THE YORUBA IN THE CONSTRUCTION
OF CUBAN REVOLUTIONARY NATIONALISM

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the role played by Afro-Cuban religious myths called _patakies_ in the Cuban imaginary, focusing on one in particular that appears frequently in Cuban popular culture, about the _orichas_ or Yoruba deities Ogún and Ochún, who are male and female, respectively. The word _patakí_ (or _patakín_) in Cuban _Lucumí_ liturgical speech refers to an allegory or parable about the _orichas_ that transmits a moral lesson, and is derived from the word _pàtàkì_, which means “[something] important” in the _Yorùbá_ language of West Africa. Although versions of this _patakí_ differ, the essential story remains the same: Ogún, the blacksmith _oricha_ of Iron, War, and Work, exiles himself to the forest out of shame for a crime he has committed. Human society suffers in the absence of his technological knowledge, yet one by one other _orichas_ fail to convince him to return. Only _Ochún_, goddess of Love and sweet waters, succeeds in coaxing him to return, using her “soft powers” of seduction, intelligence, and the sweetness of honey.

Through exploring the manifestations of this singular myth in Cuban literature, film, popular culture, and scholarship, this dissertation will seek to demonstrate its resonance with the political and racial mythologies surrounding the idea of the Cuban nation, and interpret its deeper implications for Cuban Revolutionary thought through a Yoruba lens of duality and gender, wherein Ogún represents the masculine, and Ochún the feminine, forms of power and intelligence. The dissertation attempts to answer how and why this particular myth is “important” (_pàtàkì_) to the story of Cuba, and in so doing, argues for a re-centering and privileging of African-derived philosophical frameworks within Cuban Revolutionary thought and discourse.
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my *querida ahijada* Yisleidis Larduet Herrera, my favorite daughter of Ochún. I can’t wait to get back to Cuba and see you.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the role played by Afro-Cuban religious myths called *patakies* in the Cuban imaginary, focusing on one in particular that appears frequently in Cuban popular culture, about the *orichas* or Yoruba deities Ogún and Ochún, who are male and female, respectively. The word *pataki* (or *patakín*) in Cuban *Lucumi* liturgical speech refers to an allegory or parable about the *orichas* that transmits a moral lesson, and is derived from the word *pàtàkì*, which means “[something] important” in the *Yorùbá* language of West Africa. Although versions of this *patakí* differ, the essential story remains the same: Ogún, the blacksmith *oricha* of Iron, War, and Work, exiles himself to the forest out of shame for a crime he has committed. Human society suffers in the absence of his technological knowledge, yet one by one other *orichas* fail to convince him to return. Only Ochún, goddess of Love and sweet waters, succeeds in coaxing him to return, using her “soft powers” of seduction, intelligence, and the sweetness of honey.

Through exploring varied iterations of this singular myth in Cuban literature, film, popular culture, and scholarship, this dissertation will seek to demonstrate its resonance with the political and racial mythologies surrounding the idea of the Cuban nation, and interpret its deeper implications for Cuban Revolutionary thought through a Yoruba lens.
of duality and gender, wherein Ogún represents the masculine, and Ochún the feminine, forms of power and intelligence. The dissertation attempts to answer how and why this particular myth is “important” (pàtàkì) to the story of Cuba, and in so doing, argues for a re-centering and privileging of African-derived philosophical frameworks within Cuban Revolutionary thought and discourse.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

This project will provide a fresh, interdisciplinary take on the intellectual contribution of African-derived moral philosophy—and that of the Yoruba people in particular—to Revolutionary discourse around the Cuban nation. The dissertation will underscore what scholars such as Fernando Ortíz, Rogelio Martinez Furé and others have argued: that the African contribution to Cuba is not confined to the aesthetic, religious and cultural realms— influences which have been extensively documented and studied—but permeates the intellectual and political realms as well.

Furthermore, the project will problematize the study of “African [linguistic] retentions” in the New World by applying an expanded concept of “language” beyond the Western/European model (wherein “language” refers exclusively to the spoken or written word), to instead privilege a Yoruba model in which three modalities of speech co-exist and function in concert¹: mouth-talk, eye-talk, and hand-talk (Orie 2009:237). Applying a Yoruba concept of language to the study of Yoruba linguistic and cultural “retentions and innovations” in the New World, and Cuba in particular, will afford a more expansive and nuanced reading that opens up possibilities and interpretations that are perhaps more

¹ Word choice intentionally alludes to the “performativity” of speech.
accurate in describing lived experience. The project will demonstrate through specific examples of visual and other non-verbal modes of communication that the more one is attuned to these multiple modalities and the signs and symbols through which they speak, the more visible are their messages, which are everywhere, “hidden in plain sight.”

Whereas Cuban history written from a North American perspective tends to transpose North American concepts of race and "blackness" that flatten "Afro-Cuban" into a homogeneous category, the lived reality of African heritage in Cuba is one that is more heterogeneous in terms of distinct African ethnicities that are descended from the "naciones" and cabildos of the past, promulgated and perpetuated in the present via distinct traditions—religious, musical, philosophical, iconographic, and otherwise. These varied ethnicities and the traditions associated with them coexist within the overarching category "Afro-Cuban" and are interrelated and overlapping. This is demonstrated by the fact that someone can be both a practitioner of Yoruba- and Congo-derived religions simultaneously, or a member of Abakuá (a separate African-derived tradition) at the same time; the categories are not mutually exclusive. Yet in my personal experience and reading of the literature, practitioners of these varied Afro-Cuban traditions are very cognizant of the differences between the distinct threads, and when and how they engage with them.

This dissertation aims to pull out one distinct thread from that tangled mix—the Yoruba element—and highlight its specific intellectual contribution to the construction of post-Revolutionary Cuban identity and concept of nation through the tradition of the patakí. The dissertation culminates in the analysis of the iconic 1970s film directed by Sara Gómez, *De cierta manera*, because the film itself sends these "mixed messages"
about the role of African culture in building the Revolutionary state, explicitly referring to Abakuá as backwards and atavistic while simultaneously implicitly referencing the Yoruba element as compatible with and constructive toward harmonious nation-building.

Lastly, this dissertation aims to contribute to the study of Cuban cinema and the legacy of Sara Gómez by arguing for a re-reading of *De cierta manera*, which has been written about extensively in regard to its place in the construction of Cuban Revolutionary and nationalist discourse. Using this film as a starting point, this dissertation will argue for a reconsideration of many assumptions that underlie the study of Cuban history and culture, and invite alternate perspectives that will enrich the broader field of Cuban Studies.

METHODOLOGY

As an interdisciplinary dissertation, the project will intersect and put into conversation multiple disciplinary frameworks, including sociocultural linguistics, history, and film studies. In terms of methodology and sources of data, the research will synthesize a variety of approaches.

Analysis of existing literature (both primary and secondary sources) will be fundamental in establishing what is already known and making connections between seemingly unrelated bodies of knowledge across disciplines as varied as history, linguistics, and film studies. Supplemental ethnographic data, in the form of oral history interviews with Afro-Cuban religious practitioners and performers of Afro-Cuban folklore who enact this *pataki* through music and dance, will reveal the dynamic, living meaning of this myth in the context of contemporary Cuban society. Furthermore, the
proliferation of videos and other online materials on Afro-Cuban religious practices that are publicly available through platforms such as YouTube will provide additional context for the ideas and practices found throughout transnational Yoruba religious culture, “which, like Christianity, should now be considered a world religion” (Olupọna 3).

**Patakí as Metaphor: The Role of Stories in Afro-Cuban Religion**

The Yoruba element in Afro-Cuban religion is manifested in two different but interrelated spiritual traditions called *Regla de Ocha* and *Regla de Ifá*. Both *Regla de Ocha* and *Regla de Ifá* deal with deities called *orichas*, who have personalities, character attributes, and stories that are associated with them. The orichas are active spiritual forces whose essence is captured in their personal *patakíes*. Within Afro-Cuban religious practice *Regla de Ifá*, exclusively conducted by specialized male priests called *babalawos*, is “the culture’s paramount divination system… it is in the sacred stories of *Ifá* that practitioners of Oricha worship find their place in society and learn how to relate to others. It is through *patakí* that diviners define matters of power, rank and authority” (Flores-Peña 212). Babalawos employ *patakíes* to explain divination results to their clients, using them as metaphors after which to model human behaviors and decisions. Indeed, “*Patakí is the main metaphor of the culture*” (ibid 217).

“*Orula es el patrón de conducta*”: Yoruba Moral Philosophy and *Ifá* Divination

I was told by a Cuban *babalawo* in 2017 that the definition of *Ifá* is “Knowledge, deified.” Within the tradition of *Ifá* there is a specific oricha named Orula who acts as an intermediary with whom *babalawo* priests have a sacred relationship through which they
communicate and relay messages between the world of the divine and the world of the living. I was told shortly thereafter by another Cuban babalawo that “Orula es el patrón de conducta” – Orula is the patron of conduct, instructing humans how to behave in issues of moral importance. Upon receiving messages from Orula, usually on behalf their practitioner clients, babalawo priests frequently supplement and contextualize these messages by explaining them through patakies. Mercedes Cros Sandoval provides the following explanation for the moral and ethical function of patakies, particularly within the realm of Ifá divination:

The actions of the gods revealed in such myths help to define specific types of disharmonious behavior that destroy balance and goodwill in social interaction, in families, in the workplace, and in communities… the excesses of the gods are used to caution followers and clients about such behavior in their own lives (Sandoval 311).

As Kristina Wirtz demonstrates in Ritual, Discourse, and Community in Cuban Santería: Speaking a Sacred World, the interpretive discourse that occurs among practitioners following a religious activity is as important as the activity itself, whether it be a ceremony, spiritual possession, or an Ifá oracular reading. It is through this process that meaning is made and solidified. Solimar Otero aptly concludes, “Such storytelling is the rich register by which Afro-Cuban religious instruction is performed” (Otero and Falola 88).

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is meant by “Yoruba Moral Philosophy”? Well, let us begin with interrogating the term “Yoruba.” The term is neither absolute nor universal; it is anchored in history, a product of social change and human migrations, both forced and
Does there exist such a thing as a “Yoruba World View” with identifiable characteristics, an intellectual and philosophical framework, both in diaspora and in the homeland, that makes moral sense of ideas, practices, and lived experiences? Fortunately, there exists an ample body of literature, much of it written by Yoruba scholars themselves, about the Yoruba language and its associated philosophical framework(s). A sampling of the scholars with whom I will engage includes: Wole Soyinka (Myth, Literature, and the African World), Barry Hallen (The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Discourse About Values in Yoruba Culture), Margaret Thompson Drewal (Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency), Omófolábò S. Àjàyí (Yoruba Dance: The Semiotics of Movement and Body Attitude in a Nigerian Culture) and Tulane professor Dr. Òlanikè Ola Orie (both through published articles as well as personal communications with her). The literature shows that a “Yoruba World View” is one in which language, culture, ethics and aesthetics are interrelated, and often one and the same.

The term “Yoruba” is a relatively recent invention. Etymologically, the word originally derived from the Muslim Hausa people, who are geographically based to the north of Yorubaland, specifically to designate their southern neighbors, the Òyó people (Villepastour 2010:20). The arrival of European missionaries further propagated its use as a generic term to designate a broader ethnic group, including not just the Òyó people but some of their neighboring groups. The Trans-Atlantic slave trade further consolidated this ethnic identity. David Eltis writes, “In the sense of self-identification the emergence of Yoruba, or ‘Lucumi’ in Spanish or ‘Nagô’ in Portuguese, may not have occurred until
the Yoruba diaspora was well advanced—perhaps well into the nineteenth century.” It is also likely that identification with the term developed “on both sides of the Atlantic at the same time in response to similar pressures” (Eltis 17-18).

The impact of Yoruba culture on the New World is outsize relative to the number of Yoruba speakers who arrived there. Although the Yoruba made up less than nine percent of the Africans taken to the New World, the circumstances of their displacement led to concentrations of Yoruba people in three primary locations—St. Domingue, Cuba, and Bahia (Brazil)—although they were always a minority amongst the whole enslaved population (Eltis 18). In the British colonies, a cluster of Yoruba descendants remains on the island of Trinidad, and a Yoruba-derived religion and language is also practiced there.

The Yoruba in Cuba

The term “Lucumi” is frequently used interchangeably with Yoruba, and is said to have come from “the Yoruba common greeting, ‘oluku mi’ (my friend), and that slaves used this phrase to communicate to the new Yoruba-speaking captives arriving in Cuba to indicate that they were not alone in a foreign land” (Reid 115). Today in Cuba and elsewhere, the Santería religion is also referred to as “Lucumi” or “Lukumí.” However, “contemporary Cubans who self-identify as Lukumí generally do so in the context of religious orientation rather than family lineage” (Villepastour 2009:345).

Enslaved Africans in colonial Cuba were forbidden from practicing African religions, although African deities continued to be worshipped secretly under the masked guise of Catholic saints. As a by-product of slavery in Cuba, the syncretism between African orishas and the Catholic saints that represent them continues to result in blurred
boundaries of meaning, such that it is unclear which figures are “really” being venerated. Syncretism amongst *African* belief systems and practices is also a defining feature of what is commonly covered today under the blanket term “Afro-Cuban Religion;” however, the Yoruba influence is arguable the most visible and salient. Many words of Yoruba origin live on today and remain in broad usage through the creolized context of the liturgical language known as *Lucumí*, spoken and sung in prayer, or peppered into the everyday Spanish speech of religious practitioners in reference to religious objects, acts, or concepts. Within the realm of contemporary Afro-Cuban religion, what is today recognized as the Yoruba influence is most salient in the two interrelated branches of religious practice known as *Regla de Ocha* and *Regla de Ifá*.

In his book *The Cooking of History: How Not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion* Stephen Palmié cautions, “I have a principled aversion against pulling in ethnographic data on the Yoruba to explain or corroborate any feature of contemporary Santería. To do so is to clear fertile ground for all kinds of ahistorical projections and the variegated ideological agendas these help serve to underwrite” (Palmie 17). While these concerns are valid, I disagree with the assertion that contemporary research and writing about Yoruba culture, mythology, and language—particularly writings in English by Yoruba scholars—should not be used to inform the study of Yoruba forms and ideas in diaspora. On the contrary, the vast body of scholarly literature written by Yoruba scholars about Yoruba culture, language, mythology and philosophy *should* be put into conversation with scholarly literature on Afro-Cuban philosophies and practices, in order to understand the ways in which they both converge and diverge, and the factors of time and place that shape these convergences and divergences. Furthermore, such exercises help to
illuminate the transnational and local processes of creolization that occur in diaspora.

It is only by accident of colonialism and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade that scattered Yoruba descendants in both diaspora and in the homeland speak and write in mutually unintelligible colonial languages—Spanish, English, Portuguese—despite a connected heritage. As a Latin American Studies project, this dissertation attempts to help close the communication gap between scholarship written in English and scholarship written in Spanish concerning Yoruba language, culture, and history, both in diaspora and in the homeland.

**Toward a Theory of “Yoruba Moral Philosophy” in Diaspora**

In *Yoruba Dance: The Semiotics of Movement and Body Attitude in a Nigerian Culture* Omófolábò S. Àjàyí writes, “A pervasive theme in Yoruba socio-cultural thinking is the philosophy of *ìwòn òtún ìwòn òsì*. Popularly referred to as *ìwòntúnwònsì*, it is an injunction that everything must be balanced and in moderation. The Yoruba person frowns on any excesses, and the ideal situation in life is based on a moderated balance between the positive (good and perfect) and the negative (bad and imperfect)” (27). This ideal of balance is directly tied to the symbolic significance of the number two in Yoruba thought, as described by Babatunde Lawal: “The Yoruba regard the number two as sacred apparently because of the duality or ‘twoness’ (*èjìwàpò*) apparent in nature, such as day/night, sun/moon, life/death, hot/cold, wet/dry, right/left, and male/female. Apart from associating the number with balance, they expect it (especially in a ritual context) to influence the supernatural and bring about a desired result” (24).

In discussing the significance of twoness in Yoruba art and culture Lawal presents
what he calls “the dialectics of Yoruba cosmology, which explains the universe as an interface of opposing yet interrelated elements” (25). The Yoruba conception of the cosmos is that of a “big gourd with two halves,” the top half signifying “maleness as well as the sky/heaven—the realm of invisible spirits” and the bottom half representing “femaleness and the primeval waters out of which the physical world was later created” (25). Twins are revered in Yoruba culture, and they are seen as holding spiritual powers that bring protection and good fortune to their parents.

Yoruba Oral and Vocal Traditions in Cuba

In Cuba, Yorùbá speech has been retained primarily as a sacred language used for religious purposes only—or in folkloric renditions that mimetically represent religious concepts. A tradition of secular Yoruba songs has not been preserved in the same way in Cuba. This suggests that the historical confinement of the Yoruba language to private spaces where religion was practiced by marginalized segments of the population, in the context of a Spanish-speaking dominant culture, led to only a selective retention of the Yoruba language.

The fact that secular Yoruba songs have not been retained in Cuba means that Yoruba has evolved into a sacred language there. Fragments of Yoruba vocabulary have filtered into Cuban speech by way of the religion. However, because of the conditions in which they were retained and passed on, words that are secular in Nigeria Yoruba, like “necklace” and “money” (eleke and owo, respectively) take on a religious significance in Cuba. In Cuba, an “eleke” is not just any necklace; it specifically refers to the beaded necklaces that are color-coded to represent each orisha, and are usually worn by santeros.
(priests/priestesses) or *creyentes* (believers). Wearing an *eleke* is an outward expression of one’s faith in the Yoruba religion, much like a Christian would wear a cross on a chain to represent his or her veneration of Jesus Christ.

**A Note on Terminology**

The term “Yoruba” is a relatively recent invention. Etymologically, “The actual word ‘Yorùbá’ originally derived from the Hausa/Arabic terms *Yariba, Yarriba, Yarraba, Yarba, Yarabawa,* or *Yaruba,* and was applied by the Hausa in the north of Nigeria up until the nineteenth century, specifically to designate their southern neighbors, the Ôyó people” (Villepastour 2010:20). The arrival of European missionaries further propagated its use as a generic term to designate a broader ethnic group, including not just the Ôyó people but some of their neighboring groups. The Trans-Atlantic slave trade further consolidated this this ethnic identity.

David Eltis writes, “In the sense of self-identification the emergence of Yoruba, or ‘Lucumi’ in Spanish or ‘Nagô’ in Portuguese, may not have occurred until the Yoruba diaspora was well advanced—perhaps well in to the nineteenth century” (17). Many scholars conclude that Yoruba speakers only came to see themselves as “Yoruba” as a result of their experiences in slavery in the New World. The shared trauma of the experience of slavery probably led to the seeking out of other groups with the same language or religion, and a subsequent reformation of social identity. It is also likely that identification with the term developed “on both sides of the Atlantic at the same time in response to similar pressures” (Eltis 18).

The term “Lucumî” is frequently used interchangeably with Yoruba, and is said to
have come from “the Yoruba common greeting, ‘oluku mí’ (my friend), and that slaves used this phrase to communicate to the new Yoruba-speaking captives arriving in Cuba to indicate that they were not alone in a foreign land” (Reid 115). Today in Cuba and elsewhere, the Santería religion is also referred to as “Lucumí” or “Lukumí.” However, “contemporary Cubans who self-identify as Lukumí generally do so in the context of religious orientation rather than family lineage” (Villepastour 2009:345).

The Yoruba Diaspora in the New World

Yoruba speakers trafficked in the slave trade were not only clustered geographically, but temporally, toward the end of the slave trade, which also led to the resultant pockets of cultural and linguistic retention, as in the aforementioned locations of Cuba, Brazil, and Trinidad. Warfare on both sides of the Atlantic facilitated this demographic shift. The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), in which the enslaved population of the French colony of St. Domingue rose up in rebellion, destroyed the French sugar plantation society that had been established on the island of Hispaniola over centuries and led to a mass exodus of French planters, mixed-race and free blacks, and enslaved blacks. Many of the French planters migrated across the waters to Cuba, where within a few decades a sugar plantation complex was established and came to dominate the trade in the New World, filling the vacuum left by the Haitian Revolution. The burgeoning sugar industry led to a surge in the slave trade; over 85 percent of the slaves that entered Cuba arrived after 1800. Concurrently with the rise of Cuba’s sugar industry and subsequent need for labor, civil war in the Yoruba region of Africa led to the collapse of the Oyo Empire and facilitated the enslavement of thousands of Yoruba refugees and
war captives. The region became the most active West African slave embarkation point north of the equator during the nineteenth century (Reid 114).

Yoruba Vocal Traditions in Nigeria and in Diaspora

Within the vast body of Yoruba oral literature, the genre that appears to be most related to the songs of Santería is that of the *oriki*. Often translated into English as “praise-poetry,” a more nuanced definition provided by Karin Barber is “attributions or appellations: collections of epithet, pithy or elaborated, which are addressed to a subject” (1). *Oriki* can be addressed to any number of subjects—human, animal or spiritual—and they are “compact and evocative, enigmatic and arresting formulations, utterances which are believed to capture the essential qualities of their subjects, and by being uttered, to evoke them” (ibid.). The name “praise-poetry” may be a misnomer, as they are not always flattering; “their point is rather to go to the heart of a subject’s identity by evoking whatever is distinctive in it” (ibid. 13). *Oriki* also serve as a form of oral history, either through recording ancestral lineages or significant events, but in relation to the present moment. When addressed to a child, they act as “an attributive name expressing what the child is or what is hoped that it will become” (Salami 104). When addressed to a king or a titled man, they contain “recitation of achievements of an individual or group meant to make full their self-images as well as to create a fuller sense of self-awareness or identity in themselves or their groups” (ibid.). When addressed to a deity, they are petition-prayers that preface a request for a favor, with the objective of persuading or manipulating the deity into action.
A key attribute of *orìkì* is that they are not passive, but constitute a form of action. It is believed that there is power in the spoken word. Seeking a special favor from a king involves ritual recitation of *orìkì* in order to “re-establish or re-enact the relationship between them and remind them of their loyalty” and consequently “remind the king of his reciprocal duties” toward the subject performing the *orìkì* (Salami 98). In the realm of religion, *orìkì* are employed pragmatically to invoke the intervention of a superior spiritual power in human affairs. A number of *orìkì* conceive of a God with many ears all over him, and “can be understood as meaning that in whatever direction a human being turns to speak, God is likely to hear since his ears are not limited to two like ordinary mortals” (ibid. 112).

Religious *orìkì* are usually directed toward deities called *òrìsà*, known as *orichas* or *orishas* in Cuba, and *orixás* in Brazil. In pre-colonial Africa, *òrìsà* were predominantly regional; a village would venerate one particular *òrìsà*, their neighbors another *òrìsà*, and so on. The consolidation of the Yorùbá as a unified ethnic group resulted in the merging together of the various *òrìsà* under the umbrella of a single religious system generally referred to as ‘*Òrìsà Religion*’ or ‘*Òrìsà Tradition*.’ In New World versions of the *òrìsà* religion they are frequently referred to as a “pantheon.”

Amanda Villepastour’s description of the relationship between humans and *òrìsà* provides a comprehensive summary of how *òrìsà* are conceived of in the *Òrìsà Religion*:

Devotees… believe that *òrìsà* are all-knowing, omnipresent spiritual beings with access to the past, present and future. Devotees believe that *òrìsà* have the power to intercept physical reality and facilitate healing, conception and birth, material wealth and other blessings. Conversely, they are also believed to have a potential destructive power. Hence, it is important to petition and appease the *òrìsà* through prayer, praise, music and sacrificial offerings… The *òrìsà* are believed to communicate with
humans through spirit possession, divination, dreams, visions and other visitations. (2010:21)

Verbal *oríkì* are performed in tandem with a trio of special drums called the *bàtá* which are said to “speak” the language of the *òrisà*. This tradition was carried to the New World where it still lives on in places like Cuba and Brazil.

In a Cuban Santería ceremony the lead singer, who guides the drummers and the dancers through the selection of songs in a particular order, is called the *akpón* or *akpwón*. This term is said to derive from the Yoruba word èpón, which means “flattery.” John Mason explains, “The *akpón’s* job is to trick the knowledgeable participant as well as the *òrisà*. We all know where s/he is going but the artful design of the route is what determines his/her skill. Dangling the carrot propels us forward as we grab for it” (7). The purpose of the *akpón’s* song, in the religious context, is to “use praise to soften the *òrisà’s* heart for granting the requested favor to follow” (Mason 38-39). Thus, song is an inherent component to spiritual practice, functioning like *oríkì*.

