

## The “Letter of the Year” and the Prophecies of Revolution

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In January 2003, a group of over 800 *babalaos*, or Ifá divination priests, gathered together in Havana, Cuba, to read the “Letter of the Year,” an annual divination ceremony that forecasts the social, political, and economic climate for the coming year. The group of both Cuban and foreign diviners was organized by the Miguel Febles Padrón Commission (CMFP), which, since 1986, has united a number of otherwise independent divination priests to annually carry out the ceremony. Although it has been performed intermittently beginning with the first generation of Cuban *babalaos*, knowledge of the ceremony was until recently largely confined to the island’s Ocha-Ifá (i.e., Santería) communities. Since the late 1980s, however, the Ifá oracle’s prophecies have attracted the attention of the larger Cuban public, as well as the international press. The annual divination ceremony’s increasing public visibility and contested political meanings became clear in the CMFP’s 2003 reading. Aside from the usual predictions of natural disasters, social ills, and war, the CMFP’s reading made what some believed was a cryptic reference to Fidel Castro himself with one of the year’s slogans, “The king turns in his crown before dying.” The proverb not only underscored the danger of talking about Fidel’s death but also turned heads given the fact that the CMFP is an opposing faction of *babalaos* in the struggle over control of the ceremony, at odds with the government-funded and directed Yoruba Cultural Association (ACY). Although members of the CMFP went to great lengths to stress that the proverb was in no way a reference to the nation’s *comandante en jefe*, claiming instead that it referred to “all of humanity,” the incident underscored the volatile political role of popular religion in contemporary Cuban society.

### 124 Kenneth Routon

This essay critically examines the increasing public visibility of *babalao* prophecies and how this relates to popular conceptions of power, value, and national identity in contemporary Cuba. I begin by outlining the early history of Ocha-Ifá with a particular emphasis on the *babalaos* and their self-described status as the “high priests” of this religion, a factor that helps explain why the current regime has selected them to be the official spokesmen for this religious community. This is followed by a discussion of the pivotal role played by one particularly controversial *babalao* in opening up the priesthood to accusations of commercial exploitation, which is at the heart of the rivalry between the two main factions competing for control over the annual divination ceremony. After describing the current regime’s role in the commodification and institutionalization of Ocha-Ifá cults, I explore the power struggles and infighting that have characterized the annual divination ceremony and discuss its impact on the national imaginary in contemporary, late socialist Cuba. I argue, in particular, that attempts by the current regime to reinvigorate grassroots political support for the Revolution and attract badly needed tourist dollars in part by harnessing popular religions of African origin to the ideological agendas of the state have only exacerbated existing tensions within the *babalao* priesthood.

The crisis of late socialism is characterized, above all, by the emergence of competing regimes of value. In Cuba, this crisis has been marked not so much by paradigmatic shifts in value systems, but by the hesitant flirtation with “novel ways to value labor, property, leisure and cultural production, as well as to experience and express social identity and citizenship” (Hernandez-Reguant 2002: 5). After the collapse of the former Soviet Bloc and the withdrawal of massive foreign subsidies, the Cuban government began implementing a series of liberal economic reforms in an attempt to save the sinking national economy. As a result, socioeconomic differences emerged

between a small minority of Cubans with access to dollars and remittances from abroad and the majority who turned to the expanding black market to meet their daily needs. In this situation, commodities, services, bodies, and labor became valued in new and sometimes conflicting ways by both individuals and the state as an older ethos of *compartir* (sharing) faced an emerging ethos of *resolver* (resolve), *conseguir* (get), and *inventar* (invent); that is, making ends meet through wheeling-and-dealing, hustling, and individual resolve (Hernandez-Reguant 2002: 6–7).

Despite significant efforts by the revolutionary government to eradicate race- and class-related disparities, the crisis of the Special Period has had a more devastating impact on the Afro-Cuban population. Afro-Cubans are far less likely than white Cubans to have family abroad to send dollar remittances during economic hard times and also to have fewer ties to the dollar economy generated by the growing tourist industry (Pérez Sarduy and Stubbs 2000). Moreover, this situation is further complicated by the increasing commodification and exoticization of Afro-Cuban religions and expres-

