



Santería Abroad

The Short History of an Afro-Cuban Religion in Germany by Means of Biographies of Some of Its Priests

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Abstract. – The article reveals the history of Afro-Cuban Santería in Germany by way of the biographies of five of its priests. First, some general information about this religion will be provided, calculations about the esteemed number of followers are made, and limitations in practicing this religion in this country will be explained. At the end, some theoretical reflections will be made combining a classical theoretical concept of the Cuban anthropological debate with a recent German one, which has an implication on the relationship between the believer and his religion or, on a more general level, between the individual and the religious collectivity in times of globalization. [*Germany, Afro-Cuban Santería, travelling religion, diaspora, priests' biographies, transculturality*]

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This article contains some insights into the biographies of five Santería priests and believers living and practicing their religion in Germany.¹ The aim of this discussion is to provide some information on the short but interesting history of Afro-Cuban

Santería in this European country as recounted by some of its protagonists. This kind of approach is appropriate, on the one hand, because it opens dimensions of clarity and vividness that could never be reached through the presentation of mere facts. On the other hand, this approach is recommendable due to the great dispersion of believers of Santería throughout Germany, who do not constitute a unified group and cannot be presented as a homogenous entity. Except for Berlin, where we find about 1,250 Cubans, in any bigger German city, as for example Munich, there are only about 300 Cubans, and some 150 in medium-sized cities like Frankfurt/Main, of whom perhaps 30 percent are religious people, without taking into consideration a growing number of non-Cuban believers. Furthermore, the character of this research had to adapt to this situation. It reflects the condition of the dispersion of these people and the religion studied and can be called a “multi-situated ethnography” in George Marcus' sense (comp. Marcus 1998), since it has followed the tracks and paths of different people, images, objects, and ways, instead of trying to cover a whole religion within a conventional fieldwork based on permanent stay in one single place.

Nevertheless, in the beginning I provide some general information about the Santería religion,

¹ At the moment there are only few publications on santería in Germany; comp. Cipolletti (2006) and Rossbach de Olmos (2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008).

about its peculiarities, and its presence in Germany. I also bring some information about the approximate number of its followers, and impediments in practicing Santería in this country. After that, relevant details of the life history of five Santería priests and followers will be given. At the end I make some theoretical reflections, combining classical theoretical concepts of the Cuban anthropological debate with more recent German findings. They concern the relationship between the believer and his religion or, on a more general level, between the individual and the religious collectivity in times of globalization.

Santería: A Brief Introduction

The focus of the Santería practice constitutes the worship of *orichas*, i.e., divinities of the Yoruba homeland, which in colonial times were brought by slaves from West Africa to Cuba. The *orichas* can be seen as divine entities, with partly human traits that at the same time represent aspects of nature (Barnet 1997: 88ff.; Wedel 2004: 84f.). In the course of time, influences of Catholicism were integrated into the Afro-Cuban religion. Nowadays, the participation in catholic ceremonies is an integral part of the religious practice of Santería, and in many religious households, the catholic baptism is a prerequisite for the initiation to Santería, in which the believer becomes a son or a daughter of the *oricha*, or the saint to whom he/she is consecrated. Well-known is the identification of the *orichas* with corresponding catholic saints that resemble certain characteristics and features or show similar attributes and colors, and which has been interpreted on many occasions as a camouflage in order to allow the slaves deported from Africa to worship their deities without any fear of retaliation from the colonial and catholic power. But this identification could also be interpreted as an attitude of tolerance and openness that frequently characterizes polytheistic systems (Marquard 2005; Assmann 2003). This can also be observed in Cuba, in the coexistence of different Afro-American religions with different origins: Santería, based on religious conceptions of the Yoruba, who live in today's Nigeria and Benin, coexists with the Palo Monte religion (and its secret society of Abakuá) of Bantu origin, and with the Haitian Voodoo, as well as various forms of Spiritism of European origins. Certain rivalries exist and some religious traditions are considered to be magically more powerful, but there is no enmity caused by religious convictions. Nevertheless, the differences between the catholic saints and the orig-

inally African *orichas* persist (Palmié 1995: 81f.). Even if it is true that both can be found in the same house shrine, one next to the other, the saint is represented by a statue and the *oricha* incarnated in sacred stones (*otanes*) inside a closed container. It is also clear that while the saint gets flowers and candles as offerings, the *oricha* needs animal sacrifices from time to time because the blood provides new vital energy or *aché*.

Over the last few years, some tendencies have emerged to eliminate the catholic influences and to reintroduce the Yoruba orthodoxy. In this context the name "Santería" is losing acceptance. The denomination *regla de ocha* as well as the *regla de ifá*, a term for the *babalawos*, i.e., the priests specialized in divination, is used more and more frequently. Unlike the *regla de ocha*, within the *regla de ifá* the role of the priest is limited to men, even if this status quo has recently been changed by some consecrations of women as *iyaonifá*² Due to the fact that the name "Santería" is still the best known for this Afro-Cuban religion, it will be used in the context of the following study in spite of the mentioned reservations.

Santería: A Traveling Religion

Santería, whose formation is closely related to the forced deportation of slaves from the Yoruba land to Cuba, can be described as a "traveling religion." It emigrated from Cuba to the United States in the decade of the 1940s along with musicians and migrant workers (Brandon 1997: 104ff.), from where it moved to Puerto Rico in connection with the dominant spiritism (Schmidt 1995). After the Cuban revolution, when a lot of opponents of the government left the country in the decade of the 1960s but also after 1990, Miami became a new center of Santería (Palmié 1991: 184–205). It later spread over other parts of the Caribbean and other neighboring countries. Meanwhile, *santeros* and Santería believers can be found even in Argentina and in Mexico or in Venezuela, where links with local religious traditions have developed (Pollak-Eltz 2001; Argyriadis y Juárez Huet n. d.; González Torres 2008).