**The Language of the Batá Drums**

The Yoruba batá drum is part of a tradition of “talking drums” that includes the more popular *dùndún* drum, which is more prevalent in Nigeria in contemporary times. In fact, the *bàtá* tradition has been disappearing over the past few generations, largely because the *òrisà* religion with which it is associated has been socially stigmatized and replaced by Islam and Christianity, which presently dominate the realm of religious practice. Of the hereditary *bàtá* drummers—known as *alubàtá*—who still play, the overwhelming majority are Muslim; only a slim minority are actually practitioners of the
òrisà religion. At most, only five per cent of the Yorùbá people in Nigeria today are òrisà devotees (Villepastour 2009:352). Ethnomusicologist Amanda Villepastour, who has extensively researched batá drum practices on both sides of the Atlantic, writes that in Nigeria “the bàtá is still unambiguously associated with the òrisà and is therefore viewed as a relic of a backward, dark past by many contemporary Yorùbá Christians and Muslims, who would never hire a bàtá ensemble for their weddings, funerals or naming ceremonies, let alone their religious ceremonies” (2010:119). And those that do play don’t necessarily continue the religious traditions. One of Villepastour’s informants, an older alubàtá, lamented that “the younger alubàtá played only textless dance rhythms” (ibid. 37).

A special òrisà named Àyàn, or Añá in Cuba (approximating the Yorùbá “yan” nasal vowel), is said to live inside consecrated drums and enable them to speak the language of the òrisà. “Àyàn represents the ultimate expression of God as sound. Its symbol is the drum which serves as both repository of divine power and the vehicle to give it voice” (Mason 6). Beyond mimicking the tonal aspects of Yorùbá speech, “the bàtá renders different kinds of vowels with different stroke combinations” (Villepastour 2010:49). The voice of the bàtá is seen as an extension of that of the drummer who plays them. Citing a 1999 interview with an alubàtá in Nigeria, Villepastour writes, “he agreed with me that alubàtá are often not aware of the techniques they are applying when they speak with the drum and therefore have trouble theorizing their craft. He said, ‘It’s part of him. It’s like an extension of mouth.’ Like the complex, unconscious reflexes of speech, a bàtá player does not go through a cognizant process in order to produce words on the drum” (37).
The Batá Tradition in Cuba

Cuban bàtá oral history, as documented by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, recounts that the first consecration of bàtá drums on the island occurred in 1830 in Havana, by two allegedly African-born slaves called Añabí and Atandá. Within the Cuban bàtá tradition, consecrated drums (those containing añá inside them, and thus the power to speak the language of the òrìsà) must be “born” from an already existing set of consecrated drums. Through a “transmission” ceremony, the “voice” of the older set is passed to the newly “born” set (Villepastour 2009:345). Consecrated drums are reserved for use in ceremonies called tambor de fundamento, which are the more sacred religious events requiring direct communication with the òrìsà. Unconsecrated drums may be used for less serious sacred gatherings, as well as secular folkloric performances.

The bàtá tradition in Cuba survived in an atmosphere of oppression and secrecy. With the exception of a period of time when it was permitted through the cabildo system, drumming was consistently repressed by the church and the government throughout the colonial period, and drums were confiscated by the authorities if and when they were discovered. In fact, “today, both the exhibit hall and the basement of the Museo Nacional de la Música in Havana are filled with confiscated drums, the oldest of which date back to the 1850s” (Villepastour 2009:346-7). It has only been in recent decades that the bàtá tradition has been practiced openly.

While the bàtá tradition in Nigeria has experienced a sharp demise since the early twentieth century, the bàtá tradition in Cuban has become more mainstream, not only condoned by the government but promoted through religious and cultural tourism. The
Cuban constitution was amended in 1992 to guarantee citizens non-discrimination based on religious belief (Villepastour 2009:351). The economic benefits that bàtá players stand to gain through the cultural tourism industry has further sustained and expanded the practice.

**Linguistic Transformation in Afro-Cuban Yoruba Song**

Villepastour has conducted comparative analyses of songs and their associated verbal texts and drum patterns in both Cuba and Nigeria, finding that melody and rhythm remain consistent, despite significant changes to the words sung. She concludes, “Beyond the numerous differences in text (though mostly containing recognisably [sic] related sounds), the melodic contours and intervallic structures are remarkably cognate given well over one hundred years of cultural separation” (Villepastour 2009:358). In most cases, however, the verbal texts are significantly different.

Although singers and practitioners memorize extensive catalogues of liturgical verse, “the overwhelming majority of creole (born in the Americas) devotees, lay and priest alike, sing songs and perform ritual without knowing the meaning of most of the words and sentences they are saying… This is not to say that there were no language mechanics in New World Yorùbá communities but that their numbers, with each new generation, were and are on the decline” (Mason 36). Furthermore, linguistic creolization with the dominant language occurs, sometimes with unexpected results. Just as oriki dedicated to òrìsà have undergone alterations, those that are dedicated to the recitation of lineages, called oriki orile, have lost or transformed in meaning in the absence of genealogical knowledge through the generations. John Mason describes one example:
Although the names of some well-known lineages such as Alákétu and Ìrèsé are mentioned in the poems, they are not developed any further than mere mentioning of names… Although the Yoruba people who were shipped to the Americas fall into several lineages, they did not preserve in their religious chants much information about these homelands. Rather, the poems dwell on the divinities, their origin, relationships to one another, their attributes, and power, as well as the promises which they hold in stock for their followers (Akinyemi 44).

The chants honoring birth lineages symbolically live on in the practice of moyuba at the beginning of religious ceremonies, in which the ancestors who brought the religion to the New World are honored and paid homage.

The Development of a Visual Yoruba Language

To return to the point made at the beginning of this chapter, language that is spoken or played on a “talking drum” like the bata does not encompass the whole range of modalities or valences of communication. The visual modality of communication, “eye-talk,” is one that lives on in diaspora through signs and symbols.

The most salient example of this visual language is one that can be observed at most folkloric dance performances where orishas are personified. Frequently, performers are adorned with a symmetrical set of three horizontal lines drawn on their cheeks with make-up. These lines evoke traditional facial scarification practices from West Africa, which are used to indicate ones tribal or ethnic affiliation. The pattern of three horizontal lines on each cheek happens to be the mark of the ancient kingdom of Oyo, which collapsed in the early 19th century, leading to an influx of Yoruba war captives into the slave trade. Many of these individuals were from Oyo and bore the marks of Oyo on their faces. Thus, the continued marking of the face, with make-up rather than with a blade,
can be interpreted as a tradition of “visual oriki” recounting the memory of that displacement.

**Sketches of Yoruba facial stripe patterns (Johnson 1921:104).**

Figure 1. Facial scarification patterns indicating kinship affiliation.
Sign word for 'Yoruba' (which can also mean 'person with facial stripes').

Figure 2. Yoruba sign language (Orie 2001:16).
As the following chapters will seek to demonstrate, these collections of signs and symbols do more than merely recall the past. Rather, what I intend to demonstrate is that these signs and symbols are not only evoked and lived in the present, taking on new meanings in new contexts, but that they become more evident the more that the observer is attuned to them. Thus, this dissertation argues for a kind of multi-valent observation, in which the reception or interpretation of communicated visual language is not only layered, but interpreted differently according to who is looking at it, and what they are primed to see there.
Locating the Yoruba within “Afro-Cuban”

Under the umbrella “Afro-Cuban,” Yoruba is but one of the African ethnic groups represented. Some of the other ethnic/linguistic/religious groups that are highly visible are the Congo (from the Bantu-speaking area of Africa) and the Carabali, from which the Abakuá religious brotherhood originates. In general, the Yoruba were “late arrivals” in the slave trade, peaking in numbers during the early-mid 19th century. The unfortunate coincidence of civil war in Yorubaland and a boom in the Cuban sugar industry during those years led to an influx of Yoruba captives in the slave trade, although there were Yoruba who arrived as early as the 17th century, as evidenced by the presence of Lucumi cabildos, or fraternal associations sanctioned by the church.

As mentioned previously, the term “Yoruba” is an invention born out of the modern Atlantic world. There is evidence as well that the term came into use as a direct result of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, which brought Africans of various backgrounds together, creating a more consolidated ethnic and linguistic identity as people naturally gravitated to others to whom they were more similar than different (Palmie). In Cuba, the most commonly used term was “Lucumí,” which appears in slave trade records to describe one’s point of origin. However, in other parts of the diaspora, such as Brazil and Haiti, the term “Nago” is more prevalent to describe someone of Yoruba origin. Thus, the term “Lucumí” has a distinct Cuban connotation. In modern times, the Yoruba-derived religion is frequently also called Lucumí by its practitioners.

Fernando Ortiz, the Cuban ethnologist credited with formally launching Afro-Cuban studies (as well as coining the term “afrocubano”), wrote of the metaphor of
ajiaco to describe the creolized culture of Cuba. Ajiaco is a stew that came from the original indigenous inhabitants of Cuba, and contains a wide variety of meats and root vegetables. Ortiz described this ajiaco as a large pot that continually receives new ingredients, which cook together into a whole, although some pieces remain intact. Much like the gumbo metaphor that is frequently applied to New Orleans, the ajiaco is a metaphor for transculturation. In the words of Ortiz: “cubanidad inheres not only in the result but in its complex formative process, disintegrative and integrative, in the substantial elements that enter into its eventuation, in the environment within which it takes place, and in the vicissitudes of the way in which it unfolds” (1940:16). It would follow that an ingredient that was introduced later would be more intact and recognizable, not yet cooked to mush. This is perhaps an explanation for why the Yoruba root is the most visible, superficially, in “Afro-Cuban culture.” There have been fewer generations of creolization to blur its edges and meld with other cultural forms, and it is still floating quite visibly on the surface.

Interestingly, as in the New Orleans example, the Congo contribution arrived earlier and has “cooked down” into more of a generalized “base” of the soup, like a roux if you will. As Ned Sublette points out, the word “gumbo” derives from the Kongo word for “okra” (2008:117). And as a popular Cuban song refrain goes, “...pero si come con harina el quimbombó, es congo de verdad” (he who eats okra and flour is truly Congo), indicating that this very recipe is a mark of Congo-ness.

During slavery, slaves were distinguished by the “nation” from which they came in Africa, and there were stereotypes associated with each of them. “These comparisons persist today, especially in contrasting stereotypes of the highly assimilated Carabalí with
the brutish, rebellious Congos and the cultured, urbane Lucumi” (Wirtz 186).

Linguistically, few words of the original Kikongo speech remain in use, unlike Lucumi, which utilizes an extensive liturgical language (also called “Lucumi”) for song and prayer that reveals direct connections to spoken Yoruba. Those few Congo-derived words that do remain are typically used in the context of *bozal*, a pidgin-like version of Spanish that is said to be the language that was spoken by African-born slaves (who were also called *bozales*, as opposed to *criollos*, or Cuban-born). Although Wirtz questions how accurately *bozal* reflects the actual speech that was spoken by slaves, symbolically it operates as a register that indexes blackness and the historical moment of slavery. *Bozal* is spoken in both sacred and secular contexts. In sacred contexts it is usually spoken by a spirit of a dead slave or maroon that has possessed the body of a practitioner of the Congo *palo* religion; in secular contexts of folklore performance, it is spoken by the brutish characters of Afro-Cuban folklore depicting Congo slaves and witch doctors.

Whereas the *bozal* register evokes a particular historical period of slavery, Lucumi acts as an honorific register for communication with the orishas and “ochá’s songs evoke a more mythic and time-transcending chronotope” and (Wirtz 147). (Ocha is another term used to describe the Lucumi religion.) Likewise, in terms of folkloric costuming, performers of Congo are typically dressed in “slave attire” rooted in a historical moment, as opposed to the otherworldly, ethereal quality of orisha costumes. The Carabalí performers Wirtz writes about are typically costumed in historical garb evoking the colonial era.

Within the realm of “Afro-Cuban,” there is also a geographic variation between Eastern and Western Cuba—*occidente* and *oriente*. Wirtz describes the dichotomy: “Havana, in the west, creates a center of political and cultural gravity… Santiago [in the
east]…is Havana’s antipode, a provincial city that boasts of its popular traditions and Caribbean (read: Black West Indian) influences, as well as its rebellious spirit” (24). The mountains of oriente have symbolized “resistance and revolution throughout Cuba’s history, from its isolated communities of maroons (escaped slaves) to its nineteenth-century independence fighters, to its twentieth-century guerrillas” (ibid.). The perception of the east as more black and “Caribbean” is directly due to the influence of mostly Haitian immigrants, who arrived in waves particularly following the Haitian Revolution, and in the twentieth century to answer the demand for labor (Lapidus). Although Santería and Lucumí folkloric forms also exist in the eastern half of the island, their importance seems less central than other dominant “Afro-Cuban” expressions in religion and folklore, such as Congo palo monte, Carabalí carnival associations, and neighborhood comparsa groups of the conga santiaguera tradition, per Wirtz’s description.

There may also be a historical component to this, as the Yoruba that were brought to Cuba to work on sugar plantations were more likely to end up in the western part of the island, near Havana and Matanzas, where the sugar industry was most robust and developed. Thus the Havana-based Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba (CFNC), which Katherine Hagedorn writes about, seems to specialize in orisha folklore, although as a national ensemble it also masters and presents traditions from the other African ethnic groups, regions of the island, and periods of history (ie. popular vs. folkloric forms). In her history of the founding of the group, the main religious practitioners who served as sources of folkloric music and dance knowledge came primarily from the Lucumi faith. Both the works of Hagedorn and Wirtz imply that the “Yoruba” branch of Afro-Cuban religion and folklore are seen as more cosmopolitan.
Race in the Construction of Cuban Nationalism

The twentieth century discourse on race and nation in Cuba has its roots in the independence struggle of the late nineteenth century, and its entanglement in the abolition of slavery. To understand race in Cuba, it is critical to know this history. The association of these two processes—which, due to their drawn-out nature were more “processes” than “events”—meant that ideologies of the Cuban nation were inextricably tied up in ideologies of race from the get-go. They were two simultaneous but different emancipation projects—one from racial slavery, and one from colonialism. One directed toward an external oppressor, the other toward an internal oppressor.

Cuba was one of the last places in the Americas to both abolish slavery and to achieve independence from Spain. The struggles for independence and emancipation unfolded more or less concurrently, although with varying actors who had varying sets of objectives and social positions. Spain was reluctant to relinquish its lucrative sugar-producing colony, whose economic infrastructure depended on the coerced labor of African slaves. The push towards abolition came both from the outside—the global abolition movement—as well as the inside, based on the perception that slave labor was incompatible with the growth of new technologies that were being implemented in the sugar industrial complex.

Unlike in other slave societies where abolition occurred swiftly, abolition in Cuba occurred in stages over several years, involving much public and legislative debate on the part of the Spanish. Solutions such as the Patronato, which resembled a more liberal slave code but put an expiration date on slavery, sought to appease abolitionists and planter
elites alike. From the perspective of the enslaved, small legal windows were opened, bit by bit, through which they could have agency to argue for their freedom. Rebecca Scott argues that *patrocinados* “quickly learned to use new weapons,” if not to demand freedom, then to exert other rights under the new laws (140). By the time that slavery was officially abolished in 1886, only a small percentage of the original number were actually still enslaved.

The independence wars spanned three decades, from 1868-1898. In the “Grito de Yara” that initiated it, the planter Carlos Manuel de Céspedes in Oriente freed his slaves that they might fight alongside him. The question of emancipation continued to be debated throughout the wars as the insurgent movement swelled its ranks with former slaves, for whom insurgency held the promise of freedom. Consequently, the independence wars were characterized by a high participation of black and mulato fighters. Race figured prominently in the discourse around insurgency, as counterrevolutionaries evoked fears of “another Haiti” and military leaders such as Antonio Maceo were accused of attempting to establish a black republic.

Aline Helg points out that at the turn of the twentieth century Cuba differed from its fellow Latin American nations in that its racial classification system was more two-tiered (white/non-white) than three-tiered (white/black/mulatto), stemming from a mid-nineteenth-century notion of a *raza de color* or *clase de color* that encompassed both mulatto and black. Although this conception was similar to that of the United States, it was different in that “the line separating blacks and mulattoes from whites was based on ‘visible’ African ancestry, not on the ‘one drop rule’” and she asserts that it “was not a product of U.S. influence” (Helg 3). Rather, she attributes the cause to the Conspiracy of
La Escalera in 1844, which “revealed the existence of extensive networks linking urban free blacks and mulattoes to plantation slaves” (ibid 4). However, as Ada Ferrer cautions, it is tricky to apply the blanket term “Afro-Cuban” and important to be aware of the social distinctions that terms like *mulato, pardo, negro, moreno* held in their historic contexts (11).

According to Ada Ferrer, ideologically the independence wars were characterized by a constant pull between racism and antiracism. Toward the latter half of the struggle, intellectuals in exile—particularly Jose Martí—organized and garnered support for the independence movement while abroad, using “weapons of the mind.” Writing from the U.S., Martí attempted to resolve the contentious issue of race by declaring that it did not exist. He famously wrote, “Cubans are more than whites, mulatos or negros. On the field of battle, dying for Cuba, the souls of whites and blacks have risen together in the air.” Racial division was cast as a Spanish tactic for weakening the independence movement. The myth of racelessness was an ideological counter-tactic to thwart internal division within the independence movement. However, in reality structures of racism persisted within the ranks, with newly recruited whites from “good families” receiving promotions while black and mulatto fighters were denied recognition and reward for their years of contribution (Ferrer).

The U.S. effectively hijacked the Cuban independence movement, intervening in 1898 in the short-lived Spanish-American war. Independence from Spain was thus not fully achieved; instead, Cuba moved into a neocolonial relationship with the United States. Although the Platt Amendment, which legally gave the U.S. a right to intervene in issues of Cuban sovereignty, was abrogated a few years later Cuba continued under the
yoke of U.S. imperialism. For this as well as internal reasons, Afro-Cubans did not achieve the full social, political, and economic equality that they had expected from their participation in the independence wars, sowing the seeds of resentment that would blossom a decade later. In many ways, as will be discussed in the following chapter, the 1959 Revolution and the period of drastic social change that ensued was seen as finally completing the unfinished work of the Independence struggles, not only in terms of national sovereignty but in terms of racial equity and social justice.

Post-independence, Cubans of color faced barriers toward social mobility due to the scant employment options that were open to them. Many continued to work in agriculture, like Esteban Montejo, in some ways living much as they did during slavery. Furthermore, the rhetoric of racelessness, by masking structural inequalities that persisted, implied that this lack of mobility and advancement was due to their lack of merit or effort (Helg). The early twentieth century was marked by racial violence and suppression, most infamously in the 1912 massacre of the members of the Partido Independiente de Color, the first black political party in the hemisphere. This time, the ideology of the raceless nation was used to suppress black political mobilization and silence expression. To identify with a race was to be anti-nation, with violent consequences. Although the 1959 Revolution sought to remedy the racial inequalities of the Republican era, the ideology of racelessness persisted, such that to even acknowledge that race existed was to be “anti-Revolutionary.”

During the Republican era, however, the African element of Cuba culture was partly acknowledged as the nation moved toward adopting a racial identity—that of mestizaje—which idealized the twin roots of Africa and Europe. In many ways this was
an ideological tactic in response to continued U.S. imperialism. In the words of Alejandro de la Fuente, “The reinterpretation of Cubanness in the 1920s and 1930s sought to reconcile the perceived social reality of racial plurality with the need to forge a culturally homogenous, politically stable, and economically prosperous modern nation” (176). This symbolized a movement from racelessness to a race-based national identity; however, this involved the creation of a “new” race—that of the mestizo or mulato—which implied a revalorization of the black contribution to the formation of the Cuban nation. These concepts developed concurrently with the identity of the newly emerged nation, such that “by the early twentieth century, terms such as cubanidad and cubania… were, for all intents and purposes, synonymous to mestizaje” (Kutzinski 7).

Culture was a primary tool for the expression of the mestizaje concept, spawning the artistic movement known as Afrocubanismo, which employed “black motifs” to evoke a more authentic cubanidad (de la Fuente 180). Rumba took center stage as an authentic musical and dance expression of this hybridity, becoming the national genre. However, in the process, the Afrocuban expression was re-framed from a European-American perspective. “Artists and political activists did not condone the acceptance of Afrocuban street culture as it existed, but rather imagery derived from such expression as the basis for European-style composition” (Moore, 133). For example, a new musical genre such as son might incorporate Afrocuban rhythms, but use European-style instrumentation to give it a more “sophisticated” sound. During this process of transformation the new resulting form comes to represent the nation as a whole, because it manages to appear inclusive while ultimately conforming to elite norms.
A literary movement known as *poesia mulata* emerged, most notably in the work of Nicolás Guillén, a mulato poet who wrote *Motivos de Son* and *Songoro cosongo*, which saw in these “African roots” the essence of Cubanness. Writing in 1931, Guillén uses the word *mulato* to describe the nature of the nation. In this mixture, the separate components cannot be isolated: “The African injection in this land is so deep, and so many capillary streams cross each other and interweave in our well-watered social hydrography, that disentangling this hieroglyphic would be a job for a miniaturist” (1980:102). Guillén declared a cultural pride toward his African heritage and embraced it in his literary work, infusing his poetry with rhythms and imagery that evoked it.

Fernando Ortiz was one of the first to theorize about Cuban mestizaje, beginning with his theory of transculturation as outlined in “Cuban Counterpoint.” This foundational text asserted that Cuba is best symbolized by its two major agricultural products—sugar and tobacco—which function as two opposite binaries, or “antiphonies.” Ortiz coined the term “transculturation” as an alternative to “acculturation,” which implies a unidirectional influence from a dominant culture to a subordinate one. A more apt model, he argued, is transculturation, which is multi-directional, overlapping, and transmutable. Transculturation occurs in two steps: first deculturation, followed by neoculturation, in which a new culture is created that is different from both of the original cultures.

A newer generation of scholars has focused more attention on the ways in which gender ideologies are entangled in racial ideologies of mestizaje. In “Ballad of the Two Grandfathers” Guillén idealized his heritage through the image of two grandfathers—one European, one African—who fused together into the *mulato* grandchild. This definition
of mestizaje seems to exclude women from the equation. Alternately, the image of the mulata “is a symbolic container for all the tricky questions about how race, gender, and sexuality inflect the power relations that obtain in colonial and postcolonial Cuba.” She is “the inscription of a desire for cultural synthesis upon a field of sociopolitical contingencies that is accordingly distorted” (Kutzinksi 165). Yet, this symbolic inclusion, most salient in the iconic figure of the Virgin de la Caridad del Cobre, masks social inequalities of the lived experience of people of color.

Roberto Fernandez Retamar’s essay “Caliban: Notes Toward a Discussion of Culture in Our America” employs the literary metaphor of the figure of Caliban from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* to describe the relationship of Cuba to outside imperial powers. Caliban—an anagram of “cannibal”—represents the African slave; Prospero, the white colonizer; Ariel, the mulatto who is Prospero’s messenger and the spirit of the air. Ariel is the intellectual from the same island as Caliban, who can choose between serving Prospero or allying with Caliban in the struggle for true freedom. Retamar’s essay argues that mestizaje is the only way out of the colonial condition. “Our culture is—and can only be—the child of revolution, of our multisecular rejection of all colonialisms” (Retamar 38). However, Retamar concludes, “Our symbol then is not Ariel, as Rodó thought, but rather Caliban. This is something that we, the mestizo inhabitants of these same isles where Caliban lived, see with particular clarity” (14).

Alejandro de la Fuente writes, “Neither unqualified racial integration nor linear exclusion characterizes the history of Cuba as an independent nation…Ambiguity is what best defines the evolution of race relations in twentieth-century Cuba” (11). Essentially, it boils down to a kind of conditional inclusion. Another persistent theme is that this
inclusion and representation has been in the realm of national culture more so than politics. For example, when one thinks of Cuban “folklore” it is the African derived traditions that come to mind. Partial inclusion conversely means partial erasure. “Still, even as remnants of the culture of Africans are celebrated, their violent kidnapping and degradation is effaced” (Allen 27). The ideology of mestizaje elides that fact of slavery and conquest that created it. Jafari Allen goes so far to say, “The celebration of mestizaje is a celebration of black holocaust” (48).