### The “Letter of the Year” 125

sive culture marketed for foreign tourist consumption (Hagedorn 2001; see chapter 4, this volume). The marketing of Afro-Cuban religions for foreign consumption was obvious during my fieldwork in Havana between 2003 and 2005. After trying to keep Afro-Cuban popular religions in the shadows for several decades images of Ocha-Ifá, Palo Monte, and Abakuá ritual specialists and devotees suddenly stepped into the limelight of public marketing campaigns beginning in the 1990s. Most foreign visitors to the island will readily recognize the image of an Afro-Cuban *babalao* performing a divination ritual as depicted, for instance, on bottles of Santero *aguardiente*; the crude depiction of a dark-skinned *palero* standing before his *nganga* complete with human skull and secret ideographic script on bottles of Ta’ Francisco cologne; the tourist posters with photos of dancing *íreme* masquerades belonging to the Abakuá societies; or the pictures of happy-go-lucky female devotees of Yemayá and Ochún smiling on billboards promoting foreign tourism. These images, along with token visits to regime-friendly *babalaos* that are frequently included in foreign tourist packages, are just some examples of the more recent commodification of Afro-Cuban popular religions. Afro-Cuban expressive culture and history has also been forced to the forefront of national politics, not only raising questions about the intermingling of secular and spiritual power but also leading to intense debates on how to define national identity.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most significant obstacles the revolutionary regime has faced in this regard is the increasing globalization of Cuban Ocha-Ifá religion and the potential threat it poses to national identity. Beginning in the early 1990s, intellectuals, academics, and state officials began placing more of an emphasis on national identity rather than political community (i.e., the revolutionary project) in order to diminish the threat that globalization and neoliberalism posed to the nation’s sovereignty and self-determination (see chapter 1, this volume). This has had rather direct implications for the Ocha-Ifá community. As the numbers of foreign visitors to the island interested in going through Ocha-Ifá ritual initiation continue to rise—an expensive endeavor that costs anywhere from \$2,000 to \$8,000 by some estimates—a power struggle has emerged between practitioners, intellectuals, and state officials as they attempt to use the religion for widely divergent purposes (Ayorinde 2000). In the past, the absence of an overarching institutional authority among Ocha-Ifá cults contributed to their survival in Cuban society.<sup>2</sup> Now, given the increasing international popularity and economic importance of Ocha-Ifá, “there is no obvious representative among *santeros* and *babalaos* for dialogue with the state,” and, “[a]ttempts to create unifying organizations, such as the Yoruba Cultural Association, have been undermined by jealousy among rival groups of practitioners” (Ayorinde 2000: 79). The rivalry between competing Ifá ritual specialists has been most intense in the struggle over control of the annual divination ceremony, with heated exchanges and emotionally charged accusations of *interés* (i.e., economic

and political exploitation) coming from both sides of the divide. The

## 126 Kenneth Routon

existence of rival groups of Ocha-Ifá priest-healers and their links to political power, however, are not solely the result of recent socioeconomic conditions in Cuba; they have a history that goes back to at least to the turn of the twentieth century.

In the following, I briefly describe the organizational structure of Ocha-Ifá religion and, in particular, the *babalaos'* claims of ritual authority as the "high priests" of the religion. Ifá divination priests, as I show, claim rank over Ocha priest-healers (*santeros*) due to their mastery and control over the purported "foundational" texts of Ocha-Ifá religion. I then turn to a discussion of the historical struggle over ritual authority within the Ifá priesthood itself, a struggle characterized in part by disagreements concerning the proper control and distribution of sacred ritual objects. The purpose of this section is twofold. First, the *babalaos'* self-representation as the "high priests" of *santería* may explain why the government has chosen to recognize them as the cultural ambassadors of Ocha-Ifá cult houses on the island rather than others. Second, endemic rivalries and accusations of economic exploitation of the religion within the Ifá priesthood are not unique to the Special Period. Rather, they have characterized Ifá ritual politics in Cuba for decades and have only recently become more intense and public.

## Ritual Politics and the Commodification of Authority

The popular religion of Yoruba origin in Cuba known as Regla de Ocha-Ifá, or Santería, revolves around the worship of several *oricha*, or divinities. Through a ritual economy defined by sacred forms of exchange and spirit possession, devotees enter into reciprocal relationships with the *orichas*, honoring them with praises and sacrificial offerings in exchange for health, well-being, and spiritual protection. Ocha-Ifá temple-houses comprise ritual families linked through initiation by a common ritual godparent, a knowledgeable elder who oversees the introduction of new devotees into the religion. Although they share a common belief system, cosmology, and similar ritual practices, Ocha-Ifá temple-houses are not organized into a hierarchy ruled by an overarching authority but exist relatively independent of one another. Although their relative autonomy allows for some minor variation between groups, Ocha-Ifá cults, nonetheless, share a fairly standardized set of religious beliefs and practices. The establishment of standard ritual protocols and common procedures for the handing over of sacred, authority-affirming ritual objects, however, did not emerge without struggle. Conflict between rival groups competing for power and prestige has, in fact, been common throughout the religion's history in Cuba.

The organizational structure of the religion popularly known as Santería in Cuba actually comprises two somewhat distinct priestly branches: La

## The "Letter of the Year" 127

Regla de Ocha and La Regla de Ifá. The organizational separation of Ocha and Ifá cults is based primarily on differences in the division of ritual labor to which each lay claim. The officiating priests-healers and diviners of Ifá, called *babalaos*, an exclusively male priestly title, control the rich and complex divination system known as Ifá, initiate devotees to a single *oricha*, Orula, and carry out the annual divination ceremony known as the Letter of the Year. The priest-healers and diviners of Ocha, referred to as *obá oriatés* (or *santeros*), a role open to both men and women, perform a less elaborate system of divination called *dilogún* and initiate devotees to numerous *oricha*. Whereas the Ifá cults appeal to only one spiritual authority (i.e., Orula) and attempt to monopolize spiritual power and authority through a hierarchy of heterosexual male divination priests, the Ocha cults tend to decentralize spiritual authority by appealing to the numerous and sometimes competing interests of several *orichas* in a diffused network of both male and female ritual

specialists (Brown 2003a). Although there is more cooperation between these groups than there is tension and conflict, there has been, nonetheless, some notable power struggles both within and between the two groups throughout the religion's history on the island.

Much scholarly and popular opinion has it that the Ocha cults were derived from the Ifá cults, positing Ifá as an entirely separate religion.<sup>3</sup> They argue that African-born *babalaos*' knowledge of divination verses formed the structural and spiritual basis for Lucumí religion in Cuba (e.g., Murphy 1981).<sup>4</sup> Among some Ifá devotees, this linear, diffusionist narrative of the religion's historical origins in Cuba often carries with it an implicit engendered ideology of ritual politics. Here, the male *babalao* plays the most influential regenerative role by symbolically fertilizing a dormant spirituality with his ritual knowledge and expertise. His authority not only derives from this "symbolic birth event" but also from his devotion to the level-headed, restrained, and just figure of Orula as opposed to the unpredictable, selfish, and assorted character of the *orichas*, a distinction reflecting common perceptions about the essentialized qualities of masculinity and femininity on the island (Brown 2003).