In the meantime, Santería has crossed the Atlantic Ocean and arrived in Europe, where new nuclei of the religion can be found in such countries as Spain, Italy, or France. With regard to Germany, the presence of the Afro-Cuban *orichas* has to be

² Rauhut (2004), Rossbach de Olmos (2007a/b), Carbó (2005).

seen within a special context that possibly identifies Santería as a marginal phenomenon of the country's recent history but for that reason not being insignificant. The first stopover of the *orichas* took place in the communist part of the former two Germanies, i.e., in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), with its Prussian kind of socialism that was characterized by the official atheism. The faith in the *orichas* arrived during the 1970s, and was brought over by students and young workers, who – within the framework of a bilateral agreement between Cuba and the GDR about the exchange of professional workers – received a training at state-owned enterprises, satisfying at the same time the high demand for manpower in socialist Germany. Within approximately one decade between 1978, when the agreement was signed, and the unification of the two German states in 1990, it is calculated that between 20,000 and 30,000 Cubans came to the GDR for the period of four or eight years (Gruner-Domic 1996). The Cuban side controlled the loyalty to socialism of the so-called *cooperantes*, who in the majority, because of their young age, might not have been initiated into the religion. Nevertheless, there were some young people who came from families with a long religious background. Due to the severe control by the Cuban authorities, most of the former “Kubis,” as the Cubans were called in the GDR (Cala Fuentes 2007: 58), doubt until today that religious objects of Santería could have been brought to the GDR, with the possible exception of some *resguardos*, or protection objects, as for example, red pocket tissues. The majority of former contract workers do not believe that it was possible to take “their saints” with them, who, as already known, are represented by *otanes* (consecrated stones) and a variety of other typical objects. Still, some Cubans assured that they took their religious objects to the GDR, especially when they returned from vacations in Cuba, when the control was less strict.

After the reunification of Germany in 1990, a number of Cuban nationals remained in the country. The reunified Germany preserves the record concerning national citizens. According to those data, the Federal Republic experienced an increase of Cuban presence, from 295 in 1989 to 3,361 in 1991 (*Statistisches Bundesamt* 2001). Until 2004, their number was increasing steadily, stabilizing in the course of the last few years, until it reached 8,500–9,000 people. To this figure one needs to add approximately 3,000 Cubans who live in the country illegally. The total number of Cubans who presently reside in Germany should then be calculated at about 12,000 people.

The reasons for the diffusion of Santería in Germany changed. Over the last few years mixed marriages, tourist trips to Cuba, or the interest in Afro-Cuban music brought Germans in touch with the religion as well. According to the author's estimations, around 3,500 persons in Germany feel attracted to Santería in one way or another. They can be simply believers, who worship the *orichas*, priests' clients in search of help to solve their specific problems, practitioners who received a minor consecration, or priests who initiated or who initiate others. Not all of them are Cuban citizens. There is a small amount of Latin Americans of different nationalities as well as an increasing number of Germans and Europeans from other countries. I was told that there are also some few Turkish or Korean initiates among the Santería believers in Germany.

The Religious Practice in Germany: Ritual and Religion

Although Santería has increasingly appeared as a global religion over the last few years, its relationship to Cuba is still to be regarded as an integral part of the religious practice in the diaspora. This situation can be explained by the improved communication networks at an international level that allow priests and initiates living abroad to keep in touch with the places where they were initiated. In that way they contact their religious godparents in case of need for religious and personal advice, which can be done by phone or the Internet. The *orichas* are also brought to the Santería homeland to worship them in ceremonies that could hardly be carried out in an environment not acquainted with it. Also non-Cubans, who for a variety of reasons get involved in Santería, come to the island for initiation due to better personal and logistic conditions for the seven days long ceremony or because an initiation carried out in the land of origin is considered more powerful than one done abroad.

In countries like Germany some restrictions on practicing Santería religion do exist. The daily worship of the *orichas* does not require much trouble but palm oil, honey, cocoa butter, finely ground eggshells, tobacco smoke, as well as rum or distilled liquor made from sugarcane (Rossbach de Olmos 2007c). The consultation of the oracle in the houses of the *santero* or *babalawo*, the presentation of the *orichas* for different occasions in artistically arranged altars or the so-called “thrones,” and the religious and folkloric drum ceremonies do not cause any major inconveniences. The complex initiations are the ones causing real difficul-

ties. They are considered as very expensive, complicated, and delicate. A considerable number of priests as well as the necessary plants and herbs, which are difficult to obtain in Germany, have to be brought together and paid for. One must also find an adequate place for the seven days initiation. Particularly, legal problems would arise due to the sacrifice of animals (especially the so-called “four legs”), which are essential for all initiations. The sacrifices would mean an offense against the German legal regulations of animal protection, as long as they are not protected by the legal guarantee of free religious worship. Since Santería is not recognized as an official religion, it is not protected by this law (Rossbach de Olmos 2007b).

The author of this article heard some rumors about a few initiations that had taken place in Germany. Most of them did not follow the established rules and that is why they caused problems to the novice, instead of positive personal well-being or stability, as it usually occurs in cases of initiations. During the investigation the author was informed about one initiation in June 2007, close to the Saxon city of Dresden, which was carried out properly and therefore was, according to a participant, worthy of trust and successful. Some day this ceremony may reach historical significance. The first initiations in a country – as for instance in the United States – are always regarded as an evidence that Santería is finally establishing itself in its new environment, although sometimes this fact is associated with rivalries and power struggle (comp. Brown 2003: 92 ff.).

Santería Protagonists in Germany

The following presentation of biographical details of five priests and believers of Santería in Germany concentrates on the following questions: 1. What caused the person getting involved in the Santería? 2. What reason motivated the person to immigrate to Germany? 3. How does the respective person practice Santería religion in Germany? 4. What peculiarities characterize a particular priest? The answers to these questions are outcomes of an investigation on Santería in Germany carried out from 2005 to 2007. The research consisted of conversations and unstructured interviews during which the mentioned issues were treated.³ Afterwards the answers were summarized for the presenta-

tion as described below. The biographical accounts are chronologically arranged, taking as the starting point the year of arrival of the respective priest in Germany. The biographical accounts focus only on some aspects that illumine very specific issues.