The ideology of the Revolution claimed to have solved issues of race by solving issues of class privilege, particularly in the areas of housing, health, and education. Race was officially treated “as a mere by-product of class contradictions” (de la Fuente 4). Revolutionary scholarship on race tended to focus on the past, either studying slavery on the sugar plantation, like Manuel Moreno Fraginal’s El ingenio: el complejo económico social cubano del azúcar published in 1964 which was translated into English in 1976 as The Sugar Mill: The Socioeconomic Complex of Sugar in Cuba.

social cubano del azúcar, published in 1964 and translated into English in 1976 as The Sugar Mill: The Socioeconomic Complex of Sugar in Cuba, or focusing on biographical accounts of individuals who fought in the independence wars, like Antonio Maceo. In a 1974 interview with Georgette M. Dorn which is now part of the Library of Congress’ Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape, Fraginals makes this prescient statement:

Fraginals expounded on his role as a historian writing during the Revolutionary era:

Quizás una de las características más extraordinarias de esta época es que ya la historia ha dejado de ser totalmente aquel...aquella forma antigua de describir los hechos y en ararlos para convertirse en una mezcla muy extraña de sociología, economía, a veces psicología, e historia propiamente dicha (loc.gov).
Perhaps one of the most extraordinary features of this era is that history is no longer totally that... that ancient way of describing the facts and in scratching them to become a very strange mixture of sociology, economics, sometimes psychology, and history proper (loc.gov).

This effort to (re)write the history of Cuba from the vantage point of the Revolution, as a way to define the Revolutionary present and ideal future, will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 2.

As many scholars have documented, the structural changes of the Revolution did not successfully eradicate racist mentalities. The silencing of discourse on race in the Revolutionary present limited the range of political expression for Cubans of African descent. “Dominant racial ideologies are not mere reflections of structural conditions but integral parts of social realities. They define what is politically possible” (de la Fuente 6).

Thus for artists and intellectuals such as Sara Gómez, addressing race and blackness in their work required walking a fine line of political caution. However, it is for this very reason that her film De cierta manera presents such a fascinating example of a text that can be read through multiple valences, a film that carries complicated and conflicting messages.

Before diving into this reading of De cierta manera, however, the next three chapters will first examine the pataki which I am arguing is represented symbolically in the film. Chapters 2 and 3 will first look at the figures of Ogún and Ochún independently, and evaluate the individual resonances of these two archetypes with ideologies of Cuban nationhood. Chapter 4 will present and evaluate several versions of the pataki in question, in which Ochún lures Ogún out of his auto-exile. And finally, Chapter 5 will argue for a radical re-reading of Gómez’s De cierta manera in which this pataki operates
as a metaphor not only for the love story between the two protagonists, but as an allegory for the Revolutionary nation itself as it seeks to construct an ideal society.
CHAPTER 2: OGÚN AND CUBA – ROMANCING THE MACHETE

“Ogún Liberates: Rise beyond his shadow.”

“El mambí y el machete parecen estar unidos, ser una sola cosa.”

February 2017

Walking down Amargura street in Old Havana, I came upon a mural that had been painted by the neighborhood Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, or CDR. The building-wide mural depicted a man in profile, from the elbow up, with a machete in his hand, the blade resting on his shoulder (sharp edge up). The words “Con La Guardia en Alto” were spelled out on a floating yellow ribbon that framed either side of his head. A Cuban flag, elongated to form another ribbon of blue and white stripes, emerged from his clenched (machete-holding) fist and wrapped around the length of the blade in a spiral. Upon closer inspection, the signature painted onto the lower right corner of the wall read: “La Kasa y Los Niños de Amargura y el CDR #3 Septiembre 2014” (The House and Children of Amargura and CDR #3, September 2014). I returned later with a Cuban friend to ask him what he saw in the image. He pointed to the man’s hat and said that it indicated he was a campesino, a common man, and that the beard on his face indicated

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2 Wole Soyinka, *Seven Signposts*, p.53

3 *La Primera Carga al Machete* (1968)
that he was a revolucionario. Although this friend is a santero and a folkloric drummer deeply immersed in the world of Afro-Cuban religion in Havana, he did not voluntarily mention the figure of Ogún in relation to this mural, and I did not bring it up.

Figure 4. CDR Mural on Amargura street in Old Havana, 2017.

However, with the dissertation preoccupying my mind on that particular trip to Cuba, I was filtering everything I encountered through a lens of “Afro-Cuban visual language,” and at first sight of the mural on Amargura street I immediately saw one thing only: Ogún. Orisha (deity) of iron and owner of the forge, Ogún is visually marked by the machete he typically holds in his hand. Whether depicted by a folkloric dancer performing as him on the stage of the Teatro Mella or in a souvenir painting sold by a
street artist on El Prado, within the visual vocabulary of Yoruba-derived religion the machete in hand is the salient symbol indicating that a (male) figure represents Ogún. Typically, a folkloric dancer representing Ogún will be shirtless and wearing a grass skirt called a mariwo, and may possibly be smoking a cigar. His signature colors—which he may be wearing in a sash across his bare chest—are green and purple, or green and black. But regardless of the exact costuming, it is the machete in hand that marks him as Ogún: god of War, Labor, and the mysteries of the forge which he has mastered as the archetypal Blacksmith and “owner” of Iron.

Sparked by my initial glimpse of this mural at the beginning of this 2017 trip to Cuba, I began to note the imagery of the machete as a recurring theme on that trip. On a tour of San Juan Hill outside of Santiago, the Cuban tour guide pointed to a statue and said that it was of a mambí or independence fighter, and that one could tell because of the machete hanging from his waist (no mention of the rifle held in his hands).

Later, I noticed that the logo for the CDR system itself depicts the upper torso of a genderless figure, machete held aloft over the head, the words “con la guardia en alto” spelled across the blade. Further research revealed that both the design of the logo and the slogan “con la guardia en alto” were created in 1960 by Cándido Justiz Pileta (Moré Leal). The CDR system was set up in the early years of the Revolution as a series of neighborhood organizations that served the role of carrying out collective surveillance tasks in the face of external interference and the acts of destabilization of the Cuban political system.
What does this imagery have to do with Ogún, and why does that matter?

Although a Cuban acquaintance of mine, a scholar of African diaspora religions who is based at a university in Cuba, emphatically denied that the nationalist imagery in the CDR mural on Amargura Street (or in the CDR logo itself) has any direct connection to the Yoruba orisha Ogún, I cannot help but note the overlap between nationalist and religious tropes and meanings around the machete as a symbol in Cuba. There is a striking parallel and resonance between the ideologies represented in the nationalist symbolism of the machete, particularly in imagery and lore produced in Revolutionary
(i.e. post-1959) times up until the present, and the ideologies which encapsulate the Yoruba archetype or concept of Ogún in Afro-Cuban religion. In both paradigms, the machete as a symbol invokes moral concepts or values and references mythology; here I will bring these concepts and mythologies into conversation.

This chapter will argue that the prevalence of the machete in Cuban nationalist imagery draws upon the historical antecedents of a “lineage” of archetypal Cuban figures for whom the machete as a symbol represents primarily resistance (against slavery, imperialism, and other forms of oppression) and secondarily labor (as a utilitarian tool for agriculture and specifically for the cutting of sugarcane), and that these two interrelated themes of resistance and labor are integral to Cuban ideologies of revolution and citizenship that have been promoted by the state since 1959.

Furthermore, the machete and the nationalist ideologies it represents have deep resonance with the religious symbolism and ideology around the figure of Ogún, deity of both War and Work in the realm of Yoruba cosmology. The chapter will explore the implications of this resonance between the political and the spiritual in Cuba, and argue for a symbolic syncretism of sorts between Ogún and the masculine archetype of the “revolucionario”—a syncretism not dissimilar to that between the Yoruba oricha Ochún and the Catholic patron saint of Cuba, la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, the subject of Chapter 3. The purpose of these next two chapters is to demonstrate how each figure independently can be interpreted as a symbol or metaphor for the Cuban nation, laying the foundation for the argument that consequently, a pataki telling a story about the interaction between these two orichas can be read as an allegory for the Cuban nation.
I will also argue for a symbolic connection between the machete and the literal and metaphorical space of “el monte”, which “can be translated as ‘mountain,’ but also as ‘wilderness,’ ‘jungle,’ or ‘woods,’” and is a space that has served as a place of refuge in Cuba over centuries for *cimarrones*, *mambises*, and bearded *revolucionarios* alike (Rodriguez-Mangual 12). Likewise, *el monte* is the preferred home or refuge of the orisha Ogún. Within Yoruba cosmology there is a deep association between Ogún and *el monte*; whereas other Yoruba orishas may dwell in the ocean (Yemayá) or the river (Ochún) or the sky (Olorun), the orishas known as the “guerreros” or warriors – Elegguá, Ogún, and Ochosí (the hunter) – make their home and find refuge in *el monte*. In the pataki (myth) that is the central subject of this dissertation, it is to *el monte* that Ogún exiles himself to work day and night, and it is out of *el monte* and back into civilization or human society that Ochún successfully lures him. I argue in this chapter that national symbolism around the machete, and those who carry it and identify with it, is intricately bound with the symbolism of *el monte* as a space of refuge, rebellion, and the birth of revolution.

**Ogún as Afro-Cuban Archetype**

This next section will review the associations and meanings around Ogún as an archetype in the Yoruba worldview, and examine how his archetype resonates with that of the *cimarrón* and of the *mambí*, before moving on to a comparison between these archetypes and the more modern Revolutionary archetypes of the *revolucionario* and the *Hombre Nuevo* as described by Ernesto Che Guevara in 1965.
Within the so-called “pantheon” of orishas who are venerated in New World orisha traditions, Ogún is considered one of the three “warriors,” along with Eleggua and Ochosi. It is said that Eleggua opens the path, and Ogún clears it. The orisha of iron who is a blacksmith by trade, Ogún represents both War and Work, the two aspects united under a common symbol—the machete. Ogún knows the secret to forging raw iron into a blade that can cut. As such, in Nigeria, the traditional Yoruba facial scarification practices mentioned in the introduction can only be performed by professionally trained specialists who are devotees of Ogún (Orie 2011:17). By extension, Ogún represents technology more generally, and transportation and metal machinery in particular. John Mason writes:

Ogún is the champion of laborers everywhere… His appearance signals the locating and procuring of the raw materials needed for production, which in turn leads to the employing of workers, and the prosperity that comes with the manufacturing and marketing of finished goods… As hunter, explorer, and adventurer, Ogún traveled and is known where none had gone before and accomplished what none were able to do (1997:355).

It must be noted that Ogún is not the only African figure in Cuba that is associated with iron. In the Congo-inspired religion of Palo, the deity Zarabanda “is a fighting prenda, one made to concentrate the properties of iron and metal like the Ocha/Santo sovereign Ogún, into whose territory of fate-changing potential Zarabanda incurs” (Ochoa 109). The figure of Ogou in Haitian vodu provides another analogue, likewise a fiery deity of war.

In Cuba, the other male warrior oricha who matches Ogún’s power is Changó (Ṣango in Yorùbá, in which the letter “ṣ” is pronounced like the English “sh”), the deity of fire, lightning, and the owner of the drums, and they are often presented as each
other’s ultimate rival. In the *patakies*, they are frequently fighting each other over a woman, whether she be the oricha Yemayá or Oyá. Their relationship is dramatized on screen in the 1985 Cuban film *Patakín*, which takes the form of a musical comedy in which Ogún first appears riding a tractor. Chanan writes, “here Shangó is an irresistible lumpen layabout, while his nemesis, Ogún, is a staid model worker” and their struggle “is presented as the expression of an ancestral struggle between ethical attitudes that still remain valid, like honesty versus deceit, or seriousness versus superficiality” (398).

**Ogúñ and The Fourth Stage**

In his 1976 essay “The Fourth Stage (Through the Mysteries of Ogún to the origin of Yoruba tragedy),” Yoruba scholar Wole Soyinka discusses how Ogún is unique among orishas because he occupies the space of “the fourth stage,” which has to do with transformation through struggle, Ogún’s duality as both a creative and destructive force, and Ogún’s mythological/metaphysical struggle as a prototype for bridging the gulf between deities and humanity. Soyinka argues that:

> Ogúñ stands for a transcendental, humane but rigidly restorative justice. (Unlike Sango, who is primarily retributive.) The first artist and technician of the forge, he evokes like Nietzsche’s Apollonian spirit, a ‘massive impact of image, concept, ethical doctrine and sympathy’ …Ogúñ the creative urge and instinct, the essence of creativity. (141)

This concept of the need to destroy in order to create anew also resonates with the mythologies surrounding the struggle for independence and Revolution. For Ogún, the blacksmith, the machete represents not only the fruit of his labors at the forge, but its two
primary uses: for War, and for Work. By extension, Ogún is also the oricha who represents technology and transportation, and therefore, progress as a society.

**Linking the Cimarrón and the Mambí**

In the Cuban imaginary both the figures of the *cimarrón* (runaway slave) and the *mambi* or Independence fighter are practically inseparable from the symbol of the machete. Post-1959, these two historic archetypes found new life and importance in service of revolutionary nation-making, especially in the realm of popular culture and state media.

The animated cartoon *El Negrito Cimarrón*, created for Cuban television in 1975 by Tulio Raggi, tells stories of the adventures of a young Afro-Cuban boy who has escaped from slavery, and who is frequently depicted carrying a machete. The machete would have been the main tool of labor under slavery (particularly for sugarcane), and both a utilitarian tool and a defensive weapon of war to the cimarrón. *Elpidio Valdés* is a cartoon and comic book character created in 1970 by cartoonist and Cuban filmmaker Juan Padrón. As a fictional character, Elpido Valdés was born in the 1870s and fought as a *mambi* in the Independence Wars, rising to the rank of colonel and surviving to the end of the war. The figures of the *cimarrón* and the *mambi* themselves are elevated as national icons, historical antecedents that inform conceptions of Cuban citizenship and “Cubanness” in post-Revolutionary Cuba, and both are often depicted with a machete in hand.
As described in the Introduction, the 19th century struggles for Cuba independence and emancipation unfolded more or less concurrently, and the association of these two processes meant that ideologies of the Cuban nation were inextricably tied up in ideologies of race from the get-go. These two simultaneous emancipation projects—one directed toward an external oppressor, the other toward an internal oppressor—tied the notions of liberation from foreign imperialism to that of liberation from racial slavery. The high participation of black and mulato fighters in the independence wars resulted in the question of race figuring prominently in the discourse around insurgency, and ultimately the linking of the figures of the *cimarrón* and the *mambi*. 
Given the scarcity of armaments and munitions, and the prevalence of machetes among former slaves and rural campesinos who joined the ranks of Independence fighters, it is not a surprise that it was a weapon of last resort that would attain such symbolic status. Since the 1959 Revolution in some ways completed the “unfinished work” of the Independence struggle, the figure of the mambi was a politically expedient model to invoke as part of the Revolutionary project. In fact, I would argue that the mambi became more significant as a historical Cuban figure as a result of the post-1959 Revolutionary project, and cultural production around national historical memory.
Figure 8. Cover of comic book *Historias Mambises* by Tulio Raggi – Juan Padrón (2008)
As I will discuss in the next section about depictions of the machete in Cuban popular culture post-1959, the embracing and elevating of the machete as a national symbol also helped to frame the Triumph of the Revolution as the culmination and resolution of a 19th century Independence war that was only half-won. By dismantling the neocolonial relationship with the United States that had replaced that of the Spanish after 1898, the Cuban Revolution at long last achieved the goals of Cuban sovereignty and self-rule that the Independence Wars had only partially achieved⁴. The machete for Cuba is thus a symbol of resistance against imperialism, in all its forms.

Romancing the Machete: Forging a Symbol of Cuba Libre

The machete achieved iconic status as a national symbol in Cuba not only because of the role it played during the Wars of Independence (1868-1898), but largely because of popular cultural production post-1959 that has emphasized that role as critical to the story of the nation’s history and the identity of the Cuban people. The anecdote recounted earlier in this chapter about the Cuban tour guide on San Juan Hill pointing out the machete on the mambi statue demonstrates how this association has been internalized by Cubans as common historical knowledge, a fact of history.

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⁴ As Guadalupe García notes in her article “Urban Guajiros: Colonial Reconcentración, Rural Displacement and Criminalisation in Western Cuba, 1895-1902” the gathering of some 500,000 rural Cubans in the Civic Plaza of Havana on July 26, 1959 who were invited to the city by Fidel Castro to celebrate the sixth anniversary of the rebel attack on the Moncada military barracks in Santiago de Cuba (and who were described by the Universal-International Press as “one million machete-wielding peasants”), evoked and rectified the prior exclusion of rural (and primarily non-white) citizens in urban celebrations following the Independence victory. The invited gathering in 1959 “offered the new Cuban government a platform from which to showcase the political contributions of rural farmers and highlight the agrarian base of the revolutionary struggle” as well as to “publicly display Cuba’s newfound commitment to its rural population” (209-210).
The mythology and lore surrounding the machete in Cuba is based in both fact and fiction; military historian John Tone argues that the symbolic status it has achieved greatly exceeds its actual role and impact as a weapon of war during the battles for Cuban Independence (Tone 7). Nonetheless, he concedes that “the machete was elevated to a central place in Cuban iconography not because it won battles, but because it was unmatched as a symbol of national unity, first against Spain and later against the United States” (9). In the context of the material absence or limited supply of firearms, the machete represented the scrappy resilience of the underdog fighting for liberation from the colonial oppressor.

According to Tone, the machete was primarily used as a weapon only out of necessity (or “desperation”), when rifles and ammunition were in short supply. He argues that Cuban military victories over the Spanish were due to “the intelligent use of this available firepower” by “outstanding military leaders” such as Máximo Gómez, Antonio Maceo, and Calixto García, and not to any particular military advantage of the machete as a weapon. Nonetheless, battles such as that of Maltiempo in 1895 provided a martial arena in which the machete performed and earned its iconic status as a weapon that struck fear in the hearts of the Spanish. Per Tone, following the battle of Maltiempo, “Eyewitnesses described the Cubans on horseback charging into Spanish infantry formations and cutting them to ribbons using their machetes” (7). And thus the lore around the “carga al machete” was born.

However, he argues, that while “the image of whooping, machete-wielding men on horseback rolling up Spanish infantry” may provide a dramatic image, a more accurate assessment is that “the Cubans won battles primarily because they used their rifles more
effectively than did Spanish troops.” While the machete was “an invaluable tool and
could be a weapon of great terror…it did not win battles against the Spanish” (8-9).
Nonetheless, the mythic regard for the Cuban machete prevails in Cuba and Spain alike,
such that even the Army Museum in Madrid features original Cuban machetes as artifacts
of the war, in lieu of the guns that were in fact responsible for Cuba’s victory (10).

In the historiography of the Independence wars “the machete has served as a
shibboleth for Cuban bravery and Spanish incompetence and a symbol of Cuban victory,”
leaving Cuban historians reluctant to question or examine the actual role it played on the
battlefield. Tone deconstructs this mythology through an analysis of four major battles
besides that of Maltiempo, concluding that, “the Cubans used the machete charge
sparingly against the Spanish troops, mainly against small, isolated units or for limited
tactical purposes, for example, to give themselves time to retreat or redeploy” (14).
Cubans’ better knowledge of the terrain allowed them to be strategic about when and
where to deploy the machete charge, frequently with the aim of moving Spanish troops
into exposed positions where they were easy targets for Cuban rifles. Medical records
from military hospitals further support this argument, as the data show that wounds from
gunfire vastly outnumbered those from machetes.

The availability of armaments, which primarily were supplied by the United
States, also shaped not only the use of the machete as a weapon, but its importance as a
symbol of independence—from the United States. Given the final outcome of the wars,
which ended with American intervention and ultimately a neo-colonial relationship with
Cuba’s northern ally, the machete also represents a kind of national resilience and self-
reliance that is inherently Cuban. If Cuba won against Spain because of the superior use
of the machete, then the nation would be less indebted to the Americans for their contributions of arms and ammunition. Claiming the machete as a national symbol and cementing its mythic place in the historiography furthers the ideological project of making the 1898 victory against Spain in the “Spanish-American War” more Cuban and less American.

The Machete in Popular Culture post-1959

The flurry of cultural production during the first decades of the Cuban Revolution involved a collective gathering and telling of the new nation’s history. To understand Cuba libre in the Revolutionary present, it was necessary to reach back in the collective national memory to the beginnings of the struggle for sovereignty that the Revolution had presumably completed. And part of that narrative was the lore around the machete as a symbol for that struggle, a badge of honor and pride to which Cuban identity is inextricably tied. For example, the 1968 feature film La Primera Carga al Machete (The First Charge of the Machete) marked the centennial of the 1868 “Grito de Yara” by telling the story of the beginning phases of the first of the Independence Wars. Directed by Manuel Octavio Gómez, the film prominently features the music of Pablo Milanés composed for it, merging historical reenactment with Revolutionary art. John Mraz writes of the film:

Even within the context of revolutionary Cuban cinema—distinguished for its innovations in bringing history to the screen—First Charge is a whole new kind of historical film. Produced as a part of a cycle dedicated to the celebration of ‘One Hundred Years of Struggle,’ the film fuses the political and the poetic into a
reconstruction of the 1868 uprising against Spanish colonials and in so doing redefines historical cinema.\textsuperscript{5}

Experimentally fusing \textit{cinema verité} with historical reenactment, \textit{La Primera Carga al Machete} focuses specifically on the machete as a reason for Cuba’s ultimate liberation from Spain, such that, “in place of characters with whom one identifies, the film's central protagonist is the machete—the work tool which became a weapon in 1868 and the weapon of 1868 which is today the tool of Cuba's economic struggle”\textsuperscript{6}. Again, we are presented with the machete as a symbol of both War and Work.

\textsuperscript{5} http://www.filmreference.com/Films-Pi-Ra/La-Primera-Carga-al-Machete.html
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
Children’s cartoons and comic books have also played a significant role in cementing this mythology around the machete in the Cuban imaginary, especially for younger generations born after the Revolution. The two series that stand out are *El Negrito Cimarrón* and *Elpidio Valdés*. The former series tells stories of a young *cimarrón*, or runaway slave, prior to the abolition of slavery, while the latter series tells stories of a fictional Independence fighter by the name of *Elpidio Valdés*, and his adventures during that historical era. Both characters are often depicted carrying
machetes, symbolically linking the object to the characters’ identities. In one episode of the cartoon version of Elpidio Valdés that stands out, the entire 7 minutes is devoted to Elpidio teaching two young children about the machete and its role in Cuban history. As will be discussed below, the figures of the mambí or independence fighter and the cimarrón are symbolically linked not only because they both carry machetes, but because the fight for self-liberation from slavery was entangled with the fight for self-liberation from colonialism.

Figure 10. El negrito cimarrón fends off the slave catcher’s dogs.

In both La Primera Carga al Machete and the short cartoon “Elpidio Valdés y el machete” the argument is made that because the Cubans were so adept at using the machete as a work tool—for sugarcane harvesting, for clearing tropical brush, and for myriad other uses (both examples illustrate the machete being used to open a coconut)—that this mastery of the blade easily translated into the masterful use of the machete as a

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7 Elpidio Valdés y el machete: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPr-ubp-G_8
terrifying instrument of war, a killing implement that could cut down Spanish fighters as if they were mere branches or stalks of cane. One character in *La Primera Carga al Machete* who is being “interviewed” in a *cinema verité/reportage* style remarks on having seen a machete cut a rifle in half, and the fear that struck him at the sight. In the cartoon “Elpidio Valdés y el machete” we see exactly that (a machete cutting a rifle in half) happen in one frame of an animated depiction of a battle between the *mambises* and the Spanish. Elpidio explains to the children that the way to test a machete is to strike a nail that is lying horizontally; if the nail is cut in two and the machete does not get nicked or damaged in the process, it has passed the test.

![Figure 11. Elpidio Valdés demonstrates cutting a nail in half with a machete.](image)

In one key scene of *La Primera Carga al Machete*, officers of the Cuban Liberation army sit in the salon of a house and discuss the role of the machete as the Cubans’ “secret weapon” of sorts against the Spanish. One man notes, “*El machete... Bueno, yo sé que*
nosotros tenemos una arma y que la sabemos usar. Y que los españoles lo saben y que le
temen cómo el mismo diablo” (“The machete…Well, I know we have a weapon and we
know how to use it. And that the Spaniards know it and that they fear it as the devil
himself.”) Citing the fact that most Cubans at that time had used machetes for utilitarian
purposes since childhood, such that it is almost as if it becomes an extension of the hand,
another character pithily notes, “el mambí y el machete parecen estar unidos, ser una
sola cosa” (The mambí and the machete seem to be united, to be one thing.) Upon attack,
those participating in the carga al machete would yell, “¡Al machete!” and the sound of
that cry alone was said to be enough to make the Spaniards tremble, per popular lore.

