

## Reviews

*Efficacy of Sound, Power, Potency and Promise in the Translocal Ritual Music of Cuban Ifa-Orisa.* Ruthie Meadows. 2023. The University of Chicago Press. 30 b/w illustrations, bibliography, index, 272 pages.

The book documents the findings obtained from over a decade of research trips to Cuba, the United States of America, Nigeria and elsewhere. It focusses on exploring, through an ethnographic approach, the Yorubanisation movement in Cuba in its aim of embracing an “African authenticity” and its attendant challenges with the government of Cuba.

One revelation in the book is how Camejo, an exiled Cuban in Spain, had a pivotal role in connecting Ifa practitioners in Cuba with Yoruba traditional religion in Nigeria. Renamed in Yoruba language as Ifashade Odugbemi, with the help of associates, he created the Ifa Temple called Odugbemi Lineage in eastern Cuba. The aim of the trans-Atlantic connection was to secure the legitimacy and authenticity of Afro-Cuban ritual practices of Santeria/Rela de Ocha. The first trans-Atlantic contact between Cuba and Yorubaland in this spiritual connection was made in 1987 when Ooni, King of Ile-Ife, Olubuse the Second, was invited to Cuba for five days and welcomed by Fidel Castro. The visit was historically symbolic, because it linked practitioners to the homeland; it also aligned with the government’s anti-colonial vision and liberationist solidarity with the Global South. However, the government institution, Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba (ACYC), became antagonistic towards the Nigeria style of Ifa or the traditionalists’ Yorubanisation movement of Santeria.

Early pioneers in the Yorubanisation movement in the 1990s were Estrada, Suarez, O’Farrill, Bravo and Gongora. Estrada is credited as the founder of the traditionalist Yorubanisation movement lineage in Cuba. The movement had setbacks in their search for the acquisition of Yoruba Ifa knowledge because they did not speak either English or Yoruba and most documents with information about sacred verses of Ifa are in Yoruba. The traditionalist Yorubanisation movement attempted to adapt the organizational structure of the Aworeni lineage of Yorubaland. The movement of pan-African models posed a challenge to the ACYC. As many Cubans began to travel to Yorubaland in Nigeria and adopted the Yoruba traditional religion style in Cuba; this was perceived as a threat to Santeria. Even though the Aworeni lineage in Cuba is registered with the branch in Nigeria and its government, it faces restrictions against open practice and a lack of recognition from the Cuban government. For the ACYC, the Arabic title is African and not Cuban and does not represent Afro-Cuban transcendence. Furthermore, Cuban laws do not allow more than one of the same type of organization. According to the liturgy of Santeria, women are not given the title and role as chief, priestess or iyanifa, which is practiced in Nigerian Ifa.

For Orozwo Rubio, a member of the Odugbemi lineage, it was necessary to learn more about Yoruba style Ifa. This follows the ideals of the Yorubanisation movement that aims for the transformation of the Cuban practice of Ifa to a traditionalist type as crucial for claims of authority and authenticity. Consequently, Rubio focused the efforts of the temple on accepting professionals as members, centered the temple's search for knowledge on academic research and provided a space for women.

Even though the ACYA is strongly against the practice of women being involved in religious activities, more women are becoming Iyanifa. They tend to participate by speaking the Yoruba language because they believe the correct pronunciation of Yoruba words can evoke power. However, this orientation among women has attracted blacklisting, harassment, and prohibition from the ACYA, Cuban American Press and social pressure. For example, the Mejias family experienced social pressure shortly after Mejias accepted the title of Iyanifa/Priestess. In turn, the family relocated to Columbia. Another incident is D'Haifa, a Jewish American, who was initiated by the Nigerian Ifa priest and playwright, Chief O. I. Elebuiban as Iyanifa. The title was later revoked when she claimed to have initiated a male into priesthood.

