

ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

TRUSTEES

Bryn Barnard
Carole Beaulieu
Evelyn Cohn
Peter Geithner
Thomas Hughes
Stephen Maly
Peter Bird Martin
Judith Mayer
Dorothy S. Patterson
Paul A. Rahe
Carol Rose
John Spencer
Edmund H. Sutton
Dirk J. Vandewalle
Sally Wiggins

HONORARY TRUSTEES

A. Doak Barnett
David Elliot
David Haggood
Pat M. Holt
Edwin S. Munger
Richard H. Nolte
Albert Ravenholt
Phillips Talbot

The Institute of Current World Affairs
THE CRANE-ROGERS FOUNDATION
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

BPE-1 1998
THE AMERICAS

Paige Evans is an Institute Fellow looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts.

AfroCuba

CUBA, Havana

July 23, 1998

By Paige Evans

AN OVERVIEW

Last week, I attended the International Yoruba Conference, the third to be held here in Havana. Prior to 1990, Cuba's revolutionary government did not allow Cubans to openly practice religion. In recent years, however, the Yoruba Association, which presented the conference, has become increasingly recognized both within Cuba and around the world.

Slaves brought to the Caribbean from West Africa between the 16th and 19th centuries carried with them systems of animistic beliefs that they managed to conceal from Catholic slave owners behind a Catholic facade. The principal syncretic religion that evolved in Cuba from a combination of Yoruba and Catholic beliefs is called *Santeria*, or *Regla de Ocha*. Originally practiced exclusively by poor blacks, *Santeria* has gained popularity and stature over the years and become an essential part of Cuba's national identity and culture.

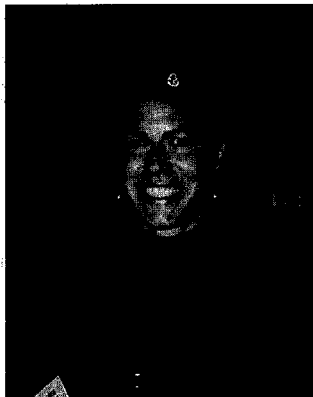
In *Santeria*, the slaves synchronized the names and images of their masters' Catholic saints with their Yoruba *orishas*.* Of the roughly 500 orishas in the Yoruba pantheon, about 22 survived the transatlantic voyage. Obatala, the father and creator *orisha*, is associated with the Virgin Mary; Changó, the virile master of fire and thunder, is associated with Santa Barbara; Yemaya, the goddess of motherhood and the sea, is associated with the patron saint of Havana, Our Lady of Regla. *Santeria*'s orishas represent primordial natural forces and archetypal human personalities; unlike Catholic saints, they have human frailties and characteristics. Orishas act as personal guardians to *Santeria*'s initiates, or *santeros*.

Santeria is based on legends that have been passed down orally over the ages. Ancestral spirits are worshipped, and the concepts of original sin and final judgment do not exist. Rites are presided over by a male priest, or *babalao*. *Babalao*s are frequently consulted by both *santeros* and non-believers for advice, to cure sickness, and to grant protection.

Evidently, Cuban *babalao*s have been charging higher and higher prices to perform rites, both because ritual materials are increasingly costly and hard to find in Cuba, and in order to make money. In recent years, increasing numbers of tourists have begun to visit *babalao*s and *Santeria* ceremonies; this, too, has encouraged the commercialization and misuse of the religion.

At the International Yoruba Conference, there was a good deal of discussion about the need to combat abuses of the religion. The tenants of *Santeria* have heretofore been transmitted orally, allowing for a good deal of miscommunication and misunderstanding among its practitioners. The conference's

*Orishas, which rule over the forces of nature and the endeavors of humanity, are the emissaries of Olodumere, or the almighty god.



A playwright, a writer of filmscripts and an *aficionado* of Caribbean music, Paige Evans is spending two years in Cuba, which she describes as a "hotbed for Caribbean performing arts."

Before Fidel Castro came to power in 40 years ago, she says, "Cuban culture was eclipsed by foreign commercial culture, particularly from the United States. Castro's revolutionary government revalued Cuba's African culture to encourage a sense of national pride and identity. The communist government opened museums, created art schools, established a national ballet company and film industry, formed theater groups, supported Afro-Cuban folklore ensembles and guaranteed musicians a salary.