Although more than 10 African-born *babalaos* are acknowledged in ritual invocations and oral histories in Cuban Ifá temple-houses, there are five that stand out as the most significant given the fact that they left behind powerful and influential ritual families that continue to exist today (Brown 2003).<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that they are credited with the founding of different branches of Ifá it appears that there was a high level of cooperation among them. This first generation of *babalaos* soon established themselves as the ritual high priests of Lucumí religion in Cuba, which they partly achieved through claims of ritual authenticity and through origin narratives that, more often than not, stressed historical continuity. The *babalaos*' appeals to the control over ritual power and prestige were also pursued through the controlled and strategic distribution of ritual objects known as *olofin* that serve to authenticate their spiritual authority.

## 128 Kenneth Routon

Between the late nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, there were around forty *babalaos* in Havana (Brown 2003). By 1948, their ranks, according to William Bascom's estimates, had grown to around two hundred (Bascom 1952). After the deaths of the first generation of conservative *babalaos*, who zealously guarded their *olofin* by limiting their distribution and severely restricting the entrance of new Ifá devotees in order to monopolize their power, the number of Ifá divination priests grew rapidly between the 1950s and the 1970s (Brown 2003). It is believed that the head *babalao* of each major *rama* had an *olofin* and that their distribution was governed by strict rules. These formal ritual procedures, however, were often contested. Although the first couple of generations of *babalaos* guarded their *olofin* to maintain their hold on power and authority, by 1945 this would all come to an end under the leadership of a powerful Havana *babalao* by the name of Miguel Febles y Padrón.

Miguel Febles y Padrón and Francisco "Panchito" Febles del Pino were the sons of the older and well-respected *babalao* Ramón Febles Molina. When their father passed away in 1939, his *olofin* went to its rightful heir, his eldest son Panchito. Shortly afterward, however, Miguel Febles stole the *olofin* from his brother who later conceded. Febles soon came to be regarded as a powerful *babalao* by the end of the 1940s for his mastery of Ifá divination, his predatory use of *brujería* (sorcery) to undermine his rivals, and through the fabrication, distribution, and control of his *olofin*. Febles first began manufacturing and distributing his *olofin* to his colleagues and godchildren but soon started producing and selling them in mass quantities.

Febles's most profitable period came after the triumph of the Revolution during the 1980s when he expanded his influence abroad in the United States and Colombia. This would be the case despite the abundance of rumors that accused him of fabricating and selling many sealed *olofin* "cans" that were actually empty and, therefore, devoid of magical power. As an authority-affirming ritual object, the *olofin* confers great symbolic capital on its owners

but by mid-century in Havana it had become “a ‘commodity fetish’ with a fluid ‘exchange value’ in the hands of Miguel Febles” (Brown 2003: 88–99). Miguel Febles’s actions are indicative of deep rifts in Havana’s *babalaos* community, creating a crisis of spiritual authority that would continue to resonate well into the “Special Period.” The emergence of rival groups of *babalaos* and their struggle for control over the annual divination ceremony have become one of the major lines of contention defining the articulation and expression of national identity in contemporary Cuban society. As the cultural significance and role of Ocha-Ifá in the public debate regarding national belonging becomes ever more contested, state officials have not hesitated to step into the fray, attempting to capitalize on the divisions and infighting among different factions in order to serve official ideological agendas. This has, perhaps, been most clear in the current regime’s support of the ACY, an organization attempting to nationalize the island’s Ocha-Ifá community

The “Letter of the Year” 129

and establish themselves as the only legitimate authority for control over the annual divination ceremony.

### Decentering Ritual Authority?

In order to better understand the current controversy surrounding the Letter of the Year ceremony and the government’s support of the ACY, a brief discussion of the revolutionary regime’s relationship with the Ifá divination priesthood is necessary. Despite initial attempts by the postrevolutionary government to repress Ocha-Ifá religion on the island—having local police deny permission requests to hold religious parties (*toques*), barring devotees from membership in the communist party, or through media campaigns that disparaged practitioners as criminals or social deviants etc.—the current regime could not resist weighing the religion’s potential political value in providing continuing popular support for the Revolution and its potential in attracting hard currency through tourism (Hanly 1995).<sup>6</sup> By the late 1970s, according to Cuban ethnographer Natalia Bolívar, Castro’s regime began promoting several regime-friendly *babalaos* as folkloric attractions for foreigner tourists and diplomats who paid in hard currency. These so-called *diplo-babalaos* charged in U.S. dollars for their services, just as the government “*diplo-stores*” that sold imported consumer goods to foreign diplomats and tourists. The government took most of the money, ranging anywhere from the 15,000 dollars a Spanish television station once paid to film a halfhour ceremony to at least 2,000 dollars that *babalaos* often charge to initiate foreigners. According to Bolívar, the *diplo-babalaos*, “also put on special ‘ceremonies’ for foreigners, including some with bare-breasted women dancers who went into ‘trances,’ and eventually drew strong protests from serious believers” (qtd. in Tamayo 1998). The government then, according to Bolívar, has played a significant role in the exoticization and commodification of Ocha-Ifá religion.