The first appearance of Egungun masquerades dancing occurred in Barocoa City. The city has the strongest pre-colonial population after the arrival of Columbus and enslaved Africans. The Egungun in Yorubaland constitutes the collective spirit of the ancestors. The masquerader's costumes inspire fascination and fear and represent the personification of the deities and not merely the ancestors. Unlike the Ifa practitioners in Cuba, the Egungun masquerade of Yorubaland does not fall under the domain of Ifa temples or lineages.

In Cuba, the Babalawo and Iyanifa are compared to leopards who are considered as a metaphor for independence, autonomy, and self-sufficiency. The symbol of the leopard is derived from the Ooni of Ile-Ife in Yorubaland. Estrada and Gongora attempted to unify all the traditionalists under one organisation which failed in the first conference as there was disagreement about leadership. They preferred the autonomy of individual communities. The connections between traditionalists in Cuba and Yorubaland are expressed in books, songs, travelling, and communication technology. The mobilisation of Ifa practices is aided by Cuba reducing restrictions on travelling for tourists and citizens. Traditionalists are constantly seeking knowledge, asking questions in their effort to attain "authenticity." They face limitation of language and Cuban laws as the movement are drawn towards Ifa and Yoruba culture.

This book makes a very important contribution to the understanding of Yoruba religious traditions which have survived plantation slavery in Cuba and the Americas. The book carries with it many stereotypes of Western intellectual traditions and even imposes on the cultures studied its own understanding of reality. The Preface, for example, starts with a documentary where a divination,

which is supposed to be a solemn, private affair between the Priest/ess and her/his client is serenaded by a chorus performed by others. This is against the principles of confidentiality of Ifa consultation, which is not different to what occurs in Western medical practice.

Aspects of the book display a level of condescension regarding the appreciation of African retention in Cuban culture, because of its Black, African and Yoruba traditions. This is manifested in the description of the language of the people as “vernacular” and the need to force a stereotypical interpretation into divination traditions where it concerns gender roles. It was not enough to see discrimination in the fact that Yoruba tradition privileges men as diviners. There was no need to go to the extreme opposite to read misogyny into this divination practice. Being a beneficiary of white privilege, the author often asserts superiority complexes which are often difficult to define, such as when one finds oneself in positions which provide access beyond what might normally accrue to peoples of colour in similar circumstances and using such privilege to make claims which the data does not support.

However, two elements are evident in the book. The first is the modernity of the Yoruba culture which did not admit to bigotry, religious fanaticism, or hatred for different cultures (6). The second is that the Yoruba never privileged any gender beyond adaptive roles, which allowed for the emergence of Iyanifa — or Aya Ifa (xiv).

There is no doubt that this book makes a very important contribution to the understanding of the tense relationship between the two Yoruba derived religious traditions of Cuba through music; that is, between the Santeria evolved retentions which emanated from the enslaved Yoruba peoples in Cuba and the Yorubanisation movement. What seems to be unclear is how the author interprets the notion of traditionality where identities are concerned; for instance, the core of the contestation seems to be the group which can lay claim to authenticity of identity in the sense of being the original Yoruba Ifa-derived Cuban religion. The Santeria group sees their efforts culled from generations of retentions by their ancestors as more authentic and the Yorubanisation group believes that by being closer to contemporary Yoruba Ifa traditions, they are more genuine. If the author had better immersed herself in Yoruba language, culture and Ifa religion, it is possible that the book may have better shown that there is no schism in the true sense of the word.

One minor point. There is a suggestion that the book represents pioneering research in understanding the subject matter of the efficacy of sound in Cuban and Yoruba Ifa systems. This is an exaggerated claim that ignores the scholarship of Adegbite (1991), Brown (2003), Hagedorn (2001), Mason (2002), Ogunyemi (2017), Olaleye (2020), Omojola (2010) and Palmié (2005). Situated in the larger context of Yoruba culture with its long-standing scholarship, it is odd that the author seems unfamiliar with much of these writings which are in the public domain.

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