The link between the machete as a tool of work, and the facility of the Cuban people
in using it as a daily tool, is continually referenced as a reason for which the mambises
were so skilled at using it as a weapon of war. The ease with which Cubans were
accustomed to using machetes to fell stalks of sugarcane or to accomplish any number of
agricultural or domestic tasks is repeatedly given as a reason for their mastery of its use
as a tool of war. The idea that Cubans possessed an innate capacity, with a machete in
hand, to fell Spanish soldiers as if they were mere tree branches or cane stalks,
contributed to the mythology around the machete as a national symbol of not only labor
and industry, but of a particularly Cuban strain of resistance against imperialism and
oppression.

The Cimarrón in the Cuban Imaginary: Fact and Fiction

Cimarronaje (the phenomenon of escaping enslavement) existed everywhere that
there was slavery, so Cuba is not unique in this regard. What is unique, however, is the
way that the *cimarrón* as a figure and a trope has been celebrated and cemented in the Cuban Revolutionary imaginary, through literature and popular culture.

Figure 12. The intrepid *El negrito cimarrón* eludes the Spanish authorities.

Perhaps the most influential work in this regard is Miguel Barnet’s book *Biografía de un Cimarrón* (translated in English to *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*), based on interviews with Esteban Montejo, who was 103 years old when Barnet first interviewed him in 1963. The timing of Montejo’s life span was such that he had been both a *cimarrón* as a youth during slavery times and a *mambí* who fought in the Wars of Independence, surviving to be a centenarian who witnessed the first years of the Revolutionary period. His biography represented that of the idealized nation; his life story matched its narrative arc. Barnet wrote retrospectively in 1997:

> I wrote *Biografía de un Cimarrón* at a time of great importance and under very favorable circumstances in Cuba, because there was a need to record the history of our country. A successful revolution had taken place which had changed many values, and it was necessary to record history from a new perspective. And that was
simply what I did, with the assistance of anthropology and also with my calling and vision as a poet and writer (282).

Published in 1966, *Biografía de un Cimarrón* falls under the genre of testimonio and is considered one of the great iconic works of Cuban Revolutionary literature.

Another major representation of the *cimarrón* in popular culture is the children’s cartoon *El Negrito Cimarrón* which was created in 1975 by Tulio Raggi and aired on Cuban television for decades. Today, many of these episodes can be found on YouTube. Rather than depicting the horrors of slavery, *El Negrito Cimarrón* characterizes its young protagonist as plucky and clever, constantly outwitting the colonial authorities and slave catchers. *El Negrito Cimarrón* is also published as a printed cartoon format geared towards children. This figure provides a way to include slavery in the national historic narrative while at the same time disavowing it. In this schema the Cuban nation identifies neither with the enslaver nor with the enslaved; rather, the Cuban nation identifies with the self-liberated *cimarrón*.

The figure of the *cimarrón* also figures prominently in the film *La última cena* (1976) directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, which depicts life on a Cuban sugar plantation in the 1790s, after the advent of the Haitian Revolution slave revolt, when French planters fled St. Domingue and sugar cultivation found a new growing epicenter in Cuba. The French refugee engineer who manages the sugar mill warns the Cuban master ominously of the threat of a slave revolt like in St. Domingue, and the film ends with exactly that. The character Sebastián, a slave who has run away at the beginning of the film only to be quickly captured, finally makes a successful escape to freedom at the end of the film, the only survivor amongst the rebelling slaves. The film ends with him
escaping to the refuge of the mountains, free at last. This film was one of several produced by the Cuban film institute during the 1970s that investigated “the nineteenth-century Cuban social formation and the role of sugar in shaping its character” (Chanan 56). Along with Sergio Giral’s trilogy El otro Francisco (The other Francisco), Rancheador (Slave hunter), and Maluala, these films paint a picture of “a deeply troubled colonial slave society with a class of largely Spanish-born plantation owners, grimly determined to prevent the overthrow of their rule by slave rebellion as in Haiti” (ibid.). Under such a society, the figure of the cimarrón represents the White colonizers’ worst fears of Black rebellion against enslavement.

In Cuba, settlements of runaway slaves were called palenques, and typically were hidden deep in the forest or the mountains, where they could most easily evade capture. Often the palenqueros would surround the area with false paths and booby traps made of sharp stakes to defend against those who might come looking for them. In one episode of El Negrito Cimarrón, after El Negrito successfully evades the slave catchers, we see the community of the palenque dancing in celebration to bata drums (incidentally, a toque or rhythm for Ogún).
Figure 13. *El negrito cimarrón* and others dance in the *Palenque* after he evades capture by the Spanish authorities.

Today, the headquarters of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba, where Cuban folkloric music and dances primarily of African descent are practiced and performed, is colloquially referred to as “El Palenque” by members of its community, who themselves are primarily Afro-Cuban. This example demonstrates the extent to which the word and its concept have permeated Cuban language and consciousness. Except that now, in the present, the word’s meaning has transformed from a place of physical refuge and safety, to a place of cultural refuge, cultural transmission between generations, and thus cultural resistance and survival. In the Cuban imaginary, the *cimarrón* denotes the self-liberated individual, while the *palenque* denotes the community of the self-liberated.
El Monte and Its Meanings

The theme song for the animated television show El negrito cimarrón opens with strains of violins, followed by a rumba polyrhythm featuring the classic mix of conga drums and clave, a mix of the folkloric with orchestral. A woman’s voice adds yet another layer to this musical mix as she sings the following lyrics:

Nos trajeron del otro lado del mar
Con grilletes y contra nuestra voluntad
No hubo justicia, fue tanta maldad
Cepo y bocabajo, grito y mayoral.

Levantan hermanos, busca tu verdad
El monte te espera con su libertad!
Chango, ay Chango!
La libertad no existe si no la tengo yo
Chango, ay Chango!
Lukamba, Lukamba
No me pongan cadenas, es’no es pa’ mi
Ya no tengo cadenas, es’no es pa’ mi

They brought us from across the sea
In shackles and against our will
There was no justice, was so much evil
Stocks and whipping, scream and overseer.

Get up brothers, seek your truth
The mountain awaits you with its freedom!
Chango, oh Chango!
Freedom does not exist if I do not have it
Chango, oh Chango!
Lukamba, Lukamba
Don't put chains on me, that's not for me
I no longer have chains, that's not for me

The theme song to El negrito cimarrón contains a telling line about the significance of the forests and mountains as a space of refuge: “El monte te espera con su libertad” (El Monte waits for you with its freedom). Miguel Barnet writes of “the mountain life of
a Maroon” in telling the story of that period of Esteban Montejo’s life (1997: 283). In *La última cena* the phrase “coger monte” is used euphemistically to refer to slaves running away from the plantation.

Most relevant to this chapter, however, is the deep association between Ogún and *el monte*; whereas other Yoruba orishas may dwell in the ocean (Yemayá) or the river (Ochún) or the sky (Olorun), the orishas known as the “guerreros” or warriors find their home and refuge in *el monte*—Elegguá, Ogún, and Ochosi (the hunter). In the pataki (myth) that is the central subject of this dissertation, it is to *el monte* that Ogún exiles himself to work day and night, and it is out of *el monte* and back into civilization or human society that Ochún successfully lures him.

In her analysis of Lydia Cabrera’s work, Edna M. Rodriguez-Mangual writes, “It is hard to give a definitive translation of the title… *Monte* can be translated as ‘mountain,’ but also as ‘wilderness,’ ‘jungle,’ or ‘woods’; in the context of the Afro-Cuban religion it is a sacred or magical place where the divine is found” (12). In the Cuban context, the space of *El monte* holds significance not only in the context of *cimarronaje*, but also in Afro-Cuban religions in general. To the *cimarrón, el monte* is synonymous with freedom. To the Afro-Cuban religious practitioner, *el monte* is a sacred space imbued with spiritual meaning. It is both the favored home of certain orishas as well as a source of medicinal plants and herbs. Whether in the past or revolutionary present, *el monte* presents a kind of otherworld in contradiction to the social order of the colonial or colonized spaces of cities and plantations, the centers of hegemonic power.

Lydia Cabrera’s seminal work *El monte: Notas sobre las religiones, la magia, las supersticiones y el folklore de los negros criollos y el pueblo de Cuba* (Notes on the
religions, the magic, the superstitions and the folklore of Cuban-born blacks and the people of Cuba) (1954) offers a collection of upwards of 500 pages of ethnographic material Cabrera gathered by interviewing Cuban practitioners of religions with varied African origins. That she chose “El monte” as the title of this tome underscores the symbolism it represents, and its centrality to the religion. She opens this massive collection of Afro-Cuban religious lore with the following paragraph:

Persiste en el negro cubano, con tenacidad asombrosa, la creencia en la espiritualidad del monte. En los montes y malezas de Cuba habitan, como en las selvas de África, las mismas divinidades ancestrales, los espíritus poderosos que todavía hoy, igual que en los días de la trata, más teme y venera, y de cuya hostilidad o beno velencia siguen dependiendo sus éxitos o sus fracasos. ... “Los Santos están más en el Monte que en el cielo”. (1983:13)

(There persists in the Cuban black, with amazing tenacity, the belief in the spirituality of the woods. In the mountains and undergrowth of Cuba inhabit, as in the jungles of Africa, the same ancestral divinities, the powerful spirits that still today, as in the days of the slave trade, they most fear and venerate, and on whose hostility or benevolence they continue to depend Your successes or your failures. ... "The Saints are in the Woods more so than in the heavens.")

Cabrera’s informant Gabino Sandoval described el monte as a temple of sorts:

“El blanco va a la iglesia a pedir lo que no tiene, o a pedir que Jesu-Cristo o la Virgen María o cualquier otro miembro de la familia celestial, le conserve lo que tiene y se lo fortalezca. Va a la casa de Dios para atender a sus necesidades... Nosotros los negros vamos al Monte como si fuésemos a una iglesia, porque está llena de Santos y de difuntos, a pedirles lo que nos hace falta para nuestra salud y para nuestros negocios.” (1983: 14-15)

(“The white man goes to the church to ask for what he does not have, or to ask that Jesus-Christ or the Virgin Mary or any other member of the celestial family, help keep what he has and strengthen it. He goes to the house of God to attend to his needs… We blacks go to the Woods as if we were going to a church, because it is full of Saints and the dead, to ask them what we need for our health and for our businesses.”)

The Revolucionario in the Mountains
The trope of the bearded *revolucionario* in the mountains draws upon much of the same material, although the machete is replaced by the rifle, another weapon made of metal. Interestingly, in the video of Elpidio Valdés’ explanation of the machete in Cuban history, there is one fleeting frame (around the 6:03 mark) mixed into the Independence fighting imagery which clearly depicts 20\textsuperscript{th} century *revolucionarios* wearing the red and black flag of the July 26th movement on their hats, one of them holding a machete in addition to his rifle:

![Figure 14. Still from cartoon *Elpidio Valdés y el machete*](image)
Part of the mythology around the Revolution is that the work of the revolucionarios was based primarily in the Sierra Maestra, the mountains of eastern Cuba, supported by a rural base. However, Julia Swieg deconstructs this myth in her book *Inside the Cuban Revolution*, in which she demonstrates that the success of the July 26\textsuperscript{th} Movement depended on its urban arm in Havana (the *llano* or plain) more than the official historiography gives credit. Nonetheless, the romantic notion of the bearded revolucionario in the Sierra Maestra dominates the official story.

**U.S. Media and Fidel Castro**

This association was one that was actively curated by Fidel Castro himself in partnership with the *New York Times*. In 1957 Castro invited correspondent Herbert Matthews to visit his rebel holdout in the Sierra Maestra mountains of eastern Cuba, resulting in a series of articles that “elevated his profile, gave him credibility abroad and helped propel his rise to power” (Beckett)\(^8\). The coverage included not only reporting but ample visuals in the accompanying photography that depicted the bearded rebels in their mountain hideout in a way that glorified the Revolution and perhaps played upon the same tropes of *el monte* and Cuban resistance that was discussed above.

In a newsreel created and distributed by the U.S. media following the Triumph of the Revolution in 1959, Castro and his crew of rebels are shown returning to the city, coming down from and out of the mountains to rejoin society, not unlike Ogún returning from his sojourn in *el monte*.\(^9\)

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\(^8\) [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/27/castro-claimed-he-tricked-the-new-york-times-but-we-may-be-the-real-dupes](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/27/castro-claimed-he-tricked-the-new-york-times-but-we-may-be-the-real-dupes)

Lastly, I would like to consider the *Hombre Nuevo* or New Man, as conceived of by Che Guevara in the years following the success of the revolution. In a 1965 letter to his Uruguayan friend Carlos Quijano, Guevara outlined his vision for an ideal society, one which depended on the reconstruction of “man” himself as a citizen. Part of what would define this New Man was sacrifice and work, in the interest of building this new society. Again, there is resonance here with the archetype of Ogún, orisha of work and builder of empires. I will revisit this resonance in Chapter 5 in my discussion of the film *De cierta manera*.

**Conclusion**

The figures of the *cimarrón*, the *mambi*, the *revolucionario*, and the *Hombre Nuevo* resonate with the figure of Ogún not only for the object of the machete which they are typically depicted carrying; they are united as well through the abstract qualities that Ogún represents—labor, industry, resistance, independence, and above all, the desire for liberty. These qualities are what make Ogún an “empire builder” and therefore an essential archetype to be evoked in the task of nation-building. Although Changó is often held up as the quintessential masculine oricha in Cuba and the epitome of male virility (who likewise counts Ochún amongst his lovers), it is Ogún as an archetype who most deeply resonates with the aims of the revolutionary project.
CHAPTER 3: OCHÚN – WATER OF MANY RIVERS,
GODDESS OF MANY NAMES

“Ochún is always the same and always different.
One cannot step into the same river twice.”

“A lo lejos se ve una gran claridad
Es el manto que brilla
De Mama Caridad”

She hovers celestial over stormy waters, an orb of golden light her crown; flanked by angels, she holds the holy babe in arms. Beneath her ample mantle, on the waves in the raging tempest below, a small boat carries three men who gaze up at her in pleading desperation. This ubiquitous image of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre adorns pendants, altars, prayer cards, candles, and keychains in Cuba and throughout the exile diaspora of “Greater Cuba” (Lopez). Officially recognized by the Catholic Church in 1916 as the patron saint of Cuba, “The Virgin of Charity—in her various local religious permutations—is arguably the most widespread object of Cuban religious devotion, both on the island and abroad” (Schmidt 8). As will be discussed later in the chapter, her spiritual role has been invoked for political purposes throughout Cuban history, by 19th century independence fighters and 21st century Cuban exiles alike, who have all seen in the Virgin a symbol of Cuba itself, whether it be a fully Catholic concept of her, or one

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10 Joseph M. Murphy, Yéyé Cachita: Ochún in a Cuban Mirror (p. 98)
11 Lyrics from a song in the Espiritismo tradition (Los Nani, Espiritistas ¡A Cantar!)
syncretized with Afro-Cuban spiritual beliefs, in which she represents the Yoruba water deity *Ochún*, goddess of love and wealth.

Figure 15. An homage to the *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, across the street from the *Muraleando* art collective in Havana (2017).

This chapter aims to explain who Ochún is and what she represents in the Cuban imaginary, and thus provide insight into her role as a mythic archetype in the pataki of Ogún and Ochún. However, it is impossible to talk about Ochún in Cuba without
examining her syncretism with the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. In Afro-Cuban religious circles, both figures are venerated as two faces of the same spiritual force. Yet, as I will explore in the following pages, “Ochún both is and is not La Caridad del Cobre” (Murphy 94). A dive into the history of the two figures in Cuba illuminates their divergences and convergences, and reveals much about religion, race, history and place in Cuba.

Although Ochún is venerated worldwide throughout the Yoruba diaspora, this chapter examines the particularities of her Cuban manifestation. I begin with a discussion of her African archetype in Yorubaland, her subsequent syncretization with the figure of the Virgin in Cuba, and the implications this has for racial ideologies related to Cuban national identity. It is through her connection to the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre that the figure of Ochún is most saliently tied to questions of Cuban national identity. I will end the chapter with a discussion of the Cuban portrayal of Ochún as a mulata, or mixed-race woman, and how this fits in with broader discourses about mulataje and Cuban national identity.

**From Òṣun in Africa to Ochún in Cuba**

Òṣun is a female water orisha, or deity, who originated in the Yoruba culture of West Africa but now is venerated around the world. The orthographic variations on her venerated [praise] name(s) across the globe (Ochún, Oxúm, Oshun, etc.) reflect variant spellings of essentially the same phonetic name (Óṣun in Yorùbá, in which the letter “ṣ” is pronounced like the English “sh”), and illustrate the diasporic nature of her existence,
by linguistically referencing the various New World colonies to which she was brought and cultivated local worship—primarily Cuba, Brazil, and Trinidad. In most of these places, she is syncretized with female deities from other imported faiths such as a Catholic Marian Virgin figure (in Cuba) and a Hindu river goddess (in Trinidad). The fluidity of her identity and naming practices reflects back on her riverine nature, as well as the worldwide ubiquity of fresh water goddesses which are undeniably, universally 'elemental' in their life-giving nature. This fluidity and universality lends itself to localized syncretisms.

In Cuba alone, she carries three different names, which operate as three facets of the same deity—Ochún is her Yoruba oricha name, la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre is her Catholic name, and Cachita is her colloquial name “on the street” (Schmidt). All three figures are typically depicted or imagined as women who are *mulata* (of mixed racial descent—African and European), and this racial identity is reflective of national discourses around race and the nation in Cuba. This chapter will examine the figures of Ochún and Virgen de la Caridad individually and in relation to each other, as well as their respective roles in articulating Cuban national identity. La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, as the patron saint of Cuba, has been mobilized symbolically in different ways and at different historical times in the service of Cuban identity. Her syncretism with the figure of Ochún is what ties the latter most saliently, if indirectly, to national origin myths and public discourse around national identity.

First and foremost, Òṣun is associated with rivers and fresh water. She is thought of as the sister of Yemayá, the deity who owns the salty waters of the ocean—the deity who, according to one of the fundamental *patakines*, “gifted” the river to Òṣun as her
home and domain; in other versions, Òṣùn turned into a river when she died. Although Òṣùn is the orisha of wealth her “proverbial richness,” as Lydia Cabrera writes, she owes to the “immensely, inexhaustibly rich” Yemayá (55). The name Yemayá is derived from a Yoruba name *Iyamoja* meaning “mother of the fishes” and alludes to Yemayá’s mythological and primordial role as the “mother” of all living beings on earth, much like the role the earth’s ocean plays in scientific narratives about the biological evolution of species on this planet.

In her own way, Yemayá’s younger sister Òṣùn is likewise associated with life-giving properties, those related to fresh or “sweet” water and to female fertility; it is Òṣùn who blesses devotees with children, and it is cool, fresh water (*omi tutu*) that holds healing properties for the “children” of Òṣùn (Ogungbile 197). The sweetness of Òṣùn’s waters is associated with love, wealth, and renewal, not unlike fresh water itself which is crucial to the survival of most (if not all?) life forms on earth. As Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford write of Òṣùn, “She is the ever-renewing source below the surface of the visible who makes renewal possible” (6). Her powers of renewal, as expressed in the Yoruba world view, are both literal (fertility, perpetuation of human life) and metaphorical (spiritual renewal).

**Òṣùn in Africa**

The Òṣùn who would become “Ochún” in Cuba originates in the Ijesa region of what is now Òṣùn State in Nigeria, West Africa, where the Òṣùn River flows. The name Òṣùn means “source” and is related to the Yoruba word *orisùn* which refers to “the source of a river, a people, or of children” (Murphy and Sanford, 2). An annual festival
in Òṣun’s honor occurs in the city of Osogbo, during which “the pact of mutual support between Òṣun and the city’s ọba (sovereign) is ceremonially renewed” (Murphy and Sanford, 4). In many Yoruba towns, she is believed to have turned into the Òṣun River itself long ago, and her festivals take place along its banks.

Òṣun, as a deity, is integral to the world origin story in Yoruba mythology, securing her place in the cosmic order as essential, much as water is to life. The Ifá divination verses tell the story of how the first orishas (called Odù) came down to earth from heaven. There were to be seventeen of them—sixteen male and the seventeenth a female, Òṣun. However, the sixteen other Odù neglected to bring Òṣun with them, and so their first mission failed. As the translated verse narrates it:

They never knew she was an “àjé”
When they were coming from heaven,
God chose all good things,
He also chose their keeper,
And this was a woman. (Abiodun 16)

When the sixteen Odù returned to heaven to consult the creator-god Olódùmarè as to why things were not working out as planned, he told them:

That one you left behind
If you do not bring her here,
There will be no solution to your problem,
If you continue this way,
You will always fail. (Abiodun 17)

Òṣun, who was now pregnant, refused to go with them unless the baby she was carrying was a male, as an expression of her displeasure at being forgotten and left behind. The
other sixteen Odù prayed she would deliver a male child, and their prayers were answered when she had a baby boy.

This baby boy was Èṣù, “the one who approves of, and bears sacrifices to, the òrisà,” the trickster and messenger orisha known as Elegguá in Cuba and Exú in Brazil. Èṣù’s full Yorùbá name is Èṣù Elegbara, and the differing names that “stuck” in Cuba versus Brazil merely reflect the retention of the first half of the full name as opposed to the second half. In Cuba, Elegbara was phonetically shortened and transformed to Elegguá.

Èṣù/Elegguá/Exú is one of the most important orishas in the pantheon; as the opener of the path, he is always saluted first in ceremonies, and provides the communicative link to all other orishas. That Òṣùn is his mother speaks to her power as “‘the vital source’…Without Òṣùn’s sanction, no healing can take place, no rain can fall, no plants can bear fruit, and no children can come into the world” (Abiodun 18). Furthermore, as a result of her role in this origin myth, Òṣùn is sometimes referred to as “the seventeenth odu.”

This same origin myth describes Òṣùn as a master hair-plaiter with a coral-beaded comb. This is significant in light of the centrality of the head in Yoruba ontology. The word ori means not only “head” in a literal sense, but represents the seat of one’s destiny and spiritual life path. Devotees of orisha worship are thought to each have a personal guardian orisha, who is characterized as “the owner of one’s head.” Obatalá, the orisha who according to Yoruba mythology created the first human beings out of clay, is also referred to as “the owner of all heads.” The practice of hair-plaiting thus not only beautifies the head—alluding to Òṣùn’s fabled vanity and beauty—it elevates the
spiritual aspects of one’s ori. However, as Michelle Gonzalez points out, “Hair plaiting in the Yoruba tradition goes beyond simple self-adornment. Instead, the appearance of one’s hair is intimately linked to one’s spiritual essence…Oshun’s association with hair has little to do with vanity, but functions instead as the bond between embodiment and spirituality” (88-89). I have been told by more than one santero to be very careful when choosing a haircutter or hairdresser, for this reason. Abiodun notes in regard to this dual nature of ori as a visual representation of one’s destiny and essence, “It is also primarily for this reason that Yorùbá will be reluctant to haggle over the charges of a hair-plaiter or hairdresser” (10-11). This is also why initiates must keep their heads covered, to protect their ori during the year-long spiritual purification process.

Ọṣun and Divination

Ọṣun holds another critical role in the spiritual realm as the owner of Eérindílógún, the sixteen cowrie shell divination system that is a counterpart to the Ifá divination system practiced by babalawo priests. The name Eérindílógún is derived from the Yorùbá word for “sixteen.” Whereas Ifá traditionally can only be practiced by specialized babalawo priests, the sixteen cowrie shell divination can be learned and practiced by any priests or priestesses initiated into the orisha tradition known in Cuba as Regla de Ocha. The babalawo follows a separate but related tradition known in Cuba as Regla de Ifá. Traditionally the babalawo is a male (baba meaning “father” in Yoruba), although a female counterpart called iyanifa (iya meaning “mother” and iyanifa meaning “mother/woman of Ifá”) exists both in Africa and in diaspora, and contemporary times have seen a resurgence in the number of female iyanifa and their perceived legitimacy.
worldwide. Nonetheless, there continues to be a gendered bias overall in the practice of 
*Ifá*. Because *Eérindilógun* is more simplified and can be practiced by priests with lesser qualifications, *Ifá* is generally considered to be a more authoritative and comprehensive form of divination. As one Cuban babalawo defined it for me, “*Ifá* is Knowledge, deified.” The babalawo acts in an interpretive role, and communicating with the divine through the oracle gives access to Truth and Knowledge itself.