By the early 1990s, after the demise of the former Soviet Bloc and the end to massive flows of subsidies, tapping into Ocha-Ifá’s secret ritual economy became not only an economic but a political necessity as well. Given the grim economic forecasts of the late 1980s and the threat of economic collapse in the 1990s, it became crucial for the revolutionary government to reenergize grassroots political support, which meant appealing to the social base that formed the core of support for the Revolution—namely, the black population and the working poor. One way to do this was by tapping into the social resources of Ocha-Ifá and ensuring that the prophecies of the *babalaos* did not fuel anxieties about the future. The result was a government-sponsored media campaign that promoted Ocha-Ifá as national folklore and the creation of a special government office on religious affairs, which some of the regime’s critics believe attempted to recruit *babalaos* to work for the regime’s

130 Kenneth Routon

internal security apparatus (Oppenheimer 1992). Although these accusations are almost impossible to confirm, several of my informants do in fact believe

that Fidel Castro turned to the counsel of regime-friendly Ifá diviners when making difficult decisions, often jokingly referring to the “army of *babalaos*” that allegedly advise the regime as the “Ministry of Orula” (also see Cabrera Infante 2000; Gutiérrez 2002).

The most obvious indication of the revolutionary regime’s desire to garner the support of the Ocha-Ifá community and the *babalaos* in particular, however, came in 1987 when they extended a formal invitation to the Oni of Ife, the official *babalao* of the sacred Nigerian city of Ile-Ife, to visit the island. Although his visit was preceded that same year by other African dignitaries, including the Asantehene of Ghana and the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, the Oni of Ife’s visit was the most anticipated of these visits by both the regime and the Ocha-Ifá community. Earlier that year, according to some interpretations, “the Ifá oracle . . . announced that Castro would die unless the Yoruba ‘king of kings,’ the ‘great Ooni’ of the *babalaos*, traveled to Cuba and kissed the ground” (Valdes Figueroa 2001:226). The Oni of Ife’s visit was arranged by Jose Carniedad, an Afro-Cuban specialist on African religions that Castro assigned to head the Party’s Office of Religious Affairs in 1984. The Yoruba religious leader, attended to by top government officials, including Castro himself, reportedly urged Cuba’s *babalaos* to cooperate with the regime when he met with a government-selected group of them in a special ceremony at Havana’s Casa de Africa (Ruiz 1987; Moore 1997: 231). His visit, however, was not without its fair share of controversy. Some prominent Cuban *babalaos* complained about their exclusion from the event, which they were forced to watch on the evening news rather than witness in person (Fernández-Robaina 2001). Others questioned the entourage’s spiritual motivations by calling attention to the disproportionate amount of time they spent striking economic agreements as opposed to attending to religious matters (Fernández-Robaina 2001: 90–91). But the most controversial moment of his visit came when the Oni commended Cubans for having retained what he claimed was 80 percent of the religion and declared Cuba’s Ocha-Ifá community to be “a subsidiary (*subsede*) of Ile-Ife,” a comment apparently embraced by the ACY (Ayorinde 2000: 79–80). The Oni’s statement infuriated some Cuban *babalaos*. “He was saying that we are missing things,” the late Cuban *babalao* Lázaro Marquetti told me, “but the [Cuban] Lucumí religion is a total religion; it isn’t lacking anything.” Marquetti went on to mention how flamboyant he thought the Oni of Ife appeared, “with his forty wives and army of attendants, he was only really concerned with getting rich.” Marquetti, at the time of my interview, had only recently resumed his activities as an Ifá divination priest. He had stopped for three years in protest of what he referred to as the “commercialization” of the religion. Two workshops followed the Oni’s visit to Cuba; one at the Casa de Africa in 1992 that hosted a debate about a return to Africa and fears of ethnic division,

### The “Letter of the Year” 131

and another called “The International Workshop on Yoruba Culture,” which held discussions on the “*yorubización de la santería*” and the return to ritual orthodoxy through the purging of syncretic elements and placing the religion under the dictates of the Oni of Ife (Ayorinde 2000). These have been increasingly divisive issues within the Ocha-Ifá community since the Oni’s visit. Fernández-Robaina, for example, notes three major tendencies and concerns within the Ocha-Ifá community in the past couple decades. First, is the desire on behalf of some to organize new associations, such as the Asociación Hijos de San Lázaro, La Sociedad San Antonio, and the ACY. Second, there have been attempts to recuperate older ritual practices of which there are two main variants; the first seeks to rescue ritual forms typical of the colonial and republican era by limiting initiation to those in need of healing an illness or for material and spiritual improvement. This mode of selecting eligibility for initiation is intended to limit the increasing commercialization of the religion, which has led to a dramatic rise in what some believe to be unnecessary initiations. The other variant suggests the adoption of the Yoruba mode of initiation in Nigeria, which only involves “seating” one oricha in the head of an initiate rather than several as is done in Cuba. For example, Victor Betancourt’s Ifá

Irán Lowó society, who also happens to be the youngest ranking member of the Miguel Febles Commission, has recently begun performing the head-and-foot initiation style characteristic of early initiations on the island and believed to be of African origin. Fran Cabrera and Taiwo Abimbola, the son of Yoruba *babalao* and writer Wande Ambimbola, founded the Ile Tun Tun society.