"Recently, though, with the fall of the Soviet bloc and the tight U.S. embargo, the government has had to cut back on funding for the arts. During this *periodo especial*, some state-funded festivals have been suspended and individual artists are receiving curtailed stipends.

"In 1993, Castro began to institute economic reforms, such as allowing Cubans to own U.S. dollars. These reforms have bolstered the Cuban economy, giving the socialist system a chance of survival. But they've also led to the re-emergence of class differences. Cubans with access to dollars — employees of the tourist industry and multinational companies, people with relatives living overseas, black marketeers, prostitutes and petty criminals — have access to goods and services denied to other Cubans. I intend to investigate the repercussions of these reforms on Cuban performing arts. I'm curious to see, for example, if the performing arts have become more consumer-oriented and elitist, and if more highly politicized, grassroots genres have emerged."

speakers and participants called for a more unified approach to the religion, with *santeros* and academics working together to transcribe and systematically regulate the beliefs and practices that now vary widely both nationally and internationally.

CONFERENCE OPENING DAY

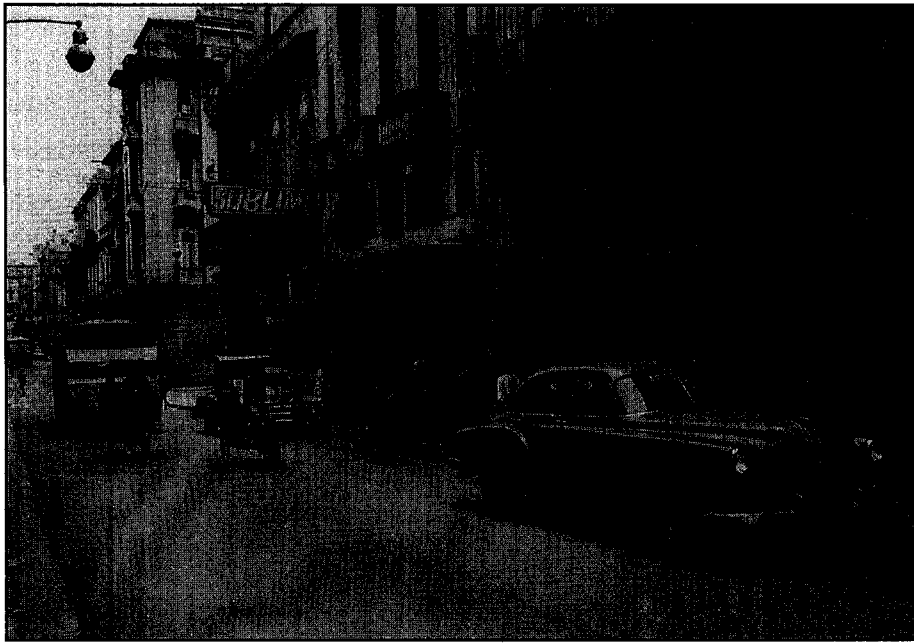
On the first day of the Conference I catch a ride to La Habana Vieja, where the conference is taking place, in a "Taxi Particular" — a privately-owned car used illegally to escort foreigners around the city. Before I get into the car, I bargain with its driver over a price in U.S. dollars. Until recently, it was illegal for Cubans to have U.S. dollars. Now, U.S. dollars are the most powerful and coveted currency in Cuba; they can buy almost anything here. Roughly seven different kinds of taxis are available in Havana, ranging in price from the official governmental taxis (which have dollar meters and are the most costly) down to bicycle rickshaws. Peso cabs charge a fraction of an official cab's fare and have meters that register pesos; but foreigners must bargain for a price in U.S. dollars. There are also "Taxi Colectivos," or Collective Cabs; and, in La Habana Vieja, bicycle rickshaws.

Like many of the cars here in Havana, my taxi this morning is a vast old American car that has been revived over the years with layers of paint and makeshift

repairs. Its owner is a doctor who, while on vacation, is supplementing his monthly income of 400 pesos (U.S.\$20) by escorting foreigners around the city. Cubans with access to dollars — those who work in the tourist industry, have families in the U.S. sending them money, work as prostitutes, or run multinational companies — are the new privileged class here; bartenders and chambermaids at tourist hotels earn substantially more from dollar tips than do most professionals paid in pesos.