Orúnmilà is the name of the orisha who governs the realm of *Ifá*; in Cuba his colors are represented by green and yellow, and his name is shortened to “Orula.” For this reason, babalawos in Cuba wear green and yellow caps on their heads in ritual contexts. Babalawos have been ordained and trained to communicate with Orúnmilà/Orula, who himself acts merely as a messenger of divine truth. The rite of passage ceremony known in Cuba as “mano Orula” involves a two-day long consultation with a babalawo or group of babalawos, and the client undergoing the ceremony ends with receiving a green and yellow beaded bracelet to wear on their left wrist, to represent Orula. This bracelet or ide is an outward symbol of faith and an amulet of sorts, not unlike a Christian wearing a necklace with a crucifix. Also, it is *only* in this ceremony that one can authoritatively learn who their guardian orisha is, the orisha who “owns their head” and of whom the person is considered “a child.” It must be revealed through the oracle of *Ifá*. When I underwent the mano Orula ceremony in 2015, in the moment before the babalawo asked the oracle who my guardian or “parent” orisha was, a more senior babalawo interjected and paused the ceremony to say to me, with emphasis: “Este es *único y irreversible!*”—this is a one-time and irreversible pronouncement. The authority
of Orula, interpreted through the actions and words of the babalawo, is absolute in this regard, and cannot be changed or questioned.

However, speaking about the relationship between Ifá versus Eérindilógún, Wande Abimbola asserts that “Ọṣun has much more to do with the origins of Ifá divination than the babalawo (Ifá priests) are ready to admit…the entire divination system of Ifá started from Ọṣun from whom it got to Orúnmilà and not the other way around” (141). As a basis for this claim he cites verses of Ifá that give hints to that effect, despite other contradictory verses that tell the story of Orúnmilà creating the sixteen-cowry divination system and giving it to Ọṣun as a reward for saving his life. In some of these verses, the collective body of Ifá knowledge is referred to as a “bag of wisdom,” and in some versions Ọṣun finds this “bag of wisdom” and gives it to Orúnmilà (Abimbola 149).

In Cuba, the name Eérindilógún has been shortened to dilogún, and according to Ysamur M. Flores-Peña, a number of adaptive changes to the practice happened in Cuba, largely because of the scarcity of babalawos among the enslaved Yoruba population. As a result, the dilogún gained primacy in the absence of true Ifá divination practices, as an adaptive stand-in that was also based on the same corpus of moral teachings. As the creolized Lucumi identity became consolidated in Cuba, “Lucumi created a new religion out of the parallel recollections of Congo and Yorùbá cults, which were later reunited by the Ifá epistemology” (213). Post-emancipation, in the late 1800s, Yoruba people in Cuba actively sought to bring Ifá to the island while simultaneously reforming and unifying traditions like dilogún, changes which “were necessary to make the system a viable tool for worship and social identity” (215). Although the tension between the two
divination systems remains, marked by gender and ritual status, what is undeniable is that Òṣun is intimately, if in some cases indirectly, tied to both of these practices of Yoruba-derived divination.

Òṣun and Political Power

Through her power to perpetuate human life, she unifies the ancestors, the living and the unborn. Within the Yoruba worldview, male and female authority “evolve from the same divine force” and Òṣun, as the archetypal mother figure and source of human life, symbolizes “a watery, ever-flowing connection between physical life and ancestral life” (Badejo 130). In Africa, Òṣun is both explicitly and implicitly linked to women’s political power. The Ijesa Empire “has a history of women sovereigns, counting at least five women rulers among the thirty-nine Owá whose names are known” (Murphy and Sanford, 5). Although the Yoruba word ọba is usually translated into “king,” Rowland Abiodun points out that it is in fact not a gender-specific term (21). Furthermore, the sociopolitical power of the ọba only exists with Òṣun’s cosmic consent, in keeping with Yoruba concepts of balance and reciprocity.

Òṣun is also the leader of the Àjé, who are people in the community (particularly elderly women) who use power secretly. They are referred to as “The Mothers” and imagined as birds, and “the ọba rules with the power of the Mothers or under their watchful scrutiny” (Murphy and Sanford, 6). The word Àjé is sometimes incorrectly translated as “witches,” perhaps because they are regarded with fear; “in many social, religious, and political gatherings, men endeavor to placate ‘our mothers’ and to pray to them to use their powers for the good of society” (Abiodun, 19). The Mothers possess
*eyẹ* or “bird power,” and this is represented in the birds that frequently adorn Yoruba crowns.

Besides the power to bestow life, Òṣùn is connected to the healing arts. It is thought that cool water (*omi tutu*) itself has the power to heal sick bodies. Water is Òṣùn’s main curative agent, and “used ritually, water is believed to effect harmony and peace, to eliminate tension, and reduce heat” (Abiodun, 25).

While this benevolent healing force is integral to Òṣùn, she is also capable of vengeance and destruction, in the same way that a life-giving river can turn deadly in a torrential flash-flood. This phenomenon of having different facets or faces is common to most orishas; they are human-like in their capacity to change moods, to respond with pleasure or displeasure.

**Honey as Òṣùn’s weapon of choice**

One of Òṣùn’s quintessential symbols is honey, which is referred to as *oyin* in the Yoruba language, and Hispanicized to “*oñí*” in Cuban Lucumí speech. Honey is given to Òṣùn as an offering, at times poured directly into the river itself. Honey represents a cluster of associations that tie it to Òṣùn: the sweetness of honey is akin to that of fresh (or “sweet”) water when compared to the salty ocean waters of her sister Yemayá; the golden color of honey evokes the gold of wealth; the sweet taste of honey is a physical sensation not unlike the metaphorical sweetness of love.

One Cuban santera whom I asked about the symbolism of honey as it relates to Ochún replied that it signifies not only sweetness (*dulzura*) but intelligence (*inteligencia*). And indeed, in the patakí of Ochún and Ogún that is the focus of this dissertation, she
uses honey as a tool or “weapon” of sorts to lure him out of his auto-exile. The santera told me that prior to tasting Ochún’s honey, Ogún knew only bitterness and the drive to work. To taste the honey Ochún placed on his lips was to gain knowledge of the sweetness that exists in the world, and to awaken a desire within him to obtain it and have it for himself. In some ways this myth presents a counternarrative to the Christian or European parable of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, where the sweetness of women’s knowledge (in the form of a forbidden fruit) is a source of salvation rather than damnation. While they are in the lush “garden” of el monte, the female Ochún gives the male Ogún a taste of sweetness that transforms his consciousness, and it leads to the salvation not only of him but of society as a whole.

Brass and Òṣùn: Lady of a Fine Mettle

Òṣùn is wealthy enough to adorn herself with gold, but the only metal she truly “owns,” in the spiritual sense, is brass.

Brass “belongs” to Òṣùn and many ritual objects dedicated to her are made of brass, such as brass bangles worn on the wrists of her devotees. Shrines to Òṣùn in Nigeria are adorned with brass objects like bangles and anthropomorphic figurines, the latter of which are carried to the river in a covered calabash during her annual festival in Osogbo. “The popular saying Ide ni apebo Òṣùn, meaning ‘brass is collectively worshiped as Osun’ sums up the symbolism of brass objects in the Osun worship context” (Adepegba 102). The word ide means “brass” in Yorùbá. In the aforementioned origin myth in which Òṣùn is the seventeenth odu or primordial deity, “It was when they were inviting her to join them as God directed that she was addressed by the male deities
as *A rí pepe kó ide sí*, which is, ‘She that has a shelf to keep brass’” (ibid 107). The fact that this title for Òṣun is invoked in the Yoruba origin myth attests to both the symbolic and literal value of brass not only in Yoruba culture, but in West African culture in general.

A further examination of the historic role of brass in West Africa reveals insights into the connections between Òṣun and brass. Copper and its alloys (brass is an alloy of copper and zinc) have long held economic and symbolic significance in sub-Saharan West Africa, and historically formed one of the staple imports into the region since at least the tenth century. Although “Easily worked iron ores are found widely distributed throughout West Africa,” in addition to the region being “richly endowed with gold,” copper in its natural state is rare in West Africa. As such, for centuries copper was imported from as far away as Romania and valued as a precious commodity (Herbert 179). Other sources of copper imported into West Africa (often through the North African caravan trade) include northwestern Mauritania, southern Morocco, and Central Europe.

Copper was widely used as a medium of exchange in Africa, and is mentioned as such in the historical record dating back to at least the eleventh century (Hebert 181). Brass is valued not only for its regional scarcity but for its enduring quality and resistance to rust, a characteristic it shares with lead (which is respectively associated spiritually with the orisha Obatalá). Interestingly, there is no word for zinc in the Yoruba language, leading Adepegba to conclude, “Hence brass used to be obtained pre-mixed and any alloy containing copper must have been obtained from outside Yorubaland” (111). Nonetheless, “African peoples themselves have generally made a clear distinction
between ‘red’ copper, that is, copper in its pure form, and ‘yellow’ copper or brass…

Though the term ‘bronze’ is often used, true bronze (an alloy of copper and tin) is rarely found in Africa” (Hebert 180-181).

Beyond their use as a medium of exchange, the other main uses of copper and brass in West Africa reflect their symbolic and spiritual qualities, including “as objects of personal adornment, as emblems of status and kingship, and as objects of cult in a narrower sense” (Hebert 181). Objects crafted from copper or brass include rings, bracelets, earrings, and necklaces, as well as larger cast figurines and bells. Copper is spiritually associated with water deities in varied African cultures, apart from the Yoruba and Osun; “along the Middle Niger copper is explicitly linked with the génie de l’eau and with myths of creation, while in the Niger Delta brass is frequently associated with the water spirits” (ibid. 194). In many African cultures, copper was considered to have amuletic or magical properties such as encouraging fertility or warding off danger (ibid. 183).

One final connection between Osun and copper is bells, which are used to summon her ritually, and whose sound is frequently compared to Osun’s laugh (at least in Cuba). Throughout the world, bells have traditionally been made out of bronze, which is an alloy of copper and tin. (Brass is typically too soft an alloy to use for bellmaking, but the addition of tin in bronze is what hardens it and makes it ideal for bells. So-called “bell metal” is a high-tin alloy of copper and tin.) However, due to the aforementioned scarcity of true bronze, bells are frequently made of brass. Brass bells typically adorn the lead drum of the Yoruba ensemble of bata drums, wrapped in a circular form called a saworo or saworoide surrounding the larger head (or skin) of the largest drum. “The Oshun
connection is furthered endorsed by the use of brass bells (saworo; see Fig. 1) that adorn the lead drum of the ensemble. Although brass is the emblematic metal of Oshun devotion, the use of the bells is fundamentally a protection against witchcraft and other forms of spiritually destabilizing forces (Adegbite 1991) that could adversely affect the drums’ potency in ritual settings” (Marcuzzi 33).

Patroness of Love, Sensuality, and Seduction

The domain of love, romance, sensuality and seduction belongs to Ochún, as reflected not only in the patakines recounting her many love affairs with other orishas, but in her spiritual capacity as the orisha who brings love into the lives of her believers. She is a master seductress (as the pataki of her and Ogún so clearly illustrates), but, as Lydia Cabrera wrote:

Pues sería error pensar que Ochún es ‘panchanga’ en todo tiempo, y no obstante su divinidad, una alegre y despreocupada mujer de la vida. Subrayando sólo su liviandad se comete el pecado de faltarle al respeto, sobre todo si no se entiende, como nos recalcó un viejo adorador de Ochún, ‘que su putería es sagrada.’ (1996:117-118)

(It would be a mistake to think that Ochún is “panchanga” [prostitute] all the time, and despite her divinity a cheerful and unconcerned public woman. [By] emphasizing her folly one can disrespect her, by not realizing as an old worshiper of Ochún said, “her hookery is sacred.”) (translation Ysamur Flores-Peña 117)

There is both an explicit and implicit link between Ochún’s power as a master in the arts of love and seduction, and her power to grant fertility and childbirth to the bodies of women. This link is what elevates her sensuality from the merely profane and carnal, to the sacred and mysterious power inherent in the female body’s ability to bring forth new life. Likewise, as we will see in Chapter 4 in the analysis of the pataki of her and Ogún,
she frequently employs these powers of cunning seduction toward the salvation of humanity as a whole, and not for the mere pursuit of carnal pleasures. There is deep wisdom in her sexual powers.

Although the literature related to Òṣun in Africa does also explicitly define her as a deity who reigns over the realms of love and fertility, the literature concerning Ochún in Cuba seems to sexualize her more. This also seems to be connected to the depiction, in Cuba, of Ochún as a mulata or mixed race woman, an archetype that has sexual connotations in the colonial and post-colonial New World context of Cuba. As will be discussed at the end of the chapter, the very nature of the mulata being the result of sexual union between black and white (or in the context of slavery, the rape of black women by white men) marks the mulata as sexual. Later, I will ponder the significance of Ochún being conceived of as mulata in Cuba, and interrogate the sexual and social politics entangled in such a conception of her.

**Becoming Ochún in Cuba**

Isabel Castellano writes generally of the Afro-Cuban orichas that “they are multi-vocal, polysemous categories that express a multiplicity of often contradictory meanings… orichas, for the most part, are not mere individuals, but sets of personalities or ‘paths’ (caminos) that refer to particular domains of human experience” (34). Michelle A. Gonzalez explains that “[t]o say that an orisha has many paths is to say that she or he has many journeys within her or him. Orishas are paths themselves and they follow paths” (89). All orichas consist of a constellation of signs and symbols that may act alone or in concert. For example, Ochún is manifested alike in the physical river itself, as much
as the tinkling brass bell used to summon her from its depths, or in the yellow sunflowers and honey given to her as offerings. Or, most powerfully, Ochún is manifested through the blessing of fertility and the miracle of childbirth. As Wande Abimbola puts it, “in this sense, Ôsun is the icon not only of women, but of all creation” (152). Without her, humans would be incapable of perpetuating human life.

All orishas have multiple caminos or paths, which are sometimes referred to as varied “avatars” of the same deity. Ochún is no exception; her five ritually recognized caminos in Cuba illustrate her varied facets—representing varied ages of womanhood (girlhood, motherhood, old age), varied locations in the river itself (where the rivers meet the ocean, in the waterfalls, in the depths of the river). She has other caminos outside of the five ritually recognized ones, and together they display her varied facets, moods, and characteristics as an orisha.

Ochún Yeyé Moró or Yeyé Kari is “the most widely known camino, and significantly the only one disseminated in the popular imagination” (Poey 55). Lydia Cabrera describes Ochún Yeyé Moró or Yeyé Kari as “la más alegre, coqueta y disipada de todas. Continuamente está de juerga. Pachanga. Se pinta, se mira en el espejo, se perfuma” (the most joyful, coquettish, and outgoing of all. She is always partying. She makes herself up, looks at herself in the mirror, puts on perfume) (Cabrera 1996:70). Poey adds, “it is through this camino that she is known as ramera, or whore” (55).

Other caminos of Ochún illustrate a more complex array of womanly characteristics, or what Cabrera refers to as the “aspectos serios de la diosa” (serious aspects of the goddess) (70). Ochún Yumú is an old woman who lives in the depths of the river. The richest of all Ochúns, she is “so deaf that the faithful must ring a large bell to
make themselves heard” (Castellanos 35). Ochún Ibú-Akuaro lives at the point where rivers meet the ocean (i.e., where Ochún and Yemayá meet). Ochún Ololodi, Orunmila’s wife, rules over waterfalls and is a homemaker skilled in sewing and embroidering. Ochún Ibú-Kolé is affiliated with the buzzard and is “a powerful sorcerer who relies on the buzzard to bring her carrion to eat” (ibid.). Ochún Ibú-Dokó is the wife of Oricha-Oko and “the patroness of the sexual act” (ibid.).

Ochún’s Syncretism with La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre

It is important to note that although the figure of La Caridad del Cobre is widely associated with Ochún in contemporary Cuba and beyond, she originated independently from the Yoruba figure and in some religious circles, such as the greater Cuban diaspora in Miami, she has been contested as a strictly Catholic (though still distinctly Cuban) figure. I will discuss the latter phenomenon in Miami after a broader discussion of the more commonly accepted syncretic relationship between the two figures.

Although narratives of diasporic syncretism tend to posit the “new” and “old” not only geographically but in time as well (Old World vs. New World, e.g.) – the deity originated in X place but transformed into something hybrid in Y place – the figure of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre actually materialized in Cuba centuries before the wave of 19th century Yoruba captives who popularized orisha worship on the island. And, as Jalane D. Schmidt points out, their specific geographic origins on the island are divergent as well: the veneration of Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre originated in eastern Cuba, in the Oriente region, whereas orisha traditions historically blossomed in western Cuba, among the enslaved populations in the areas of Havana and Matanzas. The two
figures, interestingly enough, are born out of two distinct historical phases of slavery in Cuba – copper, and then sugar – and the global economies of people and commodities (and people as commodities) that circulated as a result, landing and taking root in Cuba.

A close examination of the history of the syncretization of the two figures subverts some of the assumptions around their association that continue have broad cultural currency today. For example, Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s depiction of the cult of the virgin in 17th century Cuba in his classic work *The Repeating Island* (1996) reifies an anachronistic version of events. In telling the story of the appearance of the Virgin in colonial Cuba, he writes:

*Ave Maria*, the slaves at the El Prado mines repeated aloud, and quickly, in an undertone that the priest could not hear, they added: *Oshun Yeye*. For that miraculous altar image was for them one of the most conspicuous *orishas* of the Yoruba pantheon (15).

Yet, as historian Elena Diaz writes, “[t]he present identification of Our Lady of Charity with the Cuban Yoruba deity Ochún in the Afro-Cuban religion of Santería and in Cuban folklore in general is a phenomenon of the mid- to late nineteenth century, and in the Oriente region even later” (21). This corresponds with the historical fact that the majority of enslaved Yoruba people arrived in Cuba during the first half of the nineteenth century, and primarily in western Cuba in the ports of Havana and Matanzas.

The figure of la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre is one that is truly indigenous to Cuba. What the historical record reveals is a cult of Marian devotion that emerged in a localized way in the copper mining region in the easternmost province of Oriente in the early 17th century. Over the ensuing decades the cult of this particular virgin spread westward to other parts of Cuba, though it is recognized as having been formed in the
east, and her shrine remains in the town of Cobre in Oriente, where to this day her devotees make pilgrimage from not only other parts of the island, but from around the world.

Figure 16. *La Virgen de la Caridad.*
The image described at the beginning of this chapter, of the Virgin hovering in the skies over a stormy sea, above a boat holding three men, visually tells the Virgin’s origin story. The historical record indicates that she first appeared in Oriente, the eastern part of Cuba, in the year 1612. Three men in a boat in the Bay of Nipe—los tres Juanes (the three Juans) – were en route to a nearby salt mine when they came upon a wooden object floating in the water, which from a distance looked like a bird. On closer inspection, it was a wooden effigy of the virgin inscribed with the words “I am the Virgin of Charity.” Miraculously, her clothing was dry, despite her having seemingly emerged from the sea. They brought her back to their village of El Cobre, a small Spanish settlement next to copper mines for which the town was named. The three men were said to be of African and indigenous origin, and enslaved workers in the mines.

As with many origin myths that are based on factual historical occurrences, centuries of retelling invariably result in added embellishments and the blurring or outright inventing of details. The calm waters became stormier, the small wooden object morphed into the great glowing Virgen in the sky, the ethnicities of the three men were adjusted to match a politically correct vision of the multiracial nation. Fortunately, a document discovered in 1973 in the archives of Seville helped to cast some clarity to the facts. The document is a testimony made before a notary in 1687 by one of the original “Juanes” who first encountered the Virgin in 1612, an African enslaved man named Juan Moreno. In his official testimony, 75 years after the fact, he gave a deposition to officials of the Catholic Church in Santiago de Cuba, describing his role in “having found (hallado) Our Lady of Charity,” although the clerics who transcribed his testimony
described the event as “an ‘Aparición’—the more commonly recorded Marian apparition phenomena in which an ephemeral Virgin is reported to have appeared to and even spoken with select seers” (Schmidt 18). Shortly after Juan Moreno and his two companions, the Indian brothers Rodrigo de Joyos and Juan de Joyos, brought the effigy of the Virgin back to El Cobre, “the Virgin made known, by the miraculous illumination of three lights shining from on high on three successive nights, that she preferred for her shrine to be located on Mine Hill” (ibid.).

The appearance of the Virgin in Cuba occurred at a time when Marian traditions flourished throughout the Catholic world, and was not in and of itself an unusual occurrence. The cult of Mary and her associated miracles and apparitions had spread through Western Christendom in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, growing in popularity and “coloniz[ing] pagan sites,” such that “by the end of the fifteenth century, for example, a wide network of Marian shrines was firmly in place throughout Spain” (Diaz 96). Marian traditions were transplanted to the New World through Spanish colonization and evangelization, with the conquistadors often strategically placing Marian shrines on top of pre-Columbian sacred sites, adapting her miraculous lore to indigenous contexts. Another notable New World example of this phenomenon is the Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexico.

At the time of her appearance, “In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the cult of the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre was simply one miraculous saint and shrine among many in Cuba,” however, given “the low social status of her primary devotees, the Virgin of Charity was an unlikely Marian advocation to achieve island-wide prominence”
(Schmidt 23). A more likely candidate for patron saint of the island would have been the Lady of Assumption, patron of the first city founded in Cuba, Baracoa, in 1511 (Cueto).

The story of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre stands out from others in that it was recorded in official testimony as an hallazgo or “finding” of a miraculous object, and not an aparición like that of other Marian figures such as the Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexico. As opposed to an apparition or other “vision” that was not tangible, it was a material object that was encountered and subsequently venerated as sacred. This fact shaped the history of the figure of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, as her cult and the politics that accompanied it were centered around a physical object, rather than merely an abstract idea.

Patroness of the Cobreros

The Virgin’s original community of devotees were mostly indigenous Cubans, enslaved Africans, and creole black and mulato (Spanish and African) who worked in the mines of El Cobre. Further undermining the notion that the Virgen was in any way initially tied to the Yoruba Òṣun in the minds of her early devotees, both Diaz and Schmidt point out that the enslaved Africans at the mines of Cobre were primarily of Congo/Angolan origin – a great distance from Yorubaland in the African homeland. People from the Congo/Angola region “had long practiced copper mining in parts of their homeland” and were enslaved to apply these skills in a New World setting (Díaz 48). While the popular form of Roman Catholicism as practiced by the Cobreros likely included influences in the form of beliefs and practices from both the indigenous and African roots of its practitioners, the explicit link with the Yoruba Òṣun was likely not
among them, and didn’t become explicit until later centuries, and in a completely different region of Cuba, in the western side of the island.

Another important historical fact to note is that Catholicism had arrived in the Congo region of Africa in the 15th century with the Portuguese, and was already being practiced by people of Congo origin in Africa prior to their forced displacement to the New World in the slave trade. Citing the example of an enslaved African man listed in the slave inventory records of El Cobre with the Portuguese surname “Sossa,” Díaz suggests this “may have reflected baptism in Angola even before enslavement” (45). Therefore, it is possible that the enslaved people of Congo origin who made up a significant portion of the population of Cobreros were already predisposed to embrace a Marian figure as their spiritual patroness and protector.

In the late 17th century ownership of the copper mines and the enslaved miners who worked them transferred from a private owner to the King of Spain. As a result, the enslaved population at El Cobre was unique in that they were considered “royal slaves,” direct property of the king of Spain, as were the mines in which they were forced to labor. Politically, on multiple occasions the enslaved community at El Cobre used its royal status to petition for more favorable conditions, up to and including freedom from bondage. Contemporary sources also indicate that the colonial government and other free residents of the region likewise regarded them as “different” from normal, privately owned slaves. In at least one direct petition written to the King of Spain, the Virgen was invoked by name to bolster the Cobreros case. Thus, “The consolidation of the royal slaves of El Cobre as a pueblo went hand in hand with the institutionalization and expansion of a local Marian tradition during the late seventeenth century,” as the royal
slaves “claimed this Virgin patroness and protectress of their budding community” (Diaz 95).

From Patroness of Cobre to Patroness of Cuba

The cult of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre spread westward on the island of Cuba throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. In 1681 the synod in Santiago approved a cofradía in Havana named “Nuestra Señora de la Caridad” (Cueto). Her presence was first recorded in the town of Puerto Príncipe (now Camagüey) in 1699, and in 1734 a church was built there in her honor. She first left the island of Cuba in 1731, when a novena to her was published in Mexico. By 1835, lodging for eastward-bound pilgrims to El Cobre was opened in Camagüey, providing a resting spot for those making the pilgrimage to her shrine.

Did the Yoruba captives brought to Cuba in the 19th century see in the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre an association with the orisha Òṣùn because of the elementary connection between brass and copper? Or was that merely one of several attributes of the Virgen that aligned with their conception of Òṣùn? Lydia Cabrera wrote in her 1980 book *Yemayá y Ochún*:

_Porque el cobre originalmente le pertenecía, y era dadívosa y complaciente, los lucumí la identificaron con Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre, que se adoraba en la iglesia parroquial de la villa del Cobre, en zona abundante en minas de ese metal, a cuatro leguas de la ciudad de Santiago de Cuba (56)._

(Because copper originally belonged to her, and she was generous and willing, the Lucumi identified her with Our Lady of Charity of Copper, which was worshiped in the parish church of the town of El Cobre, in an area abundant in mines of that metal, four leagues from the city of Santiago de Cuba.)
This phrasing by Cabrera would seem to acknowledge the preexistence and preeminence of the Virgin on the island prior to the arrival of the enslaved Yoruba/Lucumi.