"[A] reborn Ilé Ifè homeland on Cuban soil," Brown notes, "[m]embers wear African clothes and conform to hierarchies and rituals believed to organize the Ifá order of the Ifè kingdom" (Brown 2003a: 162)

Finally, some advocate forming schools and academies in order to insure the "proper" transmission of ritual knowledge and practices. Others reject institutionalization altogether, arguing that this is a matter that should be handled by the *padrino* and his or her *ahijados* or initiates (Fernández-Robaina 2000). As Ayorinde notes, the attitude of "*en mi casa mando yo*" (I rule in my house) has worked against institutionalization and unity (Ayorinde 2000: 79). Apparently, only a minority of Cubans have shown an interest in institutionalization, ritual orthodoxy, and "re-Africanization," and it appears that the majority of these have been *babalaos* who like to stress the distinction between Ocha and Ifá by arguing that the latter (Ifá) is more African because of its ritual purity and the former is more Cuban because it is more syncretic (Ayorinde 2000: 81). This contestation over the relative Africanness and Cubaness of Ocha-Ifá religion has had serious implications for the articulation and expression of national identity in Cuba: "If African-derived cultural practices are to reflect and validate a *national* identity (which they do), then the importance of Africa cannot be allowed to predominate. This could lead to transnational ethnic identification which could be potentially threatening to national unity" (Ayorinde 2000: 83).

### 132 Kenneth Routon

The revolutionary government has responded in part to this threat to national identity through the licensing and funding of the ACY. Yet, paradoxically, it is the ACY, among others, who appear to advocate transnational ritual identification with Ile-Ife, which seems to contradict efforts to promote a singularly Cuban national rather than transnational identity.

## The Battle over the "Letter of the Year"

Since the onset of the so-called Special Period, the annual Ifá divination ceremony known as the "Letter of the Year" has attracted the attention and curiosity of the larger Cuban public as well as the international community. Popular interest in the ceremony's annual prophecies has come to rival if not eclipse the significance of the government's own socialist slogans for the year. In an era of uncertainty and scarce resources the *babalaos'* annual prophetic pronouncements—e.g., "Some Would Give Up an Eye to See Another Go Blind," "Contradictions Bring the Light Out of Its Hiding Place," "The King Turns in His Crown Before Dying" etc.—offer more provocative metaphoric fat to chew on than official socialist slogans for the same years—e.g., "2006—Year of the Energetic Revolution in Cuba," "2005—Year of the Bolivian Alternative for the Americas," "2004—Year of the 45th Anniversary of the Revolution," or "2003—Year of the Glorious Anniversaries of Martí and the Moncada." But the existence of multiple prophecies and infighting among various factions of *babalaos* has not only led to a crisis in ritual authority and threatened to undermine the integrity of the annual ceremony but has also been further complicated by the political opportunism of forces outside the religion. As a result, Ocha-Ifá religion has become a veritable battleground of contested political meanings in contemporary Cuban society.

Although the government officially covers the reading performed by the ACY on national radio (Radio Progreso), most Cubans hear of the annual predictions through *radio bamba*, or word of mouth. Some take the prophecies seriously while others express only mild interest. During my fieldwork local interpretations were almost always dire. In January 2004, for example, one of the rumors circulating the streets was that the *babalaos* were

distressed after the annual ceremony because, as one friend put it, “they don’t know who is going to govern the country this year,” suggesting that a change in political leadership was imminent. Local interpretations of the prophecies for 2005 were equally ominous in tone; the dead (*los eggun*), my informants warned, would rule over the coming year, ensuring that the immediate future would continue to be marked by an atmosphere of uncertainty. In 2006, some interpreted prophetic warnings that “the road toward neighboring lands would grow even longer,” as indication that immigration accords between Cuba and the United States would be threatened, a situation that could not only undermine the chances of those planning to emigrate

### The “Letter of the Year” 133

to the United States but further alienate family members separated by outmigration. I should note that these interpretations of the annual prophecies were not necessarily circulated by those who opposed the revolutionary government. Most of them came from people who, like most Cubans, temper frustrations with the country’s socioeconomic difficulties by noting the success of the revolutionary government in areas such as race relations, medical care, and education. The point here is that attempts on behalf of Ifá divination priests to manage local interpretations have been hindered by the existence of multiple prophecies by various rival groups. The most significant factor plaguing the annual ceremony’s credibility are the multiple readings performed by these competing factions. In 1999, for example, there were at least six ceremonies performed by different groups and at least one more was carried out in Miami (Guerra and Loureda 1999).

After the first generation of *babalaos* passed away, the tradition of performing a single, annual divination ceremony was lost. As early as the 1950s, prominent devotees were complaining about the crisis in ritual authority that Miguel Febles’s actions had precipitated and attempts were made to revive the institution. Just prior to the Revolution, between 1950 and 1959, Bernardo Rojas brought together various factions and for almost a decade the ceremony was carried out by a single, unified group of *babalaos*. Soon after the Revolution, and after Rojas passed away, however, these groups splintered into competing factions once again. In 1976, a group of *babalaos* came together to form an association known as the Ifá Yesterday, Ifá Today, Ifá Tomorrow Association but eventually dissolved after the government rejected their request for a state license. Another attempt was made several years later under the leadership of the *babalao* Manelo Ibañez, who renamed the organization the ACY of Cuba. In 1991, during the early years of the Special Period, the association was officially licensed and began receiving both media and financial support from the state, a decision I examine in more detail later. Today, according to the association’s president, Antonio Castañeda, the ACY has some 7,000 registered members, 1,000 of which are *babalaos*, and claims that the eldest *babalaos* on the island make up its Cuban Council of Elder Ifá Priests who are responsible for its annual divination prophecies.