Julián Ponciano

Currently, Julián Ponciano⁴ lives and works in Potsdam, but he keeps in touch with his friends and with the relatives of his former German wife, who live near Dresden. Guillermo B. from Bautzen, who lives in the city since the times of the GDR, keeps memories of Julián alive. He has put the author of this article on Julián's track. Among his German and Cuban friends, Julián is known for organizing Cuban religious celebrations, despite of the strict socialist atheism of the GDR. It was always possible to find a place outside the city to have a religious festivity in honor of the *orichas* without being disturbed. That way, in times of socialism, German and Cubans gathered on the periphery of the city to worship the *orichas* Changó, identified as Saint Barbara in Catholicism; Babalú Ayé, who corresponds to Saint Lazarus; Ochún, who represents the Virgin of Charity of Copper, as well as the other important Cuban deities. It seems that Julián had the sufficient discretion and the necessary protection of the *orichas* to avoid any trouble. Julián, as a Cuban, knew from his own experience how difficult it was to take religious paraphernalia to the GDR. So, at the beginning, he only came with a previously prepared chain as protection, leaving to his family in Cuba the daily care of his *orichas*, after these had given their respective approval by the oracle. Afterwards he brought his saints to his new homeland.

Julián Ponciano is Afro-Cuban and comes from a religious family from Havana. By birth he is a son of Yemayá, the deity of the salty waters, since his own mother “made her saint,” i.e., was initiated, while she was pregnant. Julián, as a son by birth, would not have had to be initiated to Santería, but he did and, furthermore, he was initiated to Palo Monte. That is why he is called “tata.” Julián, like many other Cubans, continues the religious tradition of his family, which he practiced in the GDR with such discretion that his fidelity towards

³ In this context I distinguish between conversation and interview. The interview was recorded whereas the conversation was summarized afterwards as a kind of memory protocol.

⁴ The first and second names of the *babalawos* and *santeros* are the real ones. All the five protagonists presented here allowed the author to use their real names. The author would like to express her gratitude to all of them to be allowed to publish very personal details of them.

socialism and his loyalty to the state were never questioned.

Julián was not a contract worker, but came to Germany as a student. From 1976 on, he studied judo and martial arts in the cities of Dresden, Leipzig, Rostock, and Karl-Marx-Stadt (today Chemnitz). He finished university in 1982 in Dresden. Julián was called “Jimi” because of the legendary Jimi Hendrix, with whom, in previous years, he shared the “Afro look” hairstyle, i.e., long and curly hair, that was very popular and common among black people at the time. In 1979, Jimi had to undergo a meniscus operation at the hospital of Dresden, where there were only very few black patients. There he met the mother of a nurse, who had been admitted to the same hospital suffering from stomach cancer. This woman became the first client to whom Julián offered and provided support. The stomach cancer got well and according to Julián, the woman has been in good health since then. Afterwards, other clients followed. One of them was his own German wife, who, as he explains, was healed from a serious illness and later was initiated into Santería as well. Mostly he provided help to people with illnesses, and a lot of his religious godchildren that Julián took care of and who nowadays live in Munich, Cologne, or Spain remember him with affection and gratitude. Julián Ponciano diagnoses problems of people by means of spiritism. With a glass of water put in front of him, he identifies the problem of his patient, although this person might be far away from him.

During his studies at the university, in 1974, he was elected as “chief of group” by the Cuban nationals. In this position, he took over the responsibility for a group of young workers in Bautzen, assisting them in all matters related to their stay in Germany. This position was usually only given to members of the Cuban “Juventud Comunista” (Communist Youth) or to the members of the Communist Party. The fact that Julián was given this responsibility shows that there were no reasons to doubt his fidelity to socialism. Julián, from his point of view, does not see any contradictions between politics and religion. He explains that during his term as the chief of the group he occasionally had to make inspections of the residences where the Cubans stayed, and he sometimes found an Eleguá, the *oricha* that opens the paths. With the piety that is proper to him, Julián worshiped Eleguá with a brief prayer or knocking softly against the wall or the floor, as his religious obligations demanded it from him, without anybody noticing what should not be noticed at all.

In times of the GDR, Julián got married and stayed in Germany after the fall of the Wall. He has spent a long time of his life in this foreign country and has adopted the German citizenship. Nowadays, he works in the catering trade, lives a secluded life, and not all the Cubans who have known him for years have realized that he attends people as a *santero*, or a *palero*. His familiarity with living conditions in Germany may be the reason why Julián does not see many limitations to the exercise of his religion, as long as his *orichas* express their approval by means of oracle. Julián Ponciano admits having participated in two initiations, in places that were once part of the GDR.

One of Julián’s religious activities deserves special attention. He himself may not consider it to be particularly spectacular because from his point of view the healing of sick people used to be a bigger challenge. Nevertheless, it is unusual from the perspective of cultural history, since it deals with a very sensitive issue of the recent history of Germany. Julián insists that, by means of Santería-related practices, he was able to influence decisions of some officials in the GDR, so that they authorized the emigration of eight East German citizens and their children to the Federal Republic. These people are still grateful for that today. The total number of emigration permits issued by authorities of the GDR is calculated at 400,000 (Hertle 2002: 310ff.). Could it happen that some of those permits were given due to the intervention of the *santero* and his *orichas*?

Eddy Gutiérrez

Eddy Gutiérrez is one of the very few Cuban *babalawos* in Germany who offered his religious assistance online. He created his own website where he introduced himself as *ifá* priest, and as a singer, and instructor of salsa dance. According to his own experience, the Internet is not the most opportune way to address those people who need and search for religious support. It is mostly the oral diffusion that brings clients to the *babalawo* in Germany. The German capital of Berlin, with its multiple cultural contexts and its sparkling entertainment, where Eddy has resided for many years in the quarter of Kreuzberg, is the right place for somebody who devotes himself with the same enthusiasm to the Cuban music as to the Afro-Cuban religion.

Among the eight *babalawos* that live in Berlin today, Eddy is one of the eldest consecrated to *ifá*. Besides caring for his godchildren and his clients, he is still interested in the international develop-

ments of the *regla de ifá* and *ocha*, and he is concerned with the future of the religion at the diaspora. Eddy is looking for a stronger cooperation and union among the Afro-Cuban priests of Berlin and the surrounding areas, and his biggest desire is to pay stronger attention to the recently initiated *babalawos*. The bad experiences he had made as a young priest when he was a contract worker in the GDR convinced him that the novices can easily get in trouble when they are not given a proper assistance and attention by their godfathers and the experienced *babalawos*. This issue has become a permanent worry for Eddy Gutiérrez.