The cult of the Virgin was embraced by Cubans of all social statuses, and not only the enslaved sectors of society. As such, the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre has been mobilized politically as a national symbol at multiple points in Cuban history. In 1868, at the start of the first War of Independence, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes famously freed his slaves in the “Grito de Yara” that sparked the conflict, yet before leading them into battle he first took them to Cobre to pray before the Virgen de la Caridad. She served as a spiritual anchor and patroness of the fight for Cuban independence, and it was common for independence fighters to wear or carry estampitas with her image. As the Cuban independence fighters were referred to as mambises, she was given the moniker “la Virgen Mambisa.” She took on new power as an indigenous symbol of Cuba in the fight against Spanish dominance. Furthermore, Michelle Gonzalez writes:

Much of her narrative and iconographic transformation occurred during Cuba’s wars of independence from Spain, when she rose in prominence as a national symbol. La Caridad, therefore, is not only a symbol of Cuban identity; she represents the Cuban process of identity-making, Cuban’s self-construction as they articulated a distinctive identity from Spain. (79)

In Cachita’s Streets: The Virgin of Charity, Race, and Revolution in Cuba author Jalane D. Schmidt traces this evolution, focusing in particular on public processions in which the Virgin has been removed from her sanctuary and paraded through the streets in various times and places throughout Cuban history. She argues that these public
processions and festivals have played an integral role in constructing and solidifying not only devotion to the Virgin but her identification as a national Cuban symbol.

The role of the Catholic Church (i.e. the Vatican) and visits or involvements by the Pope himself has served to legitimize her power as a symbol. As mentioned earlier, the Virgen de la Caridad was officially recognized by the Church as the patron saint of Cuba in 1916. During the Republican period, prior to the repression of religion that occurred after the Cuban Revolution, the Virgin, or “Cachita” (a nickname for “Caridad”) as she is colloquially known, was a vibrant and regular presence on her annual day of celebration. With the triumph of the revolution in 1959, despite Catholics’ initial attempts to continue these practices they grew to be at odds with the Marxist ideology adopted by the new government, and public displays of devotion were ultimately repressed and phased out by 1961 or 1962, after which point many lay Catholics had fled the island anyway.

Post-revolution, Cubans who had fled to Miami reestablished her devotion in exile, and a duplicate of the original was dramatically smuggled out of Havana on her feast day of September 8, in the year 1961. Several years later a new shrine to her, La Ermita, was built in Miami, where it continues to be a site of pilgrimage, practice of devotion, as well as identity negotiation. Race plays a role in this negotiation, heightened by the fact that the initial waves of Cuban exiles to Miami were white, and less likely to practice orisha worship than a more “pure” Catholicism. Although the association between the figure of the Virgin and that of Ochún remains strong for many who visit La Ermita, the institution itself has made efforts to separate the two. Gonzalez writes, “Pamphlets are distributed inside La Ermita to ‘rectify’ certain ‘confusions’ that have
occurred as a result of improper evangelization” (92). Furthermore, “What these pamphlets circulate is a whitewashed and misleading account of La Caridad’s history. The African roots of the devotion, grounded in the slave community of Cobre, are entirely written out of these histories” (93). However, as Thomas Tweed illustrates in his book *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami*, many lay visitors have resisted these efforts by the clergy, and continue to see in La Ermita a syncretic symbol of the African orisha Ochún. Subsequent waves of Cuban exiles to Miami that were more racially diverse, and more likely to practice Afro-Cuban religions, have heightened this tension.

In 1998, a visit to the island by Pope John Paul II brought the Virgin out from her sanctuary once again, and religious processions in her honor began to be permitted in public again. In the same way that the drastic social changes of the Special Period facilitated the flourishing and mainstream acceptance of the practice of Afro-Cuban religions, they also facilitated the re-introduction of La Cachita as a public presence in the streets of Cuba. In 2012 Pope Benedict XVI made a visit to Cuba, during which the original image was brought to the Plaza de la Revolución for a pontifical Mass attended by thousands, after which the Pope followed her back to her home in Oriente.

What does it mean that Ochun in Cuba is mulata?

Much has been written about the figure of the *mulata* as a symbol of Cuba and as a product of a colonial society structured by racialized slavery (Kutzinski, Fraunhar). Alison Fraunhar writes of “the paradoxical, impossible subjectivity of the mulata as a sign of Cuba” and dates the production and consumption of her image back to an 1881
lithograph by Victor Patricio de Landaluze called *Mulata de Rumbo* (5). In this image, the female subject gazes back coyly at the assumed male observer. Her body language, interestingly, matches that of 21st century folkloric dancers who “perform” Ochún on stage: one hand propped suggestively on her hip, her head turned slightly to look over her shoulder; in her other hand she holds a fan, the quintessential feminine “prop” and flirtation device.
Figure 17. Victor Patricio de Landaluze. *Mulata del Rumbo*, 1881.
This image of la mulata emerged in the 19th century popular culture as part of a cast of characters produced by the racialized system of slavery and its attendant social order. The artistic movement of costumbrismo led to visual depictions of Cuba’s colonial racial order, whereas the performance and popularity of the genre teatro bufo helped to create and perpetuate these racialized tropes. The mulata was one of a cast of characters created by Cuban colonial society and cemented through teatro bufo, joined by the negrito and the gallego, who likewise enacted racialized tropes. The mulata was always a sexualized figure: “…European enough to be visible and beautiful to the white male subject, and African enough to be typologized as sexual, primitive, desirable, and available” (Fraunhar 4).

The image of the mulata often adorned marquillas cigarreras, which were chromolithographs used to package and advertise cigarettes, and which visually used her as a representation of the nation. Popular Cuban culture abounds with works of literature such as Cirilo Villaverde’s novel Cecilia Valdés o la Loma del Angel “in which the identification of the mulata with the nation is made explicitly clear” (Fraunhar 25).

Much has been written about the mulato/a body as a site of the negotiation and enactment of racial and gender ideologies, serving as a metaphor for the social body. Gender and sexuality play a key role in these discourses of race, and in particular, racial mixing. The concept of mestizaje is itself a (re)productive and (pro)creative one, and inherent in its conception is the notion of sexual union. Whether the cause of the encounter between races is one of “exalted love”, as José Vasconcelos would have it, or violation and rape, as Vera Kutzinski would characterize it, this union marks a point of origin from which the negotiation between racialized bodies begins.
Onto the black or brown body are projected two primal emotions: fear and desire. Fear—of physical power, sexual power, spiritual power—coexists with desire for the same. This is manifested not only in the language used to describe black bodies, such as in the poetry of Nicolás Guillén, but in the efforts to control the spatial dimensions of their movement—whether it is by containment and “folkloricization” of dance or policies and attitudes around immigration and movement across national borders.

Vera Kutzinski’s chapter “Sublime Masculinity” in the book Sugar’s Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism examines representations of the black and mulata female body in Cuban literature. She describes the black woman as “the one in whose violated body the two races actually met” and the mulata as “the vessel in which the body politic is (man)-made and (woman)-unmade” (164). As a mixed-race woman, the mulata embodies the ideal of harmonious racial integration, although this ideal masks the power dynamics and violent history that resulted in her birth. Perhaps by reimagining the history that produced her, “The mulata is the inscription of a desire for cultural synthesis upon a field of sociopolitical contingencies that is accordingly distorted.” (165) Although la mulata plays a central role in the genesis of the “new race” (and thus, the new nation), she holds no authorial role in the process. She is symbolically a mere vessel for sociopolitical imagining and literally a body whose primary social function is reproductive. In Guillen’s poem “Madrigal,” he implies that “these female bodies know what it means to be Cuban, even if their minds do not” with these words: “Your womb knows more than your head.” (Kutzinski 176). The whole of her wisdom lies in her reproductive and sexual function, a primal wisdom that dwells in her body, perhaps a wisdom that her weak intellect cannot even comprehend.
At the same time that the *mulata* is rendered an object, her body is fetishized and gazed upon as an object of desire. Literature abounds with testaments to the sexual desirability of *la mulata*, often reducing her presence on the page to a collection of body parts that mark her as a woman—hips, waist, buttocks. Quoting Arrom, she writes, “for the Negro, and for good reason, the female of the species is a compound of shoulders and buttocks joined by a navel in continuous circling motion” (185). Her range of physical expression is confined to those parts of her body that make her desirable to men, which is also where her reproductive power lies. The only hint of agency and subjectivity in the literature Kutzinski presents is itself contained in a sexualized part of her body: “a desire for vengeance that your rump keeps alive” (197). The desire for vengeance referred to here is against the white man who raped her. With no voice, she must speak with her “rump”.

The theme of dance emerges as an important element in the discourse around black bodies, drawing on essentialist notions of innate rhythm. This is voiced by Vasconcelos, for whom “the drop put in our blood by the Black” makes the mestizo “eager for sensual joy, intoxicated with dances and unbridled lust” (22). Likewise, in the literature that Kutzinkski reviews, the idea of black bodies as dancing bodies is ever present. Rhythm is equated with Africa. “What racially marks these bodies, male and female, are the musical rhythms their dancing translates into sight. They are visually displaced and dismembered by these rhythms” (182) Within this discourse, the mark of *la mulata* is a silenced and objectified body, and therefore, a silenced self.
**Ochún on Film**

Gloria Rolando’s film which depicts the *patakí* in question is perhaps the most vivid and salient example of Ochún in Cuban cinema. Although the actual title of the film in English is *Oggun: An Eternal Presence*, the most viewed version on YouTube is uploaded under the title “Ochún saca a Oggún del Monte,” underscoring her centrality in the narrative. Rolando makes use of her visual attributes: river, honey, fan (adorned with peacock feathers), ample use of the color yellow. Aurally, we hear her laugh, that is bell-like, and we also hear bells and wind chimes (which signal honey—more on this in Chapter 4) as part of the soundtrack that accompanies her.

Whereas Rolando’s depiction takes place in the ethereal, mythic and timeless realm of the orishas, seemingly unconnected to Cuban daily life, other film depictions reflect the image of the *mulata* as described above. The 1992 film *La última rumba de Papá Montero* (The Last Rumba of Papa Montero) places the characters of the orishas Ochún, Changó, and Elegguá in 1930s urban Havana. Ochún is transformed into a quintessential *rumbera*, dressed in bright yellow frills, dancing, flirting, and surrounded by admiring men.
Figure 18. Sonia de la Caridad in *La ultima rumba de Papá Montero*. Her dance movements mimic the action of Ochún putting on her bracelets, and the yellow of her dress evokes Ochún.

**Conclusion**

In Cuba, Ochún has come to represent, and be represented by, a cluster of associations that interpenetrate multiple realms: the religious, the cultural, and the national. Her fluidity as an archetype allows for these sometime contradicting notions of her to coexist. Although Ochún herself is not a symbol of Cuba per se, her connections to the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre and the trope of the *mulata* as symbol of Cuba, indirectly tie her to concepts of the Cuban nation.
In the literature on orishas, both Ogún and Ochún are described as “empire-builders,” albeit with very different personalities and skill sets through which they work (Barnes 1997). The next chapter will examine the patakí that brings these two “empire-builders” together, and discuss the implications of this patakí as an allegory for the nation of Cuba.
CHAPTER 4: “PERO OCHÚN FUE MÁS INTELIGENTE” – VERSIONS OF THE PATAKÍ AND ITS MEANING(S)

“Los patakines te cuentan las historias de los dioses Yoruba... Historias del amor, de luchas entre los dioses, y fabulas. Los patakines tienen también un significado dentro de la religión Yoruba. Esos significados son, mas o menos, lo que te narra la vida que el iniciado va a tener a través de los años dentro de la religión Yoruba...
...Te puedo hablar también de un patakín de Ogún...

“The patakines tell the stories of the Yoruba gods... Love stories, struggles among gods, and fables. The patakines also have a meaning in the Yoruba religion. These meanings, more or less, narrate the life the initiated will lead [throughout one’s years] within the Yoruba religion...
...I can also tell you a patakín about Ogún…”

— Lázaro Ros

Thus begins Lázaro Ros’s narration of the patakí of Ogún and Ochún in Gloria Rolando’s film “Oggun: An Eternal Presence” (1991), a documentary primarily focused on the figure of Lázaro Ros, but as an entree into the Yoruba-derived mythological world view associated with oricha veneration in Cuba, both as a lived religion and as a national art form to be staged and performed publicly. At the time the film was made, Lázaro Ros was the akpwón or lead singer of the Conjunto Nacional Folklorico de Cuba (CFNC), and the documentary features not only him, but the CFNC community of drummers, dancers, and practitioners to whom he was a spiritual and artistic leader, until his death in 2005 at the age of 79. Although the patakí is not the film’s primary focus, it features prominently in it. The film opens with Ros’s narration of the patakí, initially depicting Ros with cigar in hand, recounting the story, and eventually transitioning to and superimposing Rolando’s cinematic imagining of it in image and sound, with actors playing the parts of
Ogún and Ochún. As such, Rolando’s rendering offers perhaps the most salient audiovisual version of the story to date, because it most explicitly depicts the *patakí* through image and sound rather than merely symbolizing it, and therefore will be discussed at length in this chapter as a central point of reference.

Whereas the previous two chapters presented the figures of Ogún and Ochún as individual archetypes, this chapter presents four specific Cuban versions of the *patakí* that brings these two figures—and the elemental forces they represent—into relationship with one another. The origins of the *patakí* lie in oral tradition derived from the verses of *Ifá*; however, this chapter will focus on other secondary “texts” inspired by the story and for the most part, created and recorded in 20th century Cuba. Whereas one course of analysis would be to trace the origins of the *patakí* from Africa to the varied places it may appear in diaspora, similar to William Bascomb’s 1976 article “Oba’s Ear: A Yoruba Myth in Cuba and Brazil,” which compares and contrasts the various versions, that is not the purpose of this chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to get to the heart of what is “important” about this *patakí* to the story of Cuba, by analyzing these four different versions of it through the lens of the time periods and social contexts that produced them, each version adding a new layer or valence of meaning.

The four selected versions span a time period from as early as 1936 and as late as 2001, and appear in media as diverse as ethnographic writings, a ballet choreography, and Gloria Rolando’s aforementioned film version. They are:

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12 While a worthy and intriguing line of inquiry to pursue, researching the origins of this myth in Africa and comparing Cuban versions to others elsewhere in diaspora is outside the scope and purpose of this dissertation.
1. A literary version written by Lydia Cabrera and published in 1936 as part of a collection of Afro-Cuban folk tales.

2. A ballet called *El río y el bosque*, choreographed in 1974 by Alberto Méndez and performed by the Ballet Nacional de Cuba.


4. A version that appears in ethnomusicologist Katherine Hagedorn’s 2001 monograph *Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería*

These four versions of the pataki were selected for this study because they fit these criteria for analysis: they are from different time periods and reflect the same myth placed in not only different time periods but also different media formats. The first is purely text, which has been adapted from oral tradition to the written page by Lydia Cabrera. The second is a dance performance that interprets the pataki through music and movement, blurring genre distinctions to mix the African-derived “folkloric” with the European-derived “classical” style of dance that is ballet or modern. Gloria Rolando’s film, made in the 1990s, demonstrates the mainstreaming of folkloric beliefs that occurred after the Special Period, when religious practitioners did not feel a need to hide their faith or ritual practices. It also serves as a documentary depicting the Conjunto Folklorico Nacional de Cuba at a particular historic moment of the early 1990s. Lastly, the version by Katherine Hagedorn represents the very essence of the nature of a pataki, as Hagedorn uses the myth as a subtext in a self-reflexive ethnography about the performances of the Conjunto Folklorico Nacional de Cuba, including it in the “personal” portion of an otherwise academic text.
The selection of these four versions is by no means intended as a comprehensive representation of all existing manifestations of this patakí; rather, each version reveals insights into the temporal and social context that produced it, and thus demonstrates how the same story can be told four different ways, producing four different interpretations. The four selected versions will be presented in chronological order, as a way to not only trace the evolution of the myth over time, but in an effort to frame each version in its historical moment. The 1936 version recorded by Lydia Cabrera was the earliest written version I was able to find in Cuba, although it is based on oral versions that Cabrera heard from Afro-Cuban informants she interviewed in the decades prior to that.

The fourth and final version I will analyze, that which appears in Katherine Hagedorn’s monograph *Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería*, differs from the others in that it was in fact written by an American ethnomusicologist who conducted fieldwork in Cuba and was initiated into the religion during the course of her research. Hagedorn, like Cabrera, was an outsider who initially heard the patakí from her Afro-Cuban informants; however, rather than merely recording it as folkloric data, she identifies with patakí in a personal way as a “daughter of Ochún” within the religion. I include her version because it circles back to and underscores the point made by Lázaro Ros in the quote at the beginning—that *patakines* are stories that “narrate the life of the initiated” by providing an ontological framework for understanding the world.

To reiterate what was discussed in the introduction, the word *patakí* itself is derived from the Yorùbá word meaning “important.” These are stories meant not to merely entertain, but to teach. For practitioners, they provide metaphors and moral guidance that is meant to be applied, in context, to the trials and tribulations of our human existence. As
such, the meaning of a *patakí* depends on the context to which it is applied. Specialized priests called *babalawos* employ *patakies* to explain divination results to their spiritual clients, using them as metaphors after which to model human behaviors and decisions. It “is in the sacred stories of Ifá that practitioners of Oricha worship find their place in society and learn how to relate to others. It is through *patakí* that diviners define matters of power, rank and authority” (Flores-Peña, 212). Indeed, “*Patakí* is the main metaphor of the culture” (*ibid.* 217).

**Version 1: Lydia Cabrera**

Published in 1936 in Cabrera’s first book, *Cuentos negros de Cuba*, there is the earliest written version I have been able to find coming from Cuba. Lydia Cabrera, who happened to be the sister-in-law of Fernando Ortíz, was a white upper-class Cuban woman born and raised in Havana who dedicated her life work to researching and writing about the African traditions in Cuba. Although she left Cuba after the Revolution and lived as an exile in the United States, she continued to write and publish about Afro-Cuban ethnography. Her first book was initially published in French, while Cabrera was living in Paris, under the title *Contes negres de Cuba*. The Spanish version was not published until 1940. Edna M. Rodriguez-Manguel writes, “In 1927, Cabrera went to Paris… There, she reestablished her friendship with the Venezuelan writer Teresa de la Parra, whom she had met in Havana a few years earlier. To entertain de la Parra while she was ill with tuberculosis in Leysin, Switzerland, Cabrera began writing the stories that would become *Cuentos negros de Cuba*. De la Parra died on April 4, 1936, a month after the first publication…” (8).
Embedded in a folk tale called “Bregantino Bregantín” is a telling of the patakí.

A mere five paragraphs, this version of the patakí is short enough that it can be quoted here in its entirety:

“Because Ogún was a man of the forest who lived in solitude. He lived so alone that he actually was the forest. He knew of nothing but animals – his dog’s eyes – and plants. Whenever he saw a human being, he would hide. Also, Ogún was a virgin. One day a woman came into the forest, Ochún, la Caridad del Cobre, lady of the rivers, the springs, and the lakes. Did Ochún take a fancy to Ogún? Yes! In fact, she tried to tempt the solitary Ogún and catch him. That was her mission. Ogún ran off without even looking at her, and Ochún chased after him. When she caught up with him where he was hiding in the bush, he turned on her like a wounded wild animal. He roared his threats without deigning to look at her, but that didn’t frighten her in the least.

Ochún filled an “ibá” (jícara or sacred calabash) with honey while Ogún was hiding in a tree trunk. Then she danced around the tree, and as she danced, she told Ogún:

‘Iyá oñío oñí abbé
Cheketé oñí o abbé.’

And that made Ogún want to look at her to see if she was really like he imagined her in song. He squeezed out of the trunk, and as soon as he appeared, Ochún rubbed his lips with honey (oñí). Then Ogún, calmed by the sudden sweetness on his mouth, followed Ochún, who continued singing and dancing and holding out the honey before him:

‘Iyá oñí o oñiaddó
Iyá oñí o oñiaddó
Iyá loun loro euy loun loro osa oñiaddo.’

‘Ogún, come out of the forest. With this sweetness that I’m giving you, with this sweetness that I myself am giving you, Ogún, come on out of the forest. Because you are the one who can open and close the heavens, I give you this sweetness so that you may get inside all saints and all men.’

And that’s how she led him – attracting him, avoiding him, charming him – far from the forest. But the forest came along with him – all the way to Babá’s house. Babá kept him prisoner for a while with an iron chain greased with corojo oil and honey from bees.” 13
Although this version contains many of the same details as other versions, down to specific songs or chants that are associated with Ochún, it lacks some of the narrative elements that later versions make clear: that Ogún had banished himself to the forest for a specific reason, and Ochún went to look for him and draw him out, not merely because she “fancied” him, but because the balance of the world depended on Ogún’s return to society.

**Version 2: El río y el bosque: a Ballet Interpretation of the Pataki**

In 1972, choreographer Alberto Méndez staged a ballet production for the Ballet Nacional de Cuba by the name *El río y el bosque*. The ballet told the story of Ogún and Ochún—Ogún first finding refuge and auto-exile in the *bosque* (forest) until Ochun, owner of the river (*el río*) lures him to come out of the forest with her powers of seduction. Although existing scholarship on *El río y el bosque* is limited, it’s very existence in 1972 establishes it as a precursor to *De cierta manera* and demonstrates that the *patakí* was already an active part of the Cuban popular cultural imaginary. It is not unthinkable that Sara Gómez intentionally referenced this patakí, as I will argue in the next chapter, with the presumption that many viewers would be receptive to picking up on the symbolism.

Even more notable, in 1976 as a way to celebrate the 5th Festival Internacional de Ballet, the postal service of Cuba issued a commemorative stamp that featured the male dancer in *El río y el bosque*. This further underscores that not only did the *patakí* achieve “crossover” appeal by leaving the folkloric stage and occupying the ballet stage; it was present enough in the national imaginary to be immortalized on a stamp.
depicted is of a male dancer dressed as Ogún in a raffia skirt whose Yoruba name is mariwo, and wearing the colors green and purple. His stance is typical of Ogún, minus the machete. His arm raised in the air mimics the action of chopping with the imaginary machete in his hand.

The setting of the image on the stamp is clearly a theater stage, surrounded by darkness save for the spotlight shining on the Ogún dancer. This also makes reference to the phenomenon of the post-1959 revolutionary era, in which Afro-Cuban folkloric dances were brought out of private, religious spaces and adapted to the public, secular space of the stage. It also serves as an example of using Afro-Cuban folklore as a proud marker of Cuban identity displayed on the international stage, despite it being stripped of cultural context.
Version 3: Gloria Rolando’s *Oggun: An Eternal Presence*

In the film *Oggun: An Eternal Presence* (1991) filmmaker Gloria Rolando tells us the mythical story—or the *patakín*, to use the Cuban Lucumi term—of the orishas Ogún and Ochún. Narrated by Lázaro Ros, who was a founding member and the original
akpwón or lead singer of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba, Rolando’s cinematic rendering layers over his words the story of these two orishas through a reenactment, not only in richly staged and choreographed image, but set to a soundtrack of the very liturgical songs and drum beats that recount these orishas’ stories in the ritual realm. The symbolism is multi-sensory and multi-valent; image and sonic cues are used to “mark” the characters onscreen.

As akpwón, Lázaro Ros did not merely sing and teach; he was a living library of Yoruba knowledge, his mind and body a repository of sacred songs and dances, mythologies recounted and encoded. As one of the founding members of the Conjunto Folklórico, Ros played a fundamental role in bringing these sacred songs and stories out from private religious spaces and onto the public stage. In this film, he uses this story, this patakí, as a way to open a door into the world of Afro-Cuban thought, music, and religion. Rolando’s cinematic imagining of the patakí of Ogún and Ochún, performed by actors in costume, operates in tandem with the oral history initiated by Ros. His is an “authentic” version, passed down orally from the Lucumi ancestors, and during his tenure as akpwón he was the cultural standard-bearer for his historic moment (and a founding member of the CFNC). Thus, this particular documentary version of the patakí serves as a cultural cornerstone and point of reference, around which to ground this inquiry into the patakí’s history and meaning(s). The documentary is itself a snapshot—anchored in time and place—and acts as a historical document of sorts, a text reflecting its time and place.