The government’s decision to support the ACY may have been due, in part, to the existence of a rival group of *babalaos* whose prophecies are seen by some as less politically sensitive to revolutionary vulnerability. Since its founding the CMFP has united hundreds of *babalaos* within Cuba and abroad during its annual Letter of the Year ceremony. Soon after being licensed by the state, the ACY began performing its own annual divination ceremony to compete with the CMFP’s annual prophecies. By officially recognizing an association of Ifá diviners interested in institutionalizing their priesthood, the state benefits in several ways: state recognition ensures more direct access to and information about (e.g., statistical, sociopolitical, and financial) this

### 134 Kenneth Routon

somewhat secretive religious community, marginalizes those groups that are not interested in institutionalization by making them appear to be against the virtues of religious unity, guarantees some measure of control over how

their prophecies and activities are interpreted, provides for the appearance of religious tolerance in a country once officially declared atheist, indicates the state's commitment to its historically marginalized and largely black communities by elevating their cultural heritage to the level of an officially sanctioned public institution, and generates hard currency in attracting religious pilgrims and foreign tourists with a thirst for the "authentic" Cuba, to name just some of the potential factors influencing the government decision to formally recognize this aspiring association.

The existence of various annual prophecies and competing factions has been increasingly politicized by different groups both on and off the island. Indicative of the ceremony's increasing political significance in contemporary Cuban society are the recent flurry of scholarly articles on the subject published in Cuba and abroad, including a large section of a recent issue of the *University of Havana Review*.<sup>7</sup> Local reaction to this coverage in recent years has been mixed with some *babalaos*, such as the CMFP's Victor Betancourt, denouncing such coverage as opportunistic sensationalism. Though Betancourt (2003) addresses his comments to the international community his criticisms of the "opportunism" that characterizes the interests of those outside the religion, whether at home or abroad, can easily be read as a veiled reference to government itself. Nonetheless, interpretations from abroad, especially in the Miami exile community, have certainly complicated matters for the CMFP. Rumors on the streets of Miami had it that the commission's letter for 2004, *Baba Eyiobe*, was the same one that appeared when Castro came to power in 1959 and that reappeared in 1989 when the commander of Cuban troops in Angola, General Arnaldo Ochoa, who many exiles believed was the only person capable of organizing a successful coup on the island, was shot and killed. Many Cuban exiles in Miami believed that the CMFP's 2004 letter predicted a major political shakeup on the island. The CMFP, of course, emphatically denies these interpretations. Although both factions of Ifá divination priests on the island have been preoccupied in recent years with managing public interpretations of their prophecies, the majority of their public relations efforts have continued to focus on discrediting their rivals. Today, the CMFP and the ACY are the two main rivals struggling for control over the annual ceremony. The differences in the ritual protocols followed by these two groups appear minor. For the former the youngest ranking member is the one who takes out the letter (i.e., ritually determines which sign will rule the year) whereas for the latter it is the oldest *babalao*. For the former the ceremony should be performed on the first day or during the first week of the new year whereas for the latter it should be performed during the morning hours of December 31. They also differ on what kinds of ritual sacrifices are appropriate for a successful ceremony.

### The "Letter of the Year" 135

Some argue that the sacrifices should always be the same every year whereas others argue it depends on what Orula orders to be done, which is revealed in divination (Argüelles 2003). Despite differences in ritual procedures it is fairly obvious that the more important lines of contention between these two associations center around contestations over their respective claims of the power and authority necessary to control the annual ceremony. Although the conflict between these two factions is often represented as a contest between competing claims of spiritual or ritual authenticity, the struggle has increasingly been articulated in terms of economic exploitation and morality.

The sometimes heated rivalry and tensions between these two major factions of Ifá divination priests has included a number of seething rhetorical attacks designed to undermine the spiritual capital of the other side by claiming that more than just religious concerns motivate their organizing efforts. The CMFP, for example, accuses the ACY of submitting to political manipulation by the government in exchange for the perks of state sponsorship (e.g., a restored mansion in central Havana to serve as the association's center, state-sponsored media coverage and financial support, the sociopolitical capital that comes from state recognition etc.). The ACY, however,

counters these charges by accusing the CMFP of exploiting the religion for profit, a particularly thorny issue since the onset of the current economic crisis. Similar accusations of economic exploitation and political manipulation have also hindered efforts to unite *babalaos* across the political divide between Havana and Miami (Correa 1997). Antonio Castañeda, president of the ACY, for example, wearing a suit and tie and sitting behind a large office desk in his second-floor office, appearing more like a businessman or politician than a divination priest, had the following to say regarding the rivalry between the two groups:

We have been fighting for unification for several years. . . . Today, some want to go to battle over the letter of the year. . . . They say we [the ACY] are being manipulated by the government. But what we do has nothing to do with politics or influence. I'm still driving the same car I had before I became president of the association. I don't receive any special favors. The truth is they [the CMFP] want to exploit the religion to get rich.

Accusations of *interes* (profiting from the religion), however, are often a matter of interpretation. After we concluded our conversation, Castañeda apologized for having postponed the interview a week before. I had been waiting to interview him for a couple of weeks. "I was in France," he boasted, "attending to one of my ritual godchildren [*ahijados*], a wealthy French businessman who paid for the entire trip and even treated me to a brief vacation."