To supplement insufficient monthly incomes and meager food rations, Cubans find ways to acquire dollars and buy products at reduced prices. Many things — coffee, fish, medicine, tampons, pesos, even entire computers broken down into parts — can be bought far more cheaply "por la calle," or on the black market. My driver tells me that to avoid the prohibitive cost of gasoline — about four dollars per gallon — many Cubans buy black-market gasoline, then mix it with less costly diesel fuel.

As we drive along the Malecon, Havana's famed sea-side strip, we pass a billboard proclaiming "Por la Vida: No al Bloqueo!" or "For Life: No to the Embargo!" Like every Cuban I have spoken with, my driver decries the U.S. Trade Embargo, arguing that Cuba needs its large and powerful neighbor as a trading partner in order to survive. He says the policy is strangling Cuba's



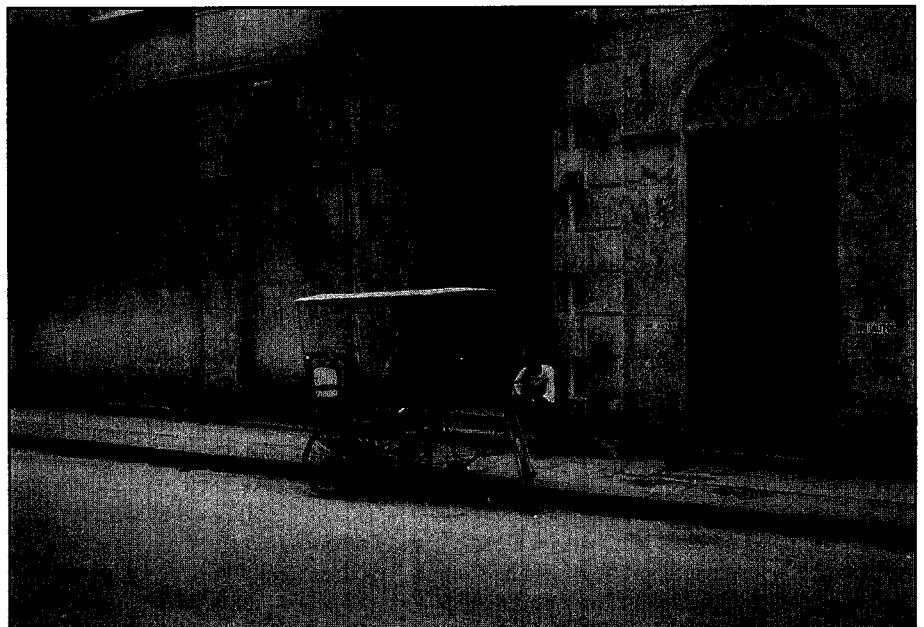
Taxi!

economy, killing its people but not its government.

He hearkens back to the days “*Antes*,” or before the Revolution, when gas was cheap and plentiful; and Cuba was “*la linda hija de America*,” America’s beautiful daughter. He tells me he watches Miami programs on television. When I express surprise at this, he explains that he does so with a clandestine antenna, remarking that “Everything in Cuba is outside the law.”

The driver is interested to hear my plans to be in Havana long-term: he knows someone with an available apartment. Independent apartments are difficult to

find here; like most things, however, they are available if one can pay in dollars. Though they usually involve lower rates, long-term rentals are attractive to Cuban homeowners because they promise a reliable influx of dollars. Cubans renting out part or all of their homes to foreigners are charged prohibitive taxes — \$250 monthly per room rented — whether or not they have renters throughout the month. My driver writes his name and number on a slip of paper and urges me to call him. If I end up renting the apartment, he will probably receive as a commission a fraction of my monthly rent — from the apartment’s owner. I have already collected a hefty stack of names and numbers in my first 12 days here.



Taxi!