Berlin is Eddy's second place of residence in Germany. He arrived in Eisenach in December 1983, as a 21-years-old *cooperante*, that is, a qualified worker in training. He was allocated to the state-owned automobile company of Eisenach (VEB Automobilwerk Eisenach or AWE), which produced one of the distinctive cars of the GDR, the Wartburg. Eddy comes from a religious family in Havana, which did not prevent a great part of his relatives to identify themselves with the goals and objectives of the socialist government. Eddy was no exception. He was a candidate to membership in the Cuban Communist Youth, and his family hoped that their son would be sent to the brotherly socialist GDR to achieve a higher professional level. On the other hand, two years before his departure to the GDR, Eddy Gutiérrez had been consecrated as a son of the *oricha* Changó in the *regla de ocha*. For many years, he had already been a priest of the deity Osain, who is identified particularly with nature, the flora, and herbs. Eddy says that this deity emigrated from the Congo to Nigeria a long time ago.

From his current point of view as an experienced *babalawo*, Eddy considers his imprudence and his lack of knowledge as a young man to be the reasons why he was expelled from the GDR on religious grounds. Before he had left Cuba, he got the consent of his deities by means of the oracle to leave his own *orichas* with his relatives, so that they could take care of them. He knew that it was a mistake entering the GDR with some very good camouflaged materials, which were needed for the production of religious objects. In his new country of residence, which was completely unknown to him, Eddy wanted to be prepared for any eventuality. He hid the materials in a room of the residential house, which he shared with other Cuban contract workers. With the exception of some strict cadres, his colleagues – that is what Eddy remembers – were mostly somehow believers; everybody knew it, so there was no reason to take high precautions. Everything worked well for two years, until Eddy

– according to his current interpretation – ignored the warning that the *orichas* had expressed by divination.

In 1987, against the advice of the oracle, Eddy spent a day outside with his girlfriend, whom he had met for the first time some days ago and who became his wife some years later. The fact that he did not obey the advice of the oracle may be interpreted as an imprudent attitude. As a consequence, he could not exercise any influence on the following events that led to the immediate cessation of his stay in the GDR. The East German and the Cuban agents carried out a raid at the residential house. Since Eddy was absent, the police broke open the door, checked his room, and found the hidden religious objects and materials.

The raid was not exactly directed against the Afro-Cuban religion. Car parts were missing at the Eisenach car factory, and there was the suspicion that they had been stolen. The East German side probably did not understand the significance of the religious materials they found in Eddy's room because of their ignorance of the Afro-Cuban religion and its diverse materials and attributes. But the Cuban inspectors immediately identified Eddy as a believer and a person that practiced the Santería. A series of adverse accidents and mysterious cases of illnesses that occurred some time before now seemed to indicate that Eddy was the responsible and, therefore, the author of witchcraft. The Cuban side denied that witchcraft had been practiced by the contract workers in the GDR. Still, in the same year, Eddy was expelled from East Germany on the request of Cuban authorities.

Eddy, who considered himself an exemplary contract worker, did not accept this incident as a sufficient reason for such a hard sanction and petitioned to suspend the repatriation, first of all with the chief of group of the correspondent region and then at the Cuban embassy. He failed. Moreover, the commercial secretary gave him no hope of being pardoned.

The expulsion had a great impact on the future life of the young Cuban man. His professional career was violently cut short, and back in Cuba Eddy's hope of continuing education was uncertain. Because of the events, his mother, who until then had been strongly committed to the socialist revolution, retired from politics altogether. Furthermore, the moment of Eddy's repatriation must be considered a sad event. Only a few years later, when the Cuban Communist Party introduced certain changes at its 4th Congress in 1991 which allowed for religious commitment and political affiliation at the same time by members of the Com-

munist Party, the life of Eddy would have been different. He got little satisfaction from the fact that the chief of the group, who was responsible for his expulsion, had been expelled as well some time later, although Eddy considered this expulsion as a kind of punishment of the *orichas* for the severe injustice committed against “their son.” A translator, who due to his political affiliation to the Communist Party was a strong supporter of Eddy’s expulsion, nowadays lives as the owner of restaurants in one of the federal states of West Germany. One could almost talk about a “Wendehals,” a turncoat, as the GDR opportunist’s were denominated after the reunification. In the context of his own repatriation, Eddy heard about another case of expulsion due to religious reasons, but he never found out who that person was.

After his return to Cuba, from 1987 to 1990, Eddy enrolled at a high school where he obtained a degree. In 1992 the “son of Changó” who had been initiated many years ago, was consecrated as a priest of *ifá*. In the same year he returned to the then reunified Germany after getting married to his long-time girlfriend. On invitation of another *babalawo*, he moved from Eisenach to Berlin in 1996, where he has lived until today, and where he has founded the group of his “religious people” who he attends and advises.

Eddy’s religion also provided him with the knowledge that helped him to understand the significance of the events that took place. The *itá* or oracle of life, which is conducted through divination at the end of their ceremony of initiation, and which is interpreted at length in order to provide the initiate with orientation for all his life, in the case of Eddy revealed events related to the *oricha* Babalú Ayé, who was also expelled from his country. The course of Eddy’s life, which he interprets on the grounds of the mythology incorporated into the oracle and explained in relation to the already mentioned *oricha*, included the option of an expulsion. The fact that a friend, who was a priest and whose life oracle revealed the same sign at his initiation, was expelled from Mexico, proves in Eddy’s opinion, the correctness of this interpretation. But in the same way the religion could have provided the measures to counteract that disaster. In Eisenach, according to Eddy, he lacked advice and consultancy of the elder and experienced priests from Cuba, who would have found ways and means to prevent him from such a misfortune.

In *ifá* religion, Eddy Gutiérrez is known by the name of Baba *ifá* Adebí, and in the meantime he has become a higher priest, who attends a large number of clients and godchildren. Thanks to his

experience as a *babalawo*, he was able to control particularly difficult situations in Berlin that could have caused him problems. These days, the ambition of this *babalawo* is that no priest should be condemned after making mistakes due to lack of information and attention.