The ACY's allegations of spiritual transgression, which denounce those who use the religion as a vehicle for profit, are thinly veiled attempts to

### 136 Kenneth Routon

dismiss the CMFP's *babalaos* by implying their participation in the illicit economic activities associated with *jineterismo*. Like *jineteros*, Castañeda deplores rival *babalaos* as purveyors of the entrepreneurial spirit that has come to define the informal economy since the withdrawal of massive foreign subsidies that began in the early 1990s. The informal economy lies outside formal state control and presents a challenge to revolutionary morals by allegedly promoting the materialistic and individualistic values associated with capitalism. The claim that the CMFP embodies the legacy and infamous reputation of Miguel Febles spiritually discredits its members by accusing them of commodity fetishism with respect to the religion, thereby shaming them by insinuating that their economic activities are contrary to the values of socialism. The CMFP has responded in part to charges of economic exploitation with their own counterclaims of spiritual transgression.

They note that they, unlike the ACY, have refused to be co-opted by the state, which they describe as a kind of spiritual coup that has essentially enabled the government to usurp the powers of Orula for both financial and political reasons.

Exploiting the religion for profit was perhaps the most salient concern of my informants in Havana and Matanzas. Many complained that this not only represented an act of spiritual debauchery that threatened established ritual protocols but was also causing unnecessary harm and suffering and angering the *orichas*. Yoel, a popular *santero* in the province of Matanzas, complained that tourism in Havana coupled with the financial disparity of its residents was exposing the religion to unprecedented forms of greed and corruption. Those who turned to the religion with the intention of making money by initiating tourists, he argued, were not only inflicting harm on unsuspecting tourists but were also threatening to alienate the *orichas* from their devotees on the island:

[I]n Havana, they bring in saints (*orichas*) that are not known here. . . . Songs don't even exist for those saints. Everything they do is for commerce. There's this Spaniard *impresario* that came to Havana and received the *mano de orula* and made saint. Afterwards, the guy lost his business; one of his legs swelled up and now he has heart trouble. You know what people are saying? That he's waiting until he can come back in order to kill the person that did that to him and he has his reason. They made him a saint that wasn't necessary. He was supposed

to receive Changó but instead they made him San Lázaro because it's the most expensive. . . . There was also this Spanish woman who made the wrong saint and, afterwards, she went bald. They talked about it on the radio in Spain. They were criticizing the religion. The woman destroyed all of her ritual belongings and now is half crazy. . . . Notice that the saints do not come like they did before. . . . They don't do the same things that they did before. They make their exceptions.

### The "Letter of the Year" 137

The current regime's role in the commercialization exploitation of Ocha-Ifá is indisputable, the most obvious indication of the state's role in the commercialization of Ocha-Ifá religion occurring in December 2005. As mentioned earlier, it is common to see Ocha-Ifá images on commodities such as *aguardiente*, perfumes, and tourists' novelties sold in stores that only accept hard currency (i.e., the convertible peso used as a local substitute for U.S. dollars and euros). During my field research, I never came across any of these religious images on products sold in stores that charge in pesos, the massively devalued currency that the state still uses to pay citizens' salaries. In a local hard currency store (*chóppin*) in Guanabacoa, a simulated Ocha-Ifá altar (*trono*) had been arranged alongside discounted fans, toilets, lamps, clothes, and food. The altar had been set up as part of a store-wide end of the year sale. In front of the altar, a folklore ensemble performed dances for the *orichas* (or Ocha-Ifá "saints"). One *babalao* in Guanabacoa was incredulous: "What do the *santos* have to do with the sale of commodities?" he fumed. "How embarrassing," he complained as he threw his hands up in resignation, ". . . it's an outrage!"

These examples of both alleged *jinetismo* and "official" state commercialization of the religion was addressed in one of the collective *rogación*, or purification/healing ceremonies, that I attended earlier in January 2004 organized by one of the ranking *babalaos* of the CMFP. The ceremony had been necessary and, indeed, urgent after the annual divination ceremony had revealed one of the most ambiguous signs of the Ifá corpus, Baba Eyiope, one forecasting either prosperity beyond imagination or hopeless tragedy and destruction. As the ritual cleansings were performed on the back patio of his temple-house in Central Havana, the *babalao* suddenly interrupted the proceedings with an impromptu speech. Citing an Ifá text, the presiding *babalao* told the story of how an entire African village had suffered from famine because the ports had been closed, an obvious reference to the American blockade or embargo. He then offered what very well may have been a reply to the ACY's charges of spiritual transgression through the illicit practices associated with *jinetismo*: "We Cubans . . . we're all hustlers [*jinetes*]! We have no other choice. The *santeros* and *babalaos* . . . they're all hustlers. We're all hustlers by necessity! And the government . . . the government's the biggest one of them all!" His comments are significant for two reasons. First, he explicitly calls attention to what has remained a public secret on the island for several years—namely, that hustling has become an integral if not vital economic strategy in the new culture of *resolver*. For the state-sponsored *babalaos* of the ACY to pretend otherwise or to take the moral high ground by claiming their nonparticipation in the informal economy, in his view, amounts to hypocrisy. Second, he not only implicates the government in the economic strategies associated with *jinetismo* but also suggests that they too are exploiting Ocha-Ifá religion for profit and that the ACY has remained complicit in these exploits. His intention was not to advocate the commodification and economic

### 138 Kenneth Routon

exploitation of Ocha-Ifá religion. Rather, he was simply calling attention to the current socioeconomic reality of scarcity that defines daily life on the island and the fact that no one in Cuba can claim moral purity with regard to the new hustle economy. Everyone is implicated.

