectile vomiting across a room,

[177] Nuñez, "Santería: A Practical Guide," 114.

The Conjuring-style. In specifically-Christian contexts, possession is even less friendly. Texts showcase unfortunate victims of demonic possession– usually unfortunate humans, having opened a door to something they do not understand, possessed by hosts of demons to be expelled in the name of Christ.

However, when one moves past the pop-culture, the horror films, and the Christian narratives of possession, one looking at possession within Voodoo or Santería contexts sees something else entirely– a practice of beauty, gentle interaction, kindness, where a goddess may gently touch the face of her worshiper and whisper to her kind words, a blessing, guidance. Possession, especially within Santería, is an honor, an act approached with the utmost seriousness– the practitioner, in this moment, is the representative of the orisha in question; they are the mouthpiece of the god.[178] (A far cry, certainly, from the green-slime, floating image that the term possession may have first conjured in one's mind!)

This is not to say that possession, within both Santería and Voodoo, is not a dangerous or riskless procedure. It is a sacrament to be taken with the utmost respect. Possession may only be completed by those fully initiated into the religion. Before the possession itself, steps are taken to prepare the potential posessee and strengthen their head– the place where African Traditional Religions maintain the soul is kept.[179] When in the ritual space, practitioners may also elect to reject possession– in acts that often can resemble our Christian-predisposed cultural mindset. Indeed, wild and unpredictable things can happen to those possessed by an orisha or Lwa. Posessees, usually referred to as the "horse" –*chewal* in Kreole, *caballo* in Spanish– have been recorded as taking chicken heads off with their teeth, eating lit cigarettes, or wildly spinning and

[178] De La Torre, "Santería," 114.
[179] Eziaku Nwokocha, "The "Queerness" of Ceremony: Possession and Sacred Space in Haitian Religion," in *The Journal of Haitian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, (Santa Barbara: University of California Press, 2020), 75.

dancing in unusual, erratic fashions. When Chango rides a practitioner, they are able to swallow fire, they can hold their hand in a lit fire without burning. Men possessed by female orisha or Lwa take on feminine mannerisms, speaking in a higher pitch; those possessed by Oya often cover their left ear– referring to the myth where Oya cut off her ear so that Chango might love her more; and the possessed person will be served the offerings often given to the entity possessing them. Women possessed by Oggún take on his gruff personality, acting like the great warrior blacksmith.[180] By all understandings, the *chewal* or *caballo* isn't present once possessed, and have no memories of their words or actions afterward. The one being ridden slips away from their physical form, untethered to the body's perceptions of pain, fear, adrenaline, anxiety. Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos detail an instance where a Voodoo practitioner was possessed by Ezili Freda, and found herself starting to disconnect from herself, feeling her consciousness leave her body:

> As sometimes in dreams, so here can I observe myself, can note with pleasure how the full hem of my white skirt plays with the rhythms, can watch, as if in a mirror, how the smile begins with the softening of the lips, spreads imperceptibly into a radiance which, surely, is lovelier than any I have ever seen. It is when I turn, as if to a neighbor, to say "Look! See how lovely that is!" and see that the others are removed to a distance, withdrawn to a circle which is already watching, that I realize, like a shaft of terror struck through me, that it is no longer myself that I watch.[181]

Possession, here, is a rite of equal parts beauty and terror, where the practitioner simultaniously cries out as to how lovely, how beautiful, how wonderful this is, and how frightening it is to realize that the thing smiling back at you from the mirror is not you.

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[180] De La Torre, "Santería," 114.
[181] Paravisini-Gebert and Olmos, "Creole Religions of the Caribbean," 115.

Once a lwa or orisha finds themself comfortably mounted on a suitable practitioner, the scene might change dramatically. Eziaka Nwokocha, in her article *The Queerness of Ceremony*, records an instance she had speaking with a Voodoo practitioner posessed by the lwa Ezili Dantò, warrior lwa and mother of both Haiti and many, many children– both mortal and divine. Nwokocha doesn't sensationalize, nor does she start with a descriptor of the graphic, colorful ritual that brought about the possession. Instead, she focuses on what Dantò said to her:

> I trusted these women. I trusted Dantò, and I allowed the process to consume me. Tears came rushing to my eyes; I was so overwhelmed with emotions. Dantò kept proclaiming that I was a beautiful woman, that I should stop crying, that I should not cry when I see my mother. She said, "Isn't it me that you have been searching for? Well, I am here! I am here for you."[182]

Possession effectively results in the divine not being the object fetishized and dissected by the religion, but the present, active community leaders alongside priests and the worshippers. When Ezili Dantò herself can tell you homophobia has no place at her altar or in her temple, it's a little harder for said religion to corrupt itself and cater so strongly to exclusion or hate.[183]

So what does possession ultimately entail? The word, to possess, alludes to its nature, the surrender of those being mounted by the orisha or the lwa, to allow an entity to take control of your body so that they might be able to communicate, and to bless, but also to dance. The orisha come and they offer judgment, they give corrections to behaviors they don't approve of, but they also come to eat their favorite foods and they come to drink cool water and sharp rum, they come to smoke a fat cigar and grip it between their teeth and feel the smoke on their tongues and throats, they come to feel air in their lungs, to feel their human hearts beat red-hot blood through

[182] Nwokocha, "The "Queerness" of Ceremony," 75.
[183] Nwokocha, "The "Queerness" of Ceremony," 72-75.

human veins, they come to feel and to have human sensation course through their corporeal self. De La Torre describes the practitioner/orisha relationship as symbiotic: the practitioner needs the ashé of the orisha, manifesting in guidance and divine interventions; while the orisha needs the return of that ashé through sacrifice and possession. Ashé gives the orisha sensation, life, corporality, the power of physical form and direct communication. Ashé gives the practitioner meaning and control over all aspects of their life, all while maintaining the life force and continued existence of the orisha.[184] Furthermore, the act of possession specifically gives the practitioner certain social benefits. They experience release from their physical form, and amnesty from actions they may undergo while possessed:

> This form of spiritual possession creates a sacred space where the devotees are given the opportunity to express their hostility toward their oppressors. Through possession, the discharge of repressed feelings is allowed… Because the ones mounted seldom recall what they did and said while possessed, they are usually absolved of their pronouncements and actions. The protest comes not from the subordinate individual but, under the cloak of possession, from the powerful orisha… At the very least, the acting out of repressed feelings of hostility, through the mask of possession, becomes therapeutic for the disenfranchised, who, up until now, were forced to suppress those emotions.[185]

Possession becomes a space free of judgment, from responsibility, therefore it becomes a space to play, to experiment, to make bold statements.

Christianity may make us fear possession, and with good reason– within the Christian canon, possession is not beneficial, it is not good, it is not beautiful. It is an active spiritual threat that must be defeated. Christianity does, however, understand what Voodoo, Santería,

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[184] De La Torre, "Santería," 45-46.
[185] De La Torre, "Santería," 196.

Candomble, and other possession-centered religions seek to accomplish with possession– physical, human, present, earth-bound connection to the divine. Christianity answers this call with Christ, the divine becoming flesh. These traditions of possession answer this urge, fulfill this need, with the continued merging of the divine and the flesh. Ultimately, we all want to be caressed by a loving god, we want to be told we have done good works, we all want to be sent back out to the world with a blessing on our head, warmth on our shoulders. *Isn't it me you've been searching for? Well, I am here! I am here for you!*

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