Jorge “Pichy” Espichicoque

Jorge “Pichy” Espichicoque came to Germany at the end of 1992. He was not among the first Cubans who arrived in this country, but he is supposed to be the first *babalawo* who came to Berlin, the German city in which most of the priests and believers of Santería live today. However, he would have preferred to immigrate to Canada, but Cuba refused him the permission to leave the country in that direction. What bothered him most about the living conditions in Cuba, besides the generalized shortage of almost everything during the so-called “special period,” were the prohibition to leave the country. Under no circumstances he would have immigrated to the United States of America, even if he had had a chance. Establishing himself in the United States would have meant an offence to the political ideals of his father Rafael, who felt committed to the revolutionary movement since his childhood, and who fought in the mountains at the side of Fidel Castro during the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Although his son Pichy does not totally agree with the ideology of his father, he respects him and his convictions. Yet, independent from the loyalty to the political ideals of his father, Pichy wanted to know other parts of the world. He had a prophecy of living in a distant country, and that is why, after marrying a German woman, he moved to Berlin, where he currently lives.

Pichy criticizes the official lack of interest with which some veterans of the revolution are treated, mostly those who – like his father Rafael – belong to Afro-Cuban families and show strong interest in the social development and the well-being of the poor. Since his father in his old age does not get the support he needs, Pichy considers the neglected attendance of his “old man,” who sacrificed his health to the struggle for the socialist revolution, to be a subtle racism, while others of a higher social class are receiving all kinds of benefits, so that their living conditions are better. A wheelchair or painkiller for the body of a revolutionary of great devotion to the cause has to be imported from abroad. Probably it was partly the father’s own fault, because his socialist ethic prohibited him to ask for help for him and his family. He always

had those people in mind whose lives were more difficult than his own. Even during the revolution his wife and his children had to bear consequences of his political convictions, particularly with the absence of the father and the husband. To protect them from persecution by the enemy, the whole family moved from the Cuban east to the capital, Havana.

From early childhood the paternal grandfather assumed the care of his grandson Pichy and introduced him to the Afro-Cuban religion. The family of the grandfather observed Haitian traditions. Memories of ancestors, who came to eastern Cuba from Haiti as slaves, were still alive, and the grandfather kept some religious knowledge, which was said to have its roots in the Haitian *voodoo* that originates in Benin. The fact that his grandson was initiated in the 90s, first as a son of Changó in the *regla de ocha* and then as a *babalawo*, was the result of the grandfather's guidance; he foretold him a life dedicated to religion and trained him as his religious successor. The grandfather gave his grandson something he is well-known for in Berlin and beyond the limits of the city: a secret that Pichy uses with the necessary precaution to solve some very special problems. Such transmission of secret knowledge from the previous generation to the current *santeros* and *babalawos* is not usual. The jealousy of the elders, who keep their knowledge and carried their secrets to the grave instead of revealing it to the younger people, is well-known.

Jorge Espichicoque always saw his role as the first *babalawo* in Berlin as a mission to unite all friends and those interested in the Afro-Cuban religions. Even when the ups and downs of his life as immigrant forced him to live in the city without a residence permit for some time, it did not stop him from attending people who needed help in organizing religious festivities, which he did first in private and later in the public sphere. An article in a progressive catholic journal talks about a celebration in honor of San Lazarus, the saint that is identified with Babalú Ayé, which Jorge Pichy Espichicoque organized on his bar Saoco during this time (Mödehn 2002).

Pichy is a priest whose life, besides his religion, is devoted to Cuban music. He is a percussionist in a band of Son music. He teaches percussion and occasionally organizes folklore parties with son and rumba music. Recently, he composed a song for a Berlin rap singer who is also his godson, in which he combines the human warmth with an attractive sensitivity and religious motifs. In the Prenzlauer Berg, the neighborhood where Pichy Espichicoque lives, he is well integrated. The neighbors know

him and he has a lot of friends there. His small apartment is the gathering place for those who need religious help but also for friends from all over the city who want to visit the *babalawo*, the musician, or the person Jorge "Pichy."

The *odun*, i.e., the sign of the oracle by which Jorge Pichy Espichicoque "was born" as a *babalawo* during his consecration of *ifá*, has a special relation to death. That is the reason why he has such a particular sense of situations marked by death, in particular in Germany, where the Nazi regime and the Second World War claimed so many human lives. At the same time, the *odun* bestows the *babalawo* with some special qualities to solve those problems in which death plays a predominant role. Pichy can talk about a series of cases in which he helped people with serious illnesses to recover or, at least, to have a bearable life. Through his religion he has saved a person who was willing to commit suicide, preventing him from jumping off a building. Worth mentioning is undoubtedly the case of the girlfriend of his Italian friend, who had been admitted to hospital in coma, in the condition which the doctors found incurable. His friend called him and asked him to come to the hospital. Making use of his religious abilities, Pichy made sure that the young woman survives. He went to the hospital immediately, let his friend lock the door, and after holding a ceremony the woman suddenly woke up. When the doctor on duty discovered that the door was locked, he thought about calling the police. But when he found the patient awake, he just asked the *babalawo* if he was a doctor, and Jorge introduced himself as Afro-Cuban priest.

The *babalawo* has not always been given a reward for his help, says Jorge Espichicoque. Germans don't believe in energies and higher forces, and they cannot imagine the religious effects and impacts of *ifá*. The problem is that in many cases the religious assistance requires further ceremonies, which cost money and through which the *babalawo* habitually gets clean and free from negative energies that frequently accompany the clients who are seeking help.