After the *babalao*'s impromptu speech, everyone present, their heads and faces still wet from the herbal water and the goats' blood, walked down to

the oceanfront with offerings to Olokún. Despite the police presence, the defiant *babalaos* insisted on completing the sacrifices in public along the Malecón in front of the port of Havana, although he had not received prior permission. There, in front of the tourists, *jinetes*, lovers, and police, he sang the praises of and offered seven roosters and a duck to Olokún, the mysterious *oricha* of the profound depths of the sea, the impenetrable and dark abyss. According to a Cuban friend of mine who accompanied me to the ceremony, the whole question of spiritual corruption was precisely why the collective purification ceremony had been necessary in the first place. It was intended to ritually “cleanse” and, therefore, protect devotees from any possible mystical repercussions associated with the morally ambiguous actions at play within the religion in an age of scarcity, a problem related to both the U.S. embargo (hence, the ceremonies’ proximity to the port of Havana) and the deteriorating domestic economy.

## Conclusion

The government’s decision to support the ACY has important political and economic implications. In part, it reflects an attempt to tap into the secret ritual economy of Ocha-Ifá. This has contributed significantly to the increasingly commercialization of the religion through international marketing campaigns designed to attract foreign tourists to the island. Of course, the ACY is not responsible for those who choose to exploit or otherwise violate ritual protocols in the interests of profit. But their association with the state has only fueled allegations of their complicity with regard to the government’s marketing of the religion for foreign tourist consumption. What is perhaps most perplexing about the government’s support of the ACY is that it appears to be encouraging an association that promotes what some refer to as the Yorubaization of Ocha-Ifá religion on the island and advocates, according to Ayorinde (2000), decentering local ritual authority in Cuba by placing the religion under the dictates of the Oni of Ife in Nigeria. It is not entirely clear what is behind such a decision, which appears to contradict the government’s desire for a unified national identity as it encourages identification with a transnational ritual authority. There are, however, at least two possible implications of the government’s current support of the ACY. On one hand, it reflects the government’s desire to cast these religious cults as cultural “survivals” from a remote African past, a

### The “Letter of the Year” 139

move that attempts to displace the local foundations of ritual authority by claiming that the religion’s roots lie elsewhere. This certainly fits well with the government’s efforts to represent Ocha-Ifá as a kind of quaint national folklore, which acknowledges the entertainment value it has in the form of myths, songs, and dance but implicitly rejects its contemporary vivacity by representing it as an essentially “dead” practice to be valued only as an historical curiosity.

On the other hand, through its support of the ACY the government appears to have, at least with respect to the Ifá community, sidelined the issue of national identity for the time being in exchange for the political guarantees that the control of the annual divination ceremony may bring. The “official” *babalaos* of the ACY will always come up with a politically correct *letra*. The use of Ifá divination to bring competing factions under one authority is not without historical precedent. In the mid-eighteenth century, for example, a Dahomean king used the Ifá divination of his Yoruba neighbors, “in order to centralize the kingdom’s oracular authority by delegitimizing and controlling the dangerously ‘centrifugal’ and subversive tendencies of the country’s multifarious *vodun* possession oracles” (Brown 2003: 115–116). The government’s investment in the struggle over control of the annual divination ceremony is not only a political strategy designed to create the impression that it respects the religious faith of its citizens but is also intended to mend the frayed edges of the body politic by encouraging the unification of multifarious religious factions and ensuring

that their prophecies do not contradict the state's agenda. After all, ritual identification with a transnational religious community may appear to be less of a challenge to the legitimacy of the state's power and authority than a politically charged prophecy that reflects negatively on the nation's leadership.

My effort in this essay has been to show how the Letter of the Year ceremony and infighting among various factions of divination priests struggling for control over the ceremony was initially a relatively esoteric conflict without much relevance to those outside of Cuba's Ocha-Ifá community. What was once a matter of local ritual politics, however, was suddenly forced to the forefront of nationalist politics after the state became involved in the conflict, as well as by the increasing global presence of the religion facilitated in part by the development of the tourist industry. As a result, Ocha-Ifá religion has become one of the most visible battlegrounds on which struggles over how to define national identity and the politics of value in contemporary Cuban society is waged. This battle over the prophetics of revolutionary society not only exemplifies the government's attempt to place more emphasis on national belonging rather than political community (i.e., the socialist project) but also calls attention to how the new culture of *resolver* is characterized as much by struggles over value as it is by economic strategy.

140 Kenneth Routon

## Notes

1. For specific examples of narrative describing the intermingling of secular and sacred power in Cuba see Bascom (1951: 17), Brown (2003: 84–85), Carbonell (1993: 198), de la Torre (2003), Díaz Fabelo (1974), Lachantañeré (2001), Melgar (1991), Miller (2000), Orozco and Bolívar (1998), and Valdes Figueroa (2001).
2. I am using the term "cult" here in the strictest sense to refer to the acephalous nature of a number of relatively small but interrelated ritual families.
3. West African antecedents more than likely had some influence on the animosity that developed between the Egbado and the Oyo and their competing ritual systems in Cuba (see Ramos 2003).
4. The Ifá-centric accounting of many scholars is largely due to the fact that their main informants were *babalaos* (see Brown 2003:147; Murphy 1981; and Cabrera 1980 [1974]).
5. The founders of these principal *ramas* or branches were Carlos Adé Bí, Remigio "Adechina" Herrera, Joaquín Cádiz, Olugueré Kó Kó, and Francisco Villalonga (see Brown 2003).
6. Religious believers were banned from the Cuban Communist Party until 1993 when the government officially welcomed believers into the party (see Benkomo 2000; Selier and Hernández 2004).
7. See de Rey Roa (2002), Sigler (2005), Argüelles (2003), Betancourt (2003), González (2003), Guerra (2003), and Trimegistros (2003).