As told by Lázaro Ros, this particular patakín goes like this (as transcribed directly from the film’s English subtitles):
“I can also mention the Patakin of Oggun where Alaguedé, the Eldest Oggun, committed an error against his mother Yembo. Elegguá discovered this. As God of all Paths, the gossiper, joyful, the boy, Elegguá told his father Obatalá who discovered it. Then Oggun said: ‘Father, do not curse me, I will curse myself and as long as the world is the world, I will work day and night.’ …But in the town, spades, knives and iron things began to break, but only Oggun knew the secret of melting metals. And the elders decided to send for Oggun and forgive him. A woman went looking for Oggun – in this case, Oyá. But Oggun abused her and sent her back. Yemayá also went looking for him, and the same happened to her. …But Oshun was more clever. As Goddess of Love, she went to the forest in search of Oggun, the God of War…”

Halfway through Ros’ story the camera abandons his image to pursue one of Ogún in his self-imposed exile… Ogún, deep in the forest, works relentlessly at his forge, surrounded by iron implements … his full-bearded face bent in concentration over the orange light of the fire, sweaty brow glistening. His black dog nobly sits watch nearby. While Ogún labors on, pounding glowing metal with raw brute force, the idyllic music of the soundtrack is pierced by the stylized, rhythmic sound of iron striking anvil, the blacksmith’s sonic signature.

Before Lázaro Ros’ narration soon gives way entirely to Rolando’s telling of the story through image, music, and movement, Ros’ final words linger, having left the viewer in the middle of the story, while hinting at the story’s final outcome and thus its underlying message:

“Pero Ochún fue más inteligente…Como diosa del Amor se marchó al monte, a buscar a Oggun, al dios de la Guerra…”

Cut to Oshun… As she makes her way into the forest, sunlight streams through trees and sunflowers bask in its radiance; a chiming bell—her ritual “call” and sonic signature—announces her gently approaching footsteps. Oshun, dressed in her signature yellow-gold, bright as a sunflower, sways gently as she moves—ever the embodiment of female
sensuality and sexuality. Oshun boldly makes her way into the monte, advancing toward the dark forest where Oggun has sequestered himself at his orange glowing forge.

It is implied that she was successful where others failed, and it was due to her “intelligence.” That Ros points out that she is goddess of Love attempting to conquer that of War, further hints at a “lesson” about Love’s “intelligence” and its relationship to the logic and ideology of War. The aural motif of the wind chimes accompanies and signals the appearance of honey – oñí – at two points in the visual narrative: first, the gourd of honey glimmering in the sunlight, and second, when Ochun and Oggun finally make physical contact for the first time, when she draws her honey-drenched fingers over his mouth, giving him his first taste of sweetness.

In Rolando’s film, after Oshun succeeds in leading Ogún out of the forest, the camera cuts to a contemporary (ie. 1980s/90s) scene of a Santeria ritual in Cuba, where a devotee prostrates herself before an altar to Oshun, “saluting” her through this gesture, while ringing a bell as she prays. We move from the sacred space of the altar to the social space of the ritual gathering, where members of the Conjunto Folklorico sing and dance together with a trio of batá drummers led by akpwón Lázaro Ros. It is never explicitly stated what the “pàtàkì” (i.e., important message) of this “patakín” is, exactly; the viewer is left to surmise that the takeaway message is that Oshun’s sensuality and adeptness at the art of seduction constitutes a kind of “intelligence” that succeeds where other kinds of intelligence fail. Furthermore, as it is her actions and not those of the other orishas who tried and failed that ultimately resolves the problem of Ogún’s absence, and thus restores order and balance to human society, it is implied that this form of “intelligence” is one that is necessary in order for society to function in a balanced,
productive way.

**Version 4: Katherine Hagedorn and *Divine Utterances***

The ethnomusicologist and ethnographer Katherine Hagedorn, in her book *Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería*, evokes this very *patakí* of Ogún and Ochún as a way to make meaning of otherwise unexplainable events in her life, which she interprets through the lens of her identity as a “daughter of Ochún,” or *omo Ochún* in Lucumí. Although the academic part of the text, which is the majority, is focused on ethnography of folkloric performance and the history of the process of “folkloricization” of spiritual practice, Hagedorn weaves in the *patakí* as part of a personal narrative of the subjective experience of the ethnographer. She identifies with the role played by *Ochún* in the *patakí*, and uses it as a metaphor for her own life,¹⁴ which I discuss next. What is interesting about this version is that it is interwoven with her more scholarly work on the history of the national folklore company that was formed in the early years of the Revolution to present Afro-Cuban culture on the national stage. Also, her version is the only one of these four that was created by an outsider, as she was a North American scholar. I include her version because she provides an apt example of a phenomenon noted by Stephen Palmié, which is that many scholars who study Afro-Cuban religions themselves become practitioners and initiates of the very religions they study.

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¹⁴ By contrast, as Amado Dedieu of the Cuban folkloric group Clave y Guaguancó said to me once, if this *patakí* were applied to a “child of Ogún” in the religion, if it were to come up in the context of an *Ifá* reading, it may serve as a warning against the woman or situation in his life who is representing Ochún, because “it didn’t turn out so well for Ogún,” according to Dedieu.
The Conjunto Folklorico Nacional de Cuba

The Conjunto Folklorico Nacional de Cuba (CFNC) was formed in May 1962 by ethnographer Rogelio Martinez Furé, who was a former student of Fernando Ortiz, and Mexican choreographer Rodolfo Reyes Cortés. As a performing group it presented theatrical productions of mostly religious African-derived music and dance. The CFNC serves as a useful example to examine the institutionalization of Afro-Cuban folklore, because not only was it a project of the state and thus a product of its ideology, but it also represented the pinnacle of artistic excellence in the genre and thus serves as the flagship example of the religion-as-folklore-as-art process described herein. By making folkloric performers employees of the state, it legitimized their form of cultural production as “work” within the socialist economic ideology. Yet, although it appeared to elevate Afro-Cuban traditions to the level of national art, some contemporaries criticized the formation of the CFNC as a “strategy of containment” for cultural expressions that it ultimately did not want to see perpetuated (Moore 2006:187). The folkloricization and commodification of Afro-Cuban expressive culture went hand in hand with its institutionalization.

Hagedorn examines the process of what she calls the “folkloricization” of Afro-Cuban religious music and dance, in which the religious practice that has been classified as folk tradition is reinterpreted and translated into a more broadly understood “lingua folklorica”—the language of folkloric performance—secularized, staged, commodified, directed outward toward the audience. Older practitioners who were initially considered informants in creating the performative renditions later became performers with the troupe. These ritual traditions were recontextualized in order to perform a new
revolutionary function: “the uplifting, informing, and dignifying entertainment of the Cuban people” (67). However, in the process some of the more religiously significant aspects (e.g. animal sacrifice) were excised from the ritual display. “They no longer represented ritual practice; rather, they communicated a beautiful and powerful world, located far away from the deeply embedded beliefs and long-standing faith” (67). They represented a mythical African heritage, an element that had been integrated into the ajiaco (mixed stew) of Cuban cultural patrimony, as conceived of in the writings of Fernando Ortiz.

In this recontextualized setting Afro-Cuban religions were not regarded seriously as religions; rather, “they were considered charming and exotic remnants of a prerevolutionary past, to be engaged in the bright, revolutionary present not with religious awe but with a combination of bemused interest and scholarly objectivity” (147). Furthermore, because the purpose of these performances was entertainment and no longer religious ritual, the theatrical nature of the “espectáculos” took primacy over accuracy of detail. For example, “the headdress of Yemayá might be transformed from a simple blue-and-white checked bandana to an electric-blue satin cockscomb atop the head of some marvelously coiffed and rouged dancer” (138).

Hagedorn straddles both worlds of researcher/ethnographer and religious practitioner, weaving a personal narrative describing her spiritual connection to this patakí into her scholarship, thereby demonstrating exactly how patakines such as this one are used by practitioners to help explain and understand the unexplainable. Ochún figures prominently in the parts where Hagedorn addresses her subjective position as an
ethnographer. Upon initiation into the Afro-Cuban religious traditions she is studying, she learns that Ochún is her “guardian angel,” or in the parlance of Lucumí, she is “omo Ochún,” or a “child” of Ochún, as omo is translated into Yoruba. As a human whom Ochún has chosen as one of her children, she as an individual and her life path in general is shaped by the parameters of what it means to be a “child” of this particular orisha. Furthermore, she highlights the patakí of Ochún and Ogún to underscore the resonance of its deeper message with themes in her lived experience that are presumed to be there because she is a “daughter of Ochún.”

Recall that in Rolando’s film Lázaro Ros states that patakines are more than just stories; for religious practitioners, “[t]hese meanings, more or less, narrate the life the initiated will lead [throughout one’s years] within the Yoruba religion.” As stories, they transcend mere entertainment: they serve as instrumental templates to explain the unexplainable, to be applied to the subjective experiences of religious practitioners. By way of introduction, Hagedorn summed up the patakí in this way:

There are patakies for all the orichas, and they are intimately linked to the proverbs of Ifa divination. These patakies are evoked consistently through the prayers, songs, and dances of religious performance, and their repetition imbues them with sacred significance. The pataki for Ogun and Ochun is well known among Cuban practitioners of Santeria because Ochun is considered to be the patron saint of Cuba. She represents Cuba's anthropomorphized national ethos—a sweet, laughing, flirtatious mulata whose seductive charms help her to survive in the difficult and dangerous world. Yet Ochun, like the other major orichas, has many caminos, some of which are neither sweet nor seductive (136).

For Katherine Hagedorn, this recurring presence of Ogún-like incidences in her life (his appearance in a dream, a real-life experience of attempted assault by a stranger, and the general feeling of being “stalked” and “watched” while in Cuba) holds an underlying
takeaway “message,” one that is related to the lesson of the patakí. As a daughter of Oshun, she concludes:

“I must not only acknowledge Ogún’s presence, but I must also accept it as part of my life. Ogún’s energy in this case does not necessarily represent physical danger, but rather the threat of it. Ochún’s energy represents the acceptance of the threat of danger without fear, which then results in the balancing of Ogún’s energy with her own. …Ogún is protector and violator, both guardia and stalker.” (34)

Hagedorn ultimately comes to the conclusion that because of her identification with Ochún, she must accept the presence of Ogún, or the forces that he represents, as part of her cosmic fate. Thus, the patakí serves as a way for her to not only make meaning of this presence in her life, but to come to a place of peace and acceptance with it. The meeting of these opposing forces of bitterness and sweetness results in a more balanced existence, and understanding of her place in the cosmic order.

**Conclusion**

What, collectively, do these works say? What is “important” about this patakí?

Firstly, their varied contexts and formats demonstrate the adaptability of patakines to a multiplicity of settings. The patakí itself serves as a form of archetype, an allegory about the meeting of opposites and resolution through balance between the two. In terms of literal elements, it represents either the meeting of hot iron and cool water, or the contrast between iron versus copper or brass. It also represents the meeting of two different forms of power that are nonetheless equally matched. The intelligence symbolized by Ochún’s honey is not to be underestimated in comparison to the hardness
of Ogún’s iron. Conversely, Hagedorn’s version shows that the hardness and power of Ogún is not to be feared.

Furthermore, since the resolution of the problem at the beginning of the patakí (i.e. Ogún’s absence) comes from the meeting of these opposite but equal forces, the patakí is demonstrative of the Yoruba value of balance and duality, as explained in the introduction. As a morality tale, it sends the message that both forms of power, whether you want to call them “hard” versus “soft,” or “masculine” versus “feminine,” cannot exist alone. They must co-exist in harmony in order for human society to function as it should.
READING YORUBA MYTH IN SARA GÓMEZ’S ICONIC FILM

The seed of this dissertation began with a research paper I wrote in my first year of graduate school. I had chosen the film *De cierta manera* (1974), an iconic Cuban film written and directed by the sole Afro-Cuban (and female) filmmaker within the Revolutionary film institute at that time. After watching the film several times, I noticed imagery embedded in the film that seemed to reference the *patakí* of Ogún and Ochún and suggested that the two protagonists (who were male and female) served as representations of the two orichas, and the story of their evolving relationship a metaphor for this *patakí*. Such an interpretation significantly impacts the reading of this film, and brings to light layers of meaning that have yet to be revealed and analyzed.

Recent scholarship on Sara Gómez (Benson 2018, Gonzalez & Lord 2013) has expanded upon existing discourse on her work beyond her one feature film, *De cierta manera* (1974) to examine not only her earlier documentary shorts of the 1960s, but to demonstrate the impact that her body of work has had on a subsequent generation of Cuban filmmakers who continue her mission to critique the Revolution through an antiracist and feminist lens—contemporary filmmakers such as Gloria Rolando, Sandra Gómez, and Susana Barriga. This chapter seeks to push this conversation forward by arguing several interrelated points: 1) that *De cierta manera* contains symbolic, visually
embedded references to the *patakí* about the Afro-Cuban orishas Ogún and Ochún, 2) that *De cierta manera* holds this in common with Gloria Rolando’s *Oggun: An Eternal Presence* (1991), which tells the *patakí* in a more explicit, obvious manner, and therefore the two films warrant comparison; and 3) lastly, that this interpretation of *De cierta manera* offers a novel take on a “classic” Cuban Revolutionary film, offering additional interpretive layers that do not change the message of the film, per se, but complicate it by adding an additional filter through which to view and interpret it: that of Yoruba moral philosophy. Since the Afro-Cuban word *patakí* in Cuban Lucumí liturgical speech refers to a parable with a moral lesson, and is derived from the word *pàtàkì*, meaning “[something] important” in the *Yorùbá* language of West Africa, this chapter will attempt to answer how and why this particular myth is “important” (*pàtàkì*) to the reading of *De cierta manera*, and discuss the implications of this reading for Cuban cinema studies and Cuban Studies more broadly.

**Cuban Revolutionary Cinema**

In 1959, less than three months after the Castro government came to power, it established the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográfico (ICAIC), often referred to in English as the Cuban Film Institute. With the objective of recording the ongoing revolutionary process from the perspective of ordinary people, the films made by ICAIC were shown free of charge throughout Cuba in order to encourage spectators to participate actively in the films’ reception and interpretation (Davies 1997: 345). Thus, from the outset, film production and consumption served as an integral ideological arm of the Revolution and its efforts to transform the consciousness of the Cuban people.
De cierta manera (1974/1977) was the first full-length feature film to come out of ICAIC that was directed entirely by a Cuban woman, and by an Afro-Cuban person (Baron 355). Although Gomez died before the editing was completed, the final edit was completed by her white male colleagues Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Julio García Espinosa. Within the canon of Cuban cinema, De cierta manera takes its place as “…a revolutionary love story, which means a film about the growing relationship between a man and a woman that refuses to isolate their elective affinity from the social determinants that have not only made them what they are, but continue to affect them as they get to know each other” (Chanan 2004: 346). De cierta manera, with its female protagonist and its explicit critique of machismo as a cultural force that holds back revolutionary transformation, “was hailed as a paradigmatic example of Third World cinefeminism by feminist film critics in North America and Europe” (Ebrahim 2007). However, some of this early feminist criticism, in its ignorance about the complexities of the Afro-Cuban religious and cultural references embedded in the film, failed to pick up on the gendered nuances and meanings inscribed therein. In this paper I argue that De cierta manera holds visual symbolism that resonates with an Afro-Cuban folk story, or patakí about the Yoruba orishas Ogún and Ochún. In this interpretation of the film, the fictional character Mario represents Ogún and the fictional character Yolanda represents Ochún.

As will be further discussed below, De cierta manera is noted for its integration of fiction and documentary; however, the message of the patakí as embedded in the fictional story complicates the overall messages regarding race, gender, and the (re)construction of a Revolutionary society. Prior to analyzing the symbolism of the
pataki in the fictional part of the film, I will first discuss how De cierta manera was hailed as an example of “Imperfect Cinema” and therefore became emblematic of this period in Cuban film history, and a starting point for antiracist and feminist critiques of the Revolution’s shortfalls.

Theorizing “Imperfect Cinema”

In the early decades of the revolution, there was not only a thriving revolutionary film industry, but an ongoing intellectual discourse around film production and consumption that sought to define the politics and aesthetics of revolutionary film. In the context of the rest of the hemisphere, the 1960s and 1970s saw an emergence of film production known as “New Latin American Cinema” which “would serve as forms of national expression but would also be active weapons in the transformation of the underdevelopment and political oppression that characterized Latin America” (Lopez, 430). In the same vein as “Third Cinema” and “New Latin American Cinema”, the concept of “Imperfect Cinema” was the Cubans’ answer to the dominance of classical Hollywood cinema and the North American cultural imperialism it implied. What gave Imperfect Cinema its particularly Cuban flavor was its commitment to reinforcing the revolutionary ideals of the Marxist/Leninist Polity (Quiros, 291).

Coined by Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa in his 1969 manifesto “For an Imperfect Cinema”, this approach was both aesthetic and political. As opposed to the “perfect” cinema of Hollywood, which sought to render the technical aspects of filmmaking invisible (through non-intrusive camera work and continuity editing, for example) in order to transport the spectator to a realist, character-driven diegetic world,
Imperfect Cinema rejected technical mastery in favor of “critical socialist realism which simultaneously produced and undermined the illusion of the real” (Davies 346). This was partly practical, as most filmmakers in underdeveloped nations did not have ready access to the filmmaking technologies available in the north, and partly ideological, as they resisted the notion that the only valid filmmaking techniques adhered to North American standards of “perfection”. As Julianne Burton put it, “[w]here dominant practices required large amounts of capital and infrastructure, oppositional film-makers sought to strip the process down to its barest essentials—a camera in hand and an idea in mind” (12). Furthermore, since the invisible hand of “perfection” in classical Hollywood cinema obscures its own political ideology, by embracing imperfection, cinema can take a more conscious and active ideological stance.

Politically, Imperfect and Third Cinema sought to resist neocolonial cultural domination by creating a new, Third World-specific film language that would engage the masses in their historical and political moment, as a tool to achieve national liberation and class equality. Imperfect Cinema was not only aesthetic but utilitarian, performing an emancipatory political function in Cuban society (Quiros 280). Much like Sergei Eisenstein’s theory of revolutionary cinema that produced a conflict in the spectator to awaken a revolutionary consciousness, Imperfect Cinema sought to actively engage the viewer in the meaning-making process. By illustrating the problems of the world and the processes by which they were created, Imperfect Cinema encouraged spectators to analyze them and draw independent conclusions, thus “challenging the mass culture of acquiescent consumption.” Imperfect Cinema presented “a plurality of non-judgmental, non-prescriptive expositions of the problems faced by ‘people who struggle’ as a
process” and invited the spectator to join in as an active participant in the process of solving social problems (Davies 346). In his manifesto Espinosa wrote, “The task currently at hand is to find out if the conditions which will enable spectators to transform themselves into agents — not merely more active spectators, but genuine co-authors — are beginning to exist.”

Imperfect Cinema and Film Form

In revolutionary cinema, both form and content had the potential to be revolutionary. According to Espinosa, “Imperfect cinema can make use of the documentary or fiction mode, or both… These questions are indifferent to it, since they do not represent its real alternatives or problems, and much less its real goals.” Indeed, because of the material constraints of early Cuban revolutionary cinema, the documentary format was prevalent in many films produced by ICAIC in its early years (Davies 345). In this section I will examine the combined documentary/fiction form used in De cierta manera as it relates to the theory of Imperfect Cinema. Despite Espinosa’s stated indifference to the choice of which mode to use, it is precisely the dialectical relationship between the two modes in this film that upholds the ideals of Imperfect Cinema.

The most salient formal aspect of De cierta manera is its integration of documentary and fiction narrative formats. This is even explicitly stated in the opening credits, which proclaim, “Feature film about real people and fictitious ones.” The ensuing credits list names separately under the headings “actors” and “real people”. For the most part, the documentary sections are easily identified by the presence of a narrator, who speaks with an authoritative, omniscient voice. With the exception of one documentary
segment that serves as a biopic of “real person” Guillermo Diaz, a musician and former boxer, the documentary segments together construct a metanarrative about the Revolution’s work integrating the marginalized sectors of the population into society. The fiction sections follow the love story between the two main characters, Yolanda and Mario. The documentary metanarrative runs in parallel to the fiction story almost as a backdrop painting the social context of the relationship between the two main characters. Yet, at the same time, it provides explicit cues as to how the spectator is to interpret or identify with the fictional characters.

In the story, the circumstances of the Revolution have brought Yolanda, a middle-class white woman, to work as a teacher in the lower-class, racially diverse neighborhood that Mario, a mulatto, working-class man, is from. Although Yolanda and Mario are individual characters driven by their own subjective needs, fears, and desires, the primary conflicts between them stem from their different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Their relationship can be seen as a microcosm of the changing social order of post-1959 Cuba, as depicted by the documentary metanarrative that provides the social context for the love story. The romantic merging of their disparate worlds plays out the process of social integration of different classes that is occurring on a society-wide level, and its resulting conflicts and negotiations. The overall formal structure in this film is dialectical in that it puts the documentary world in conversation with the fictional world, resulting in “a complex interaction between the individual and the type” (Davies 1997: 349). At the same time that the spectator is able to identify Mario and Yolanda as individual characters, one is constantly reminded of the social class (and implicitly race) that each represents.
However, the line between documentary and fiction is not always so clear. Certain shots and scenes appear to deliberately invite confusion as to whether they are documentary or fiction. For example, the first close-up of Yolanda appears in the initial documentary sequence, and when she appears again in the fictional narrative that follows it, the composition of both shots is strikingly similar. In the initial documentary sequence, the narrator speaks about the role of education in integrating the marginalized communities with the Revolution. In a close-up, Yolanda speaks directly to the camera about education, as if she were being interviewed as part of this documentary. The composition of this shot is evoked again in the scene immediately following her first meeting with Mario. From a shot of Mario gazing at Yolanda in his mother’s kitchen, the film cuts to close up of her in a different shirt (and implicitly, a different time and space), facing the camera. Without any spatial context provided by an establishing shot, she addresses the camera directly again and it is not until the following shot that we see she is speaking to Mario, and we are observing a “fictional” scene where they are sitting in the park together. This pattern of repetition and difference in shot composition highlights not only the two narrative forms, but Yolanda’s presence in both of them. The effect of this first “fictional” close-up of Yolanda is to unite the documentary world with the fictional diegetic world. By echoing a visual match to the previous shot of Yolanda, it draws a parallel between her role as both a “type” and an “individual”, while re-situating Yolanda as a fictional character in the overall narrative.

Much analysis of De cierta manera has focused on this documentary/fiction dichotomy and its implications for revolutionary cinema. What is the function of this combined documentary/fiction approach? Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, a colleague of Gomez
and a leading Cuban filmmaker and theorist, described “the process of an organic integration of form and content” as a dialectic “in which both aspects are indissolubly united and, at the same time as they oppose each other, they interpenetrate each other, to the point where they can take over each other’s functions” (Barnard, 233). The dialectic dynamic of this interpenetration has the end result of awakening a new consciousness in the spectator. “The common thread linking all these efforts is the will to ‘de-alienate’ alienated and alienating social relations, based on a dual recognition: that social change has its deepest roots in self-realization, and that the creative process provides a quasi-utopian space in which more ideal social relations may develop.” (Burton 1985: 12)

In the second-to-last scene, in which the workers hold a heated discussion about Humberto’s absenteeism and Mario’s outing of him, one has the sense that the men have clustered around the camera to take turns expressing their opinions on the issue, as if to a reporter. This scene evokes the previously mentioned intention of the ICAIC films to engage spectators in the interpretive process. It is almost as though the workers are enacting the debate and discussion about revolutionary values that the film might inspire amongst an audience of spectators who themselves are revolutionary subjects.

**Race, Religion, and Revolution**

*De cierta manera* deals with Afro-Cuban culture and religion on a variety of levels, both explicit and implicit, which in their contradictions to one another reveal the complexity of the role African heritage has played in forming Cuban national identity. A number of cultural and religious traditions with origins in West and Central Africa were adapted and found a new expression in Cuba. However, throughout modern history
leading up to the Revolution, the role of Afro-Cuban expressive culture in Cuban society would be marked by cycles of repression and inclusion.