Alexander Bilbao

In Germany there seems to be a group of *santeros* that lead a life of relative seclusion for and with their religion. At least Alexander Bilbao seems to belong to this type of *santeros*. Since the destiny had brought him to Germany, this man, who is originally from Matanzas, has lived in small towns in Bavaria and then in Swabia, where there are

few Cubans and even less people are initiated into the religion. He met a Cuban whom he planned to “make saint,” that is, to initiate, in the same asylum lodging of Aschaffenburg, where he lived temporarily. But eventually the relationship was broken. Afterwards, he stayed in contact with a Cuban *babalawo* who lived in Frankfurt, but this relationship did not survive either. Other Cuban friends, also originally from and around Matanzas, are spread all over Germany, and they only reestablish contact when they are going to travel to Cuba, offering to take letters or small gifts to relatives and friends at home. Alexander’s religious way of living is one of a relative isolation. Although in his daily life he is very busy, because he temporarily has two or three jobs to support him and his children, he misses religious exchange and religious environment. Alexander is a son of Changó. He reveals that he frequently sits in front of his *orichas* which have found a new place in the cupboard of his living room. He lights candles, offers them a cigar – although he is a non-smoker –, and talks to them as if they were his best friends. Alexander loves Santería, which brought stability and calmness into his life. And if he did not live in distant Germany but in Cuba, where even the daily life grants sufficient opportunities to increase religious knowledge and improve ritual accomplishments, he already would have become an *oba*, a master of ceremonies, who leads the initiations and higher rituals within the Santería. But he has only “made one saint” till now, i.e., he only initiated one young woman becoming her godfather, and during Alexander’s absence it is his own godmother who offers advice and help to his goddaughter.

Alexander shows interest and capacity to function as a priest. During his initiation, his life oracle indicated him a future as a *babalawo*. The reason why he did not consecrate into *ifá* is that he feels a stronger inclination towards the ritual practice of the *regla de ocha*, and also because he perceives the behavior of many *babalawos* as arrogant, as they consider themselves superior due to their higher religious rank. Alexander was never “ridden” by a saint, that is, no *oricha* has ever taken possession of him, even during his initiation, which is a clear indication that the *babalawo* priesthood is the appropriate way for him because *babalawos* are not allowed to incorporate *orichas* or spirits of deceased people.

In spite of his faith, Alexander as a young man of about thirty years, wanted to discover the world and to enjoy the advantages of technical development of capitalism, for example, the DVD (Digital Versatile Disc) and the computer. Those were things that he was able to buy in Germany, and which he enjoyed

during his idle hours. But the joy that these new purchases bring was always accompanied by the feeling that they were bought at the high expense of the separation from the people he appreciates and loves. Alexander misses the religious celebrations and meetings of his hometown, Matanzas. Since the divorce from his Cuban wife, which included the separation from his children as well, his feeling of loneliness increased.

Alexander does not come from a traditional Afro-Cuban religious family. It is not a long time ago that his ancestors had left Spain to immigrate to Cuba, therefore, his mother could claim the Spanish nationality, if she wanted, without any difficulties. His father is a retired colonel and maintains a loyal but not a fanatic position in relation to the Cuban revolution. He was not really enthusiastic when he heard that his son was going to be initiated into Santería, and he always remained skeptical. It was by chance that Alexander got in touch with the Afro-Cuban religion. He only wanted to accompany a friend who went to consult the oracle, when the *santera* noticed something in Alexander’s aura that prompted her to tell him that he was more in need of orientation of the *orichas* than the friend he accompanied.

Afterwards, Alexander met the *santera* Juana Rosa García Domínguez, who introduced him into the spiritual world of the religion, and with whom he shared the interest in the work with spirits. The Afro-Cuban variation of spiritism was perhaps the decisive reason for Alexander to join Santería. Alexander established a special affective relationship with Juana Rosa, who by the time had become his religious godmother. He remembers being one of the first white men who came to Juana Rosa’s house in Matanzas, mingling with her black godchildren and clients. As an experienced *santera* o *iyalocha*, Juana finally achieved to dispel the parent’s doubts against the initiation of their son. When Alexander was initiated as a son of Changó, his mother came to the ceremony and was the first person to bless him, as it is common in the most traditional families in town. Nowadays, when Alexander spends his holidays in Matanzas, he always stays some days at his godmother’s house. He invited her to come to Germany twice, for three months respectively, to have her company and to increase his religious knowledge as well as to practice rituals under her guidance.

On his arrival in Germany, Alexander went directly to an immigrant facility and asked for asylum. But after getting married and so having the residence permit, he withdrew his asylum request. Still until now, he has bad memories of this time

before his marriage from April to July 1997, when the local agency of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees in Würzburg took charge of his case. Continuous interviews took place, almost every day, which were long, exhausting, and annoying, and resembled police interrogations. The intention was to verify Alexander's right for asylum. These interviews left a lasting mark on his mind. In such moments he had asked his *orichas* for consolation and support. Alexander had taken them to his new whereabouts and they lived with him in the asylum lodging to be later moved to the cupboard of his new home. Before the interviews, Alexander used to take Changó out and beg him for power and good luck for himself and his asylum request. It seems as if the neighbors and colleagues in the lodging facility became aware of this, and very soon they requested the attention and help of the deities as well. Alexander attended to a huge number of refugee companions who in the presence of Changó had to clean themselves with an egg, passing it through their body, and then throwing it away. In the new lodging in Aschaffenburg, to which Alexander had been transferred after three months, the same ceremonies continued. The religious cleansings seem to have been effective. A Cuban teacher, who lived in the same lodging as Alexander, received a permanent residence permit. Alexander regrets to have lost contact with her.

As we can see, the *orichas* have been also active in German asylum lodgings, and no situation that religious Cubans face in this country has been unfamiliar to them.

Mark Bauch

Mark Bauch is a 30-years-old man who was born in Göttingen and currently lives in Berlin. He is one of the gradually increasing numbers of Germans, who sought and found a new religious orientation in Santería. Mark has not become a fanatic believer. Although he pays a lot of attention to his new faith, he integrates his former convictions, for example Buddhism, and he generally includes his personal experiences into his new religion. I am talking about a person of artistic sensitivity, who writes poems and publishes his lyrics in the Internet or in a book (Bauch und Bertram 2003).⁵ After taking up nursing career and working in this professional field for some years, he studied history of art at the Technical University of Berlin in

autumn 2006. Nowadays, he is interested in arts and religion, which precisely in the case of Santería are permeable and adjoining spheres.⁶ His love for poetry and art prompted Mark to write a story which contains all his experiences with Santería. "My Way to Ochún. A Spiritual Report to the Heart of an Afro-Cuban Religion" is a narrative in which the author adds chapter to chapter, after every new phase of his religious development (Bauch 2007).

The oracle determined Ochún as the protecting deity of Mark. Meanwhile, this German son of Ochún carried out a series of minor initiation ceremonies and received some deities, the mysterious *oricha* of the depths of the sea, Olokun, among them, who is said to provide health, well-being, and calmness. Mark and his religious godfather, Joaquín La Habana Reyes Rivero, went to the shore of the Baltic Sea to carry out the corresponding ceremonies. He also received Ochún, but she is not completely seated on her "son" Mark yet. She is a "washed" Ochún, which means a representation of Ochún in form of sacred and sacralized stones, that were washed in herb and sacrificial baths, this corresponding to a partial initiation but which already serves to protect her son who nevertheless has to complete his initiation some day. In Cuba the "washed" *oricha* is given to a believer in case of emergency, for example, when a serious illness occurs. In Germany, the ceremony already seems to be an adaptation to local conditions of the country.

Nevertheless, even in Germany it is not allowed to give a "washed" *oricha* without necessity. In Mark's case, there was a certain emergency. He has always been a spiritual person. But some months after his thirtieth birthday, the spirituality increased too much and he got nightmares, which severely disturbed his sleep. The dreams were frequently about dead people or took place where people were dying: in hospitals or in war scenarios. It seemed, as if dead people had tried to transmit their messages to the living through Mark. Some time later, Mark said he would also meet dead people when he was awake. It is obvious that somebody like him, who had imagined his future religious life as a Buddhist monk, felt seriously confused. Being a professional nurse, he had enough medical knowledge to be worried about his mental health.

The way Mark went afterwards resembles an odyssey. Conversations with a friend from Hamburg, who suffered from nightmares too, lead him to Afro-Cuban religions. After some doubtful expe-

⁵ A part of Mark Bauch's lyric can be found in the Internet (www.lyrik-berlin.de).

⁶ Comp. Rossbach de Olmos (2008) where the question of permeability between religion and art in Santería has been dealt with.

periences with a Brazilian *macumbera* at Berlin, he searched the Internet, where, through an *ifá* priest in Vienna, he found the *babalawo* Winfred Prey, who resides in Wiesbaden.⁷ His religious name is “*ifá omó*,” and he calls himself the first German *babalawo* who brought *ifá* to Germany. It could be true. When the oracle was consulted through the sign determined by the *babalawo*, Ochún expressed her wish to clarify the protecting *oricha* of Mark immediately and claimed him for herself. Mark had to look for a *santero* of Ochún for his further orientation and learning, which he effectively did some time later. Winfred Prey still helped him over the phone from Wiesbaden for some time, until Mark finally found Joaquín La Habana. Joaquín is an experienced *santero* who lives in Berlin and is known as a dance and show artist. His future godfather immediately noticed that Mark had qualities to be a medium to receive messages from spirits. During spiritism sessions, which were carried on with some friends who were *santeros* as well, the spirits that accompanied Mark were identified and the young man was assisted to direct his spiritual visions into precise and controlled paths.

Nowadays, in the presence of Mark, one notices immediately that the spontaneous advice and recommendations which he gives deserve respect and recognition. Meanwhile, Mark reorganized the religious paraphernalia that always accompanied him in his dealings with Ochún. He has religious festivities in honor of his *oricha*, and he participates in the ceremonies of the Afro-American diaspora in Berlin, for example, the Brazilian variety of the Yoruba religion, that is, *candomblé*. The fact that Mark successfully managed to control his nightmares, which caused him huge suffering before, and to direct them to spiritual paths demonstrates what is expected from Santería: leading problems of the clients to specified and suitable solutions for him/her. Today, Mark says that it were the spirits who called him and that Santería made him understand their voices.

Another aspect has to be mentioned. Like several male sons of Ochún, Mark tends to search for a partner of the same sex. Ochún, because of her love for beauty, eccentricity, sensuality, and for coquettishness, is the female *oricha* par excellence in the Afro-Cuban pantheon. She seems to attract the feminine, and homosexuality belongs to her domain as well. While homosexuality was and still is discriminated against in the Cuban society, this does not apply to the same degree to the Afro-

Cuban religions. On the contrary, there is a considerable number of homosexual *santeros* – not a few are sons of Ochún – who enjoy wide recognition. New believers can benefit from this situation, even in the diaspora, because there are informal networks that guarantee that a German who joins the religion and is homosexual can find an appropriate priest and an appropriate godfather if he wants so. The world “gay” finds a more tolerant environment in Berlin, after the city’s mayor declared on June 10, 2001: “I am a gay and that’s all right.” Santería as a religion accepts the human being in all its possible dimensions, and Ochún might be considered the patroness of the homosexuals in addition to all the other aspects that she represents.

From Transculturation towards Transculturality

After presenting the biographical details of five Santería priests and believers, I would now formulate some more general reflections. By using individual life stories to (re)present a religion, I inverted, to a certain degree, the traditional structure of a sociological discourse. I did not focus on the collectivity as the common object of anthropological reflection, but rather I concentrated on individual biographical details which should now provide the starting point for deliberations on collectivity that, however, is no longer seen as an organic unity.

This approach corresponds to the growing trend toward deconstruction of notions of collectivity in anthropological studies, which includes the concept of nation as well as ethnic groups, and could be extended to religion. Collectivity is being considered to a growing degree as an invention, construction, or even manipulation. Even within the religious development itself the tendencies towards a reorientation appear to leave issues on collectivity behind, in order to concentrate on the individual believer.