The Revolution’s adoption of Marxism-Leninism implied a move away from all religions, as it was regarded as a hindrance to social development. Furthermore, the Revolution put forth the idea of the raceless nation, as articulated by Jose Marti some decades before. Marti’s writings during the struggles for independence around the turn of the century imagined an ideal nation in which all men were “Cubans”, and there was no “black” or “white”. This ideology would later be incorporated into the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary philosophy, and questions of race would be subsumed under the rubric of class struggle. Castro’s 1959 Proclamation against Discrimination deemed racial discrimination and racial prejudice to be “anti-nation.” A culture emerged in which even speaking of social difference in terms of race was taboo and “anti-Cuban”. This silencing on race was likewise reproduced in the world of cinema: “During the early Revolutionary period, however, under the auspices of the ICAIC, filmmakers had to tread warily with regard to explicit acknowledgment of ethnicity in the context of Marxist consciousness that privileged class dynamics as a site for exploration of social contradictions. In Cuban cinema, racial oppression could be acknowledged if explored as a historical occurrence, a problem of the past.” (Ebrahim 2007)

Given this, it is notable that the Cubans of African descent represented in De cierta manera are primarily described not in racial terms, but in terms of their “marginalized” socioeconomic class status. Also, in the introductory documentary sequence, the narrator alludes to the “problem” of religion within these marginalized sectors of society, but under the rubric of “culture”: “Culture that lives in the depths of
the subconscious, in the form of habits, customs, beliefs, values, and ways of doing things can put up strong resistance to social change. …For the low educational level and oral traditions of these people make them cling to their old culture.” As the narrator speaks, images of black Cubans in daily life play across the screen; the camera lingers for a moment on the tattoo on a man’s back—it is the image of Santa Barbara, the Catholic saint who is syncretized with the African deity Chango.

*De cierta manera* complicates the notion of “Afro-Cuban,” not only by depicting various branches and manifestations of Afro-Cuban culture, but implicitly showing the hierarchy of acceptability and ability to integrate with Revolutionary goals, of different branches of Afro-Cuban ethnicity, and by extension, religion. This resonates with Kristina Wirtz’s discussion of the “chronotopes” that are evoked in folkloric depictions of various African ethnicities in Cuba, “types” that are seemingly anchored in a particular time and place. Whereas the practices of the Abakuá society are associated with pastness and underdevelopment, comparatively the Yoruba derived elements like orisha veneration “evoke a more mythic and time-transcending chronotope” (Wirtz 2014: 147).

However, although the “official” voice of the narration in *De cierta manera* decries the backwardness of traditional beliefs, some of the other Afro-Cuban religious references that are inserted in the film without narrated commentary seem to indicate an ambivalence towards, if not an outright contradiction to, this official party line.

There are two scenes that deal explicitly with Afro-Cuban religion, reflecting two of the branches I mentioned below. One is dealt with in the documentary form; the other is woven into the fictional narrative. The first, addressed in documentary form, is Abakuá (also spelled Abacuá), a male secret society whose origin lies in the Ekpe or
Ngbe of present-day Nigeria. Abakuá is often described as “macho” because of its emphasis on the manliness and bravery of its members. It has historically been associated with criminality and social deviance in mainstream Cuban discourse.

The second, integrated unannounced into the fictional narrative, is Santería (also called Lucumí), which could be described as the more “mainstream” of the two religions. Santería is a syncretic religion largely based on the beliefs of the Yoruba (present-day Nigeria) that venerates a pantheon of deities known as “orishas” that are syncretized with
Catholic “santos”—saints. Whereas the treatment of Abakuá in the documentary section is explicitly negative, the treatment of Santería in the fictional section acts as an unspoken but powerful counterpoint. A formal comparison between the two scenes reveals contradicting explicit and implicit meanings, which furthers the dialectical nature of this film.

Figure 21. Still from *De cierta manera* depicting Santería ceremony.

The documentary sequence is announced by the title shot “The Abacuá Society (Documentary Analysis)” and it is inserted almost as an interruption into the fictional narrative of Mario and Yolanda’s love story. As they sit outside and tell each other their
life stories, Mario mentions that at one point in his youth he aspired to become a ñáñigo, the word referring to a member of Abakúa. Such societies were integral to the social fabric of the working-class community in which he grew up, and were an important part of the coming of age of young men. Yolanda’s ignorance and curiosity about what a ñáñigo is speaks to her middle class white(r) background, and invites the interruption of the “documentary analysis” to explain just what is Abakuá.

At this point the documentary voice, which the viewer has now come to associate with the “official” voice of the Revolution, takes over, framing its explanation of Abakuá in revolutionary terms. The narration describes the male secret society as a deep-seated, antisocial element of marginal culture that resists social change. Referring to Abakuá’s origin myth that portrays the female Sikan as the betrayer of a sacred secret, the narration explicitly links the social backwardness of the society to its chauvinistic character, thus bringing gender into the equation.

Two formal elements in this sequence serve to distance the practitioners of Abakuá as “Other” and atavistic: the shaky “ethnographic”-looking footage of an Abakuá ceremony, in which participants appear to be in a trance and the linking of the contemporary tradition to the past through historical images of colonial Cuba. The ceremony looks as though it were shot with a hand-held camera, and its dizzying feel is accentuated by the drumming and chanting in the soundtrack. Implicit in the “ethnographic” imagery of half-naked black men with body paint dancing as though possessed, is the construction of this behavior as uncivilized, compared to other images in the film of people of all races in more “civilized” and “modern” settings—eating in restaurants and cafés, assembling in workers meetings and government research panels.
The absence of an explanation of what exactly the men are doing in the ceremony, save for sacrificing a goat, serves to make it more mysterious and “other”. The reference to the colonial past through the inclusion of historical drawings positions Abakuá as a vestige of an earlier, more “savage” version of Cuban society. The explicit meaning to be drawn from this sequence is that religious practices like Abakuá are an obstacle to the modernizing process, and must be overcome.

By contrast, the scene depicting a Santería gathering at the home of Mario’s mother is striking in its absence of narrated commentary on how the viewer is supposed to interpret it vis-à-vis the Revolution. Its nonchalant inclusion in the fictional narrative seems to counter the message of the narration that accompanies the Abakuá scene. Upon greeting Mario and Yolanda, Mario’s mother says, “On a day like today I want to have all my family around me,” underscoring the implicit message that this gathering, rather than being an antisocial activity, actually serves to strengthen the ties in the community and build social cohesion. The attendees wear the traditional white clothes representing spiritual purity and “salute” higher members of the religion by lying prostrate in front of them on a mat on the floor. Although the shot of the goat hints at an impending sacrifice, the mise-en-scéne presents a benign view of Santería, instead focusing on the singing, the washing of one’s hands with herbs, the homage and devotion represented in a beautifully constructed altar.

The mise-en-scéne which stages this scene inside, in the private realm, raises questions about the boundaries of the revolution and how extensively it reaches into the lives of the citizens. Indeed, that historical reality of Santería in the Revolution is that despite the discouragement of its practice, it went underground and became a private,
secret activity until changing social mores and a more relaxed governmental posture brought it back out into the open, beginning in the late 1980s.

**Gender and Afro-Cuban Religion**

Beneath the differing presentation of the two Afro-Cuban religions is a critique of gender roles within each. In the documentary sequence, the explanation for what makes Abakuá backward is primarily its gendered ideology. Not only is it a sphere from which women are excluded, it actively encourages a “macho” mentality that contributes to the problem of chauvinism in Cuban society, and thus inequality along gendered lines. The “code of men” that it creates is an influential ideology that threatens and competes with revolutionary ideals in the minds of men. Mario’s dilemma about his friend Humberto presents a manifestation of this conflict: by being a “good revolutionary” and outing a fellow worker who is not doing his part, he chooses to violate this “code between men”.

Santeria or Yoruba-based religion, on the other hand, presents a more equitable paradigm of gender. Female orishas are just as powerful as male orishas—and just as venerated—and initiation into the religion is open to both men and women, as is demonstrated not only by the role of Mario’s mother in that scene, but the number of women who are participants in the ritual gathering. Thus, an implicit meaning that could be drawn from comparing the treatment of the two scenes is that Afro-Cuban religious expression and practice can be tolerated, so long as it does not encourage antisocial gender ideologies, and so long as it is hidden from the public view.

**Mythic Symbolism and Afro-Cuban Psychological Archetypes**
To question the applicability of Western mythic paradigms in Third World cultural contexts is justifiable; to deny a mythic dimension in Third World cultural products is incomprehensible. What is needed is not the (continued) exclusion of psychoanalytical considerations from the critical discourse regarding Third World film, but the expansion or modification of those considerations to accommodate a less Westernised, individually-based notion of being-in-the-world. (Burton, 16)

Perhaps the most striking and powerful reference to Afro-Cuban belief systems in *De cierta manera* is one that is almost invisible, or it could be said that it is “hiding in plain sight.” Indeed, it wasn’t until my third viewing that the symbolism of the *patakí* of Ogún and Ochún jumped out at me. The symbolism that is encoded therein opens up a whole new interpretation of this film’s treatment of gender and revolution, and its depiction of the process of awakening consciousness in the revolutionary subject.

**Representing the *Patakí* of Ogún and Ochún**

The use of mise-en-scéne in the fictional scene where Yolanda and Mario get to know each other makes symbolic reference to this allegory in the way it stages the two characters. As Mario begins to tell the story of his life, a dense forest can be seen in the background. Pointing to an area some distance off, he says, “I was born over there.” As if to underscore his association with the forest, she chides, “What, in those pines?” He explains that the now natural area was once a slum, before the Revolution razed it and relocated the community to newly constructed socialist housing blocks. That Mario works as a mechanic in a bus factory further solidifies his identification with Ogún.
When it is Yolanda’s turn to tell her story, the background changes to reveal a river. She and Mario are sitting on its banks. By placing Yolanda and her personal narrative in this setting of the river, a parallel is drawn between her and Oshun. In these shots in front of the river Yolanda tells Mario the story of her failed marriage and her evolution as an “independent” woman.
The final shot of this scene shows Mario and Yolanda leaving the woods, and Yolanda asks him again about Abakua. Mario tells her that it is about being a good man, and above all, adhering to a code of brotherly loyalty. When she chides him about whether he would still initiate into the society at this point, he says he would not because his *mentalidad* (mentality) has changed. In the context of early Revolutionary discourse, *mentalidad* could be translated into “world view” or “frame of mind,” and summarizes what had to change in order for the New Man to emerge, “the way of thinking that enables certain acts and not others” (Lopez). Much of the discourse around citizenship in
early Revolutionary Cuba involved the forging of the *Hombre Nuevo* (“New Man”) as outlined by Che Guevara.

The scene ends with Yolanda laughing and teasing Mario as to whether his *mentalidad* has truly changed. She runs ahead, looking back at Mario as if to tease him. The camera pans out and Mario shrugs and follows Yolanda along the path, off into the horizon. To me, this is clearly an enactment of the *pataki* of Ogún and Oshun, but set in a revolutionary context. When compared to the corresponding scene in Gloria Rolando’s explicit depiction of the *patakí*, the similarity in the composition of the two shots is striking, though they were created decades apart, and Gomez’s long preceded Rolando’s.

In his article “The Illusion of Equality: Machismo and Cuban Cinema of the Revolution,” Guy Baron takes a different read on this scene, one which I would argue completely misses the point:

But Mario, apart from during the opening few moments of the film, in no way controls the narrative. In fact, at times he is completely out of control of his situation, and, in particular of his relationship with Yolanda. In one scene, when they are discussing their respective histories on a walk in the countryside, Yolanda stands in front of Mario and confronts him, leaving him shrugging his shoulders in confusion as she then turns and walks away, having completely controlled this particular episode. Mario is left in shot, ostensibly free to ‘perform’, a performance in which, in traditional Hollywood narrative, the male ‘articulates the look and creates the action’ (Mulvey, 1975: 41). But he has no idea what to do with the opportunity to perform, shrugs his shoulders and, head bowed, meekly follows Yolanda. The male spectator, therefore, having at first identified with Mario (a first misrecognition), then suffers another misrecognition as he fails to ‘perform’ gender adequately (Baron 2010: 356-7).

In this case, relying solely on Western concepts of feminist theory and the construction of gender provides an overly simplistic interpretation of this scene. As the theoretical framework of Imperfect or Third Cinema would advocate, applying paradigms that are
indigenous to the country of the film leads to a more nuanced, and I would argue, more compelling interpretation of the meanings embedded therein.

Applying the metaphor of the myth of Ogún and Ochún to this scene offers a deeper, more nuanced interpretation of Gomez’s critique of gender roles in the revolution. Yolanda, as a schoolteacher, represents the “civilizing” force of the Revolution. Mario represents the revolutionary subject who undergoes an awakening of consciousness through the arc of the narrative, culminating in a change in his behavior—he breaks the “male code”. Yolanda acts as an agent in that process, literally leading him out of the woods of pre-revolutionary ignorance and cultural backwardness. The choice of Ogún as the archetype for the revolutionary man is compelling in light of another quote by Sandra T. Barnes: “Basically, the Ogun concept encapsulated the progression from hunting to agriculture and the mastery of metallurgy, to urbanization and, ultimately, in these peoples’ own view, to the development of empire” (emphasis added, Barnes 1989: 39).

The Civilizing Effect of Ochún

Taking the position that Yolanda embodies the civilizing, feminine archetype of Ochún (again, who is the patron saint of Cuba), other aspects of the film fall into place as part of that narrative. For example, in the scene when Mario and Yolanda go on a double date at a restaurant with another couple, Mario’s actions reveal that the refined environment of the restaurant is unfamiliar to him: he tucks his napkin into his shirt, he jumps startled at the waiter behind him lighting a flame at a tablesides stove. It is through his relationship to Yolanda that he becomes more integrated into society.
The culmination of Yolanda’s influence on Mario is manifested in his confrontation of Humberto in the worker’s meeting. In a previous scene of Mario and Yolanda conversing in bed, he confesses to her that he admires her outspokenness, and that he himself is terrified of doing the same. However, he overcomes this fear in the end and exercises a new form of agency. He makes a definitive step toward Revolutionary ideology and away from the “atavistic” and “antisocial” male codes by violating that sacred bond of brotherhood in favor of living in a correct way.

Women and Revolution

Outside of her personal influence on Mario, Yolanda acts as a civilizing arm of the revolution in her role as an educator. The narrator says in the introductory documentary sequence, “Education—that is ever more closely linked to work—is our principle tool in bringing about this transformation.” In particular, her relationship to the ‘problem student’ Lázaro acts as a microcosm of this revolutionary ideology. It is implied that as a woman, and a teacher, Yolanda is a feminine arm of the state, taking on a “mothering” role to society at large. In the scene in which she meets with Lázaro’s mother la Mejicana, it is made evident that because of la Mejicana’s poverty and social backwardness, she is incapable of mothering her child. This scene underscores the message that the state must step in where mothers from marginalized communities have failed in socializing their children. As Yolanda “civilizes” Mario, she likewise “civilizes” Lázaro by taking him out for ice cream, “integrating” him into society in a way that his own mother is incapable of. Although one could laud the central role of women in the revolution that is played out in this scenario, it is problematic because it
undermines the agency of Lázaro’s mother and puts Yolanda in a prescribed female role. It casts the activities of the Revolution in gendered terms and limits the “liberation” of the revolutionary woman’s lived experience.

In another scene, where the administration and faculty of Yolanda’s school meet, she raises the concern about the future of young women in the revolution. This concern is not resolved, but it also lies underneath the story of Yolanda. Although Yolanda plays the role of an active agent in the Revolution, the overall narrative of this film positions the revolutionary subject as a man, leaving women in a nurturing, supporting role.

**Destruction and Rebuilding**

The final formal element I would like to address is the motif of the wrecking ball, which appears on four occasions throughout the film. I believe that the significance of this motif is that it emphasizes the idea that destruction is necessary in order to rebuild a better society. Each occurrence of the wrecking ball seems to punctuate moments in the narrative that involve the breaking down of ideological walls: 1) after Mario blows up in the worker’s meeting, rupturing the chauvinistic “male code”, 2) after Guillermo advises Mario that he can leave—either Yolanda or the psychological trappings of his upbringing, 3) after Mario’s process of awakening and destruction of his previous mentality, and 4) after the worker’s post-mortem on Humberto and Mario.
It is notable that the figure of Ogún, with whom I have already drawn a connection to Mario, is one of a destroyer/creator. The need for destruction is both ideological and physical; in the same way that slums need to be razed in order to enable the construction of new housing units, old mentalities need to be transformed in order to construct a new revolutionary consciousness.

Conclusion

In the spirit of Imperfect Cinema, *De cierta manera* does not resolve the conflicts that it depicts, instead leaving them open for resolution and interpretation. According to
Espinosa, “[w]e maintain that imperfect cinema must above all show the process which generates the problems…To show the process of a problem… is to submit it to judgment without pronouncing the verdict.”

The final scene epitomizes this, as Mario and Yolanda walk off, arguing, into the landscape of socialist housing developments under construction. The spectator is left to draw his or her own conclusions, or perhaps engage in discussion with fellow spectators, much like the workers in their final debate scene.

However, if we are to read in the love story of Mario and Yolanda a rendering of the story of Ogún and Ochún, there is an additional underlying message to the film: the salvation of the New Man, and thus of Revolutionary society itself, depends on the intelligence and agency of women. The New Man, left to his own devices, is lost in the woods.
**CONCLUSION: “AND THE PÀTÀKÌ IS...”**

When I first learned from my Yorùbá language teacher that the word *pàkàtì* means “important,” I asked how it was used in context. She replied that it might be used at the end of a story, where the narrator finishes it by saying “…and the *pàkàtì* is…” much in the same way that European-derived fables frequently end with “and the moral of the story is…”.

Therefore, this last chapter seeks to return full circle to the starting point and ask, “what is important about this *patakì*? To whom and why?” and finally, “What does it have to do with Cuba?”

**Summary of Findings**

This dissertation sought to provide insight into the world view of Afro-Cuban religion through the lens of a singular myth that underscores one of the key tenets of what can be called Yoruba Moral Philosophy: that the preferred state of being is one of harmony and balance between opposing forces, or to return to the term mention in the introduction, *iwòntúnwònsì*, that the ideal situation is one of moderated balance between the positive and the negative. In the Cuban context, that balance between positive and
negative represents the tension between destruction of the old and construction of the new revolutionary society. It is also a balance between the “soft” power of women and the “hard” power of men, as embodied by the machete itself.

Likewise, Babatunde Lawal writes of “the dialectics of Yoruba cosmology, which explains the universe as an interface of opposing yet interrelated elements” (25). The pataki of Ogún and Ochún is illustrative of this concept, as each oricha represents an opposite set of characteristics from the other, and it is the meeting of these opposite forces and energies that enables the rebalancing of human society and social order, when Ochún successfully re-integrates Ogún back into society, so that it can continue to function. That one represents hot iron and the other cool water is not an accident.

Chapters 2 and 3 examined each figure individually in the context of Cuba, in an effort to understand what meaning each holds for Cuba, independently of this pataki. Chapter 2, which focused on the figure of Ogún, argued for a resonance between his archetype and that of masculine Cuban nationalist figures, who not only represent his brute force and military prowess, but share his affinity for both the machete and el monte. And while historians of the Independence Wars may cast doubt on the actual efficacy of the machete as a weapon of war, and scholars such as Julia Sweig question the widely accepted lore of the bearded revolucionarios masterminding their victory from the hills of the Sierra Maestra, there is no doubt that these prove to be powerful symbols to this day. That the figure in the CDR logo prominently and boldly brandishes a machete is a continuing testament to the power of this symbol. These collectively point to the masculinization of the Revolution and the primacy given to not only male historical figures, but “masculine” ways of knowing and being. Thus the pataki, as applied to the
Cuban Revolution, acts as a feminist critique of revolutionary power structures that merely replicate gender inequality, and suggests that this revolutionary system is lacking because it does not adequately value female or feminine forms of intelligence. The revolution is thus an incomplete project, and it will remain so until women are given equal political weight and power.

Chapter 3 presented the figure of Ochún and investigated her complicated relationship to the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba. One of the most important findings of that chapter is that the presence of the Virgin long pre-dated that of the Yoruba Ochún, despite the tendency to see it the other way around. The analysis of these two interrelated figures also revealed and important theme that is woven throughout the dissertation—that of the differences between Western and Eastern Cuba, in terms of culture, religion, history, and even ethnicity. This tension between the East and the West of the island, and the general primacy that is given to a “Havana-centric” point of view in Cuban Studies, has been noted and studied by scholars, but there is much room for future research in this area.

Another important takeaway from Chapter 3 is that Ochún is more than merely a goddess of coquetry and flirtation, and in fact, “*su putería es sagrada*” – so said Lydia Cabrera, quoting an informant. She writes, in the voice of Ochún speaking to Ogún, in her story *Bregantino Bregantín*: “Because you are the one who can open and close the heavens, I give you this sweetness so that you may get inside all saints and all men” (11). She is not only a strong and powerful deity; her sweetness represents the intelligence that is necessary for cosmic balance. She is not to be taken for granted. Just as the role of the woman in the success or failure of the revolution is not to be underestimated.
Chapter 4 examined several versions of the *pataki* that have appeared in Cuban popular culture in the 20th century. The work of Lydia Cabrera helped to transfer an oral art to the written page, and also reflects attitudes of the early 20th century when white elites found newly-seen value and inspiration in the arts and cultures of people of African descent, and recorded it as such. The post-Revolutionary founding of the Conjunto Folklorico Nacional de Cuba, which Katherine Hagedorn writes about extensively in *Divine Utterances*, ensured that this and other mythological stories about the Yoruba orichas were performed on a national stage. The ballet *El río y el bosque* provides a fascinating example of this *pataki* “crossing over” in genres to be hybridized with classical European composition and choreography. And lastly, the personal narrative woven into Hagedorn’s monograph demonstrates the ways in which *creyentes* or believers in the religion use *patakies* to make meaning of spiritual aspects of life that are otherwise unexplainable.

I hope to have demonstrated the ways in which stories can be used by individuals or collectives, as a way to forge identity, using a common vocabulary of signs and symbols. And that these processes can occur on the micro, personal level, such as with Katherine Hagedorn, or on a much broader, national scale, like I have argued with Sara Gomez’s *De cierta manera*. The pataki is not a fixed, monolithic thing; it adapts to context, and its meaning and interpretation can shift according to the social context or medium through which it is told.

**Implications and Contributions to Knowledge**
Lastly, Chapter 5 offered a novel reading of a much-studied film. I have argued that the film contains imagery that seems to be unmistakably making reference to this *pataki*. If this is indeed the case, this has large implications not only for the interpretation of this particular film, but for the relationship between the *pataki* and Cuban national mythologies in general. To return to a question stated in the Abstract: How does this *pataki* resonate with political and racial mythologies surrounding the idea of the Cuban nation? What are the deeper implications for Cuba in terms of gender? And Yoruba concept of duality and balance?

**Re-Centering African-derived Frameworks in Cuban Studies**

As also stated in the beginning, the underlying motivation of this project is to argue for a re-centering and privileging of African-derived philosophical frameworks within Cuban intellectual history. Part of this re-centering and privileging requires rethinking how we think about language and communication. By examining the ways in which Yoruba “visual language” is encoded and “hidden in plain sight,” this project advocates for multi-valent forms of observation—allowing multiple (and sometimes conflicting) messages to coexist and operate in concert. As Katherine Hagedorn explains in *Divine Utterances*, with such multi-valent forms of communication, the final received message depends in large part on the “competence” of the viewer or listener.

**Limitations and Future Research**

As this dissertation is interdisciplinary and multi-faceted in its nature, my challenge has been to keep it focused and avoid wandering off onto too many tangential
paths. Nonetheless, there were and still are research questions that I simply did not have the capacity to pursue—such as tracing the origins of this *pataki* in West African and seeking other versions from other places in the Yoruba diaspora. However, since this project is centered on Cuba, I decided to only look at versions coming out of Cuba. The analysis of these versions undoubtedly would have looked different if they were being compared more broadly across geography and time.

There is more research that remains to be done on the life and work of Sara Gomez. Although I did not dive more than superficially into her life story and other, shorter films, there is much more there to be discovered. I feel like I have only begun to scratch the surface of this iconic personality and artist, who sadly died young, but still left a treasure trove of her creativity and inquisitive eye to be studied and probed for additional messages and meanings.

The topic of visual language is another one that is fruitful for future research. This also lends itself well to the study of Cuban cinema, because surely there are more films in the archives that have visual cues and signs, derived from creolized African linguistic practices, that may not have been written about yet.

Taken together, this dissertation contributes to Cuban post-Revolutionary studies by adding a dimension to nationalist discourse and the intellectual history of Cuba through the inclusion of Yoruba thought and moral philosophy, in the form of the pataki. As today in Cuba the country continues the complicated conversation around the centrality of blackness to the Cuban experience, the failures of the revolution and the experiences of self-identifying Afro-Cubans of the legacies of slavery and colonialism that continue to create forms of marginalization and inequality today. This dissertation
has aimed to highlight the pataki as a potential tool of liberation, transformation, and new possibilities.
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