The words “transculturation” and “transculturality” allow for an interesting comparison to demonstrate the change that is taking place in Santería as well. “Transculturation” represents a category which is kept in high esteem in the Cuban debates. It goes back to the great Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz (1973), who can be considered the founder of the Afro-American studies in Cuba. In the 1940s, Ortiz described transculturation as the mutual penetration of cultures of Europe, Africa, and Asia that arrived in Cuba with slaves and emigrants. This concept was at the same time a critical reply to the acculturation model of the anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits (1945), who founded

⁷ This *babalawo* has his own Web site on the Internet (www.orunmila.de).

the Afro-American studies in the United States and who integrated them into the North American diffusionism, into the debate of acculturation or, in other words, into the studies of cultural change. While the acculturationists saw the adaptation of black populations to the different Euro-American cultures in the New World as a linear process, though not so in relation to different spheres such as religion, language, material culture, etc., but in any case resembling a one-way street, the transculturation of Ortiz concentrated on the mutual cultural penetration and the intersection of ethnic and cultural boundaries of distinct groups. The fact that this controversy might express the difference in permeability of the Spanish and Anglo American culture, notwithstanding the idea of transculturation, stands against the acculturation model and the supposition that only one or two (or three) cultures change under the influence of a dominant culture.

For his part, Wolfgang Welsch (1997) some years ago reacted to the new conditions of globalized exchange of culture(s) by using the concept of transculturality. The contemporary cultures, according to him, do not fit (any more) within the previous concepts of closed homogeneous entities and of organic unities. On the contrary, they are characterized by a variety of subunits that acquire transnational traits. The concept of transculturality expresses this change, focusing at the same time on the individual that behaves flexibly in relation to different cultural influences.⁸ Welsch does not question the existence of cultural characteristics and their significance, but he insists on the fact that they do not form a closed unity, and that they reach a new level of flexible combinations in each individual.

Analogous evolution can be seen in the debate on Santería in Cuba. While previously the discussion about the origin of that religion centered on African slaves, especially the Yoruba, including the hypothesis that Santería played an important role in the process of ethnogenesis of various groups in the New World⁹, currently the debate gets more and more away from the supposed historical group of slaves conceptualized as a unity. Instead, today the interest moves to the different religious branches of Santería or to the founders of the religion, who – for example the legendary *babalawo* Remigio Ño Herrera (Adechina), just to mention one example (Brown 2003: 64 ff.) – played a decisive role in the emergence of the *reglas de ocha* and *ifá*. The history of the foundation of Santería

does not show the religion as a genuine collective tradition, even though it is based on a common mythology and symbolism, and cannot exist without the collective ritual aspects. However, the historical sources reveal heavy disputes among priests and priestesses, founders of the actual religious branches, which were partly struggles to gain prestige of the involved people, but partly stem from regional differences already originated in the Yoruba land (Ramos 2003). Another example represents the reform movement that can be recently observed in Cuba, although we do not have any detailed scientific analysis of that phenomenon. Those who introduce reforms and changes are extraordinary personalities. Victor Betancourt, for example, stands for the opening of the *regla de ifá* to women, which has until then been controlled and dominated by men. Frank Cabrera, on the other hand, represents the reestablishment of the lost connection with the original region of the Yoruba land, without losing the sight of the recent interest in use and perception of Santería symbolism of different Cuban political leaders (Miller 2000).

A lot of factors influence this new interest in the individual protagonists, among them the fact that priests like Willi Ramos or initiates like David Brown participate in the debate as scientists. Moreover, the spirit of the times is characterized by notions of globalized heterogeneity, in which the homogeneous collectivity dissolves and the individual comes to focus. In any case, the transculturation theory of Fernando Ortiz as paradigm for expressing the mutual penetration of cultural traditions on the one hand, and the transculturality of Wolfgang Welsch, on the other, which is based on the idea that individuals comport themselves flexibly in the interface of different cultural flows, form exactly the context in which conclusions from the five previously presented biographies have to be drawn.

For sure, these biographies do not paint a complete picture of Santería in Germany, but they make up its remarkable part. In particular, they show the possible variety of ways and perspectives in the lives of the protagonists. Among them, there are priests like Eddy Gutiérrez or Julián Ponciano, who follow the religious traditions of their families without any interruption. Then, there are others, for example, Jorge Pichy Espichicoque who revives the religious traditions of his family as a continuator of his grandfather. And there are also those who discovered Santería on their own and without any family antecedents, like Alexander Bilbao in Cuba or Mark Bauch in Germany. These differences are to be interpreted on the ground of transculturation, as defined by Fernando Ortiz, who argues that cul-

⁸ A similar analysis can be found in Hall (1994: 218).

⁹ Brown (2003: 27); Palmié (1993); Schmidt (1995).

ture, or in this case religion, passes beyond ethnic and cultural frontiers. The fact that Alexander Bilbao was one of the first white men to join the religious house community of his godmother Juana, or the fact that Mark as a German discovered Santería while searching for solutions to his problems without having previous knowledge of this religion, reflect the concrete processes of transculturation.

But at the same time, transculturality, in the sense given to this term by Wolfgang Welsch, brings up more issues. It becomes evident not only because of the transnational character that Santería acquired over the last years as more and more a traveling religion, but also due to the fact that all people presented above, although they are involved in the same common religious system, have preserved their own individual ways. While Julián Ponciano was able to practice in secrecy his religion in the hostile environment of the GDR, offering his assistance in extremely sensitive circumstances of the society in which he lived, Eddy Gutiérrez had to face severe problems to solve, and underwent a religious growth until he became the man he is now. The protagonists of these deliberations assume different roles in different cultural contexts. This is not a new phenomenon to the Cuban world but for a country like Germany, where it is unusual that priests like Eddy Gutiérrez and Pichy Espichicoque devote themselves to dance and music besides religion. And also Mark Bauch, as a possible future German *santero*, invests his lyrical artistic potential in the creation of poems dedicated to the saints and, at the same time integrating Buddhist elements, i.e., some aspects of his former religious life.

All this is contrasted by the lack of opportunities for collective religious experience, for instance in the case of Alexander, who misses religious celebrations in the house of his godmother. There are no established religious houses and communities, and these aspects of Santería still have to be developed in Germany. Religious gatherings are indispensable for religious practice, because they not only provide collective experiences but they also guarantee a direct articulation of the *orichas*, who during the beats of the drums take possession of their sons and communicate their will. Santería as one branch of the Yoruba religion(s) has already proved in the past its high ability to adapt to the context of the New World, giving rise to the effects of transculturation. Nowadays, in Germany, it shows its ability to mediate between the collective and the individual, producing processes of transculturality in an environment of globalization and of postmodernism of the Old World.

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