Because the building that normally houses the Yoruba Association is undergoing renovation, the Yoruba Conference is held in the *Capitolio*, or Capitol Building. My driver lets me off across the street so as not to be spotted by the police or government officials. The *Capitolio*, which housed the Cuban Senate in the days of U.S.-backed dictators Gerardo Machado and Fulgencio Batista, is a replica of the U.S. Capitol building (though the *Capitolio* is richer in detail and slightly smaller). Like many historic buildings in the heavily touristed Habana Vieja, the *Capitolio* has been beautifully restored.

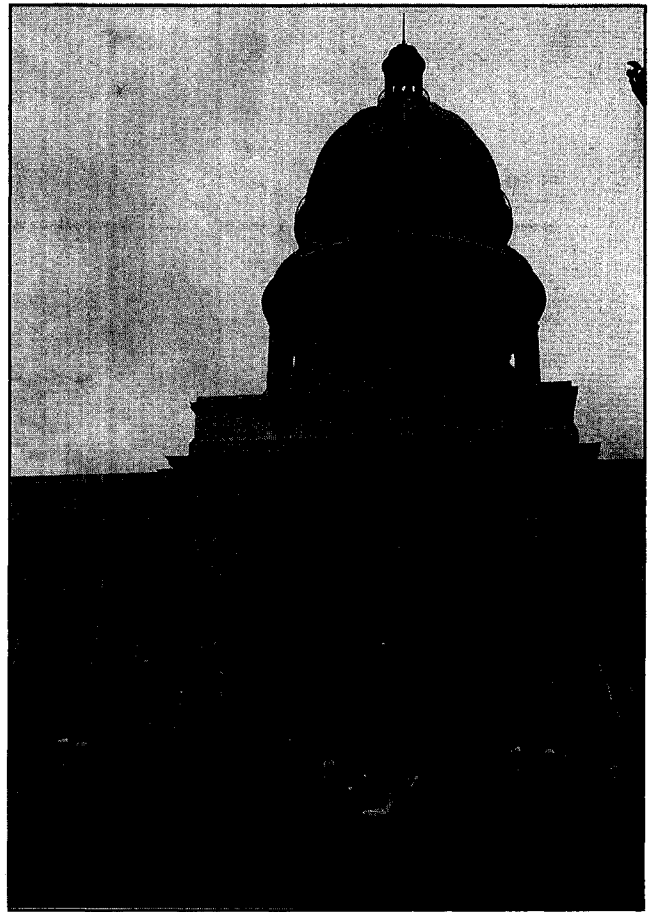
When I paid the relatively expensive foreigners' fee to enroll in the Yoruba Conference, I was assured I would have an English-language interpreter. I arrive on the first day, however, to discover that a translator has not been arranged for. A Mexican acquaintance who is a *santera* and has lived in Cuba for 20 years finds me an interpreter — a young Cuban woman named Marina who studied English at university and now works occasionally as a freelance translator.

Marina also ends up serving as an interpreter for a California woman who is attending the conference with a small delegation of U.S. *santeros*. This woman, who wears layers of colored *Santeria* beads wrapped around her hair, neck and wrists, introduces herself to me by her *santera* name, Yeye Ife. Later, I look at her name tag and find that her birth name is Anna Jones.

The conference opens with an announcement of scheduling changes. Practically every speaker and topic listed on the printed schedules handed out at registration has since been changed. As the President of the Yoruba Association greets us, Marina, sitting between Yeye Ife and me in the back row, whispers occasional translations. As an interpreter she has little experience and scant knowledge of *Santeria*, so her interpretation is rough, halting and general. I can follow the less technical Spanish myself, and Marina's translations offer a sound enough introduction for my purposes. But Yeye Ife, who speaks no Spanish but knows far more about the religion than either Marina or I, is clearly frustrated by both Marina's and my ignorance. She is also rankled by statements made throughout the conference, proclaiming them "sexist," "ageist," "paternalistic," etc. Marina struggles to navigate my and Yeye Ife's different needs, personalities, and perspectives; by week's end, one of her eyes has turned a deep red from stress.

TWO CEREMONIES

In the final days of the Yoruba Conference, I attend two *Santeria* ceremonies. The first is a "*Comida*," or meal, for Ochun, the goddess of love and rivers. Though the offering is supposed to be open only to *santeros*, the Presi-



El Capitolio

dent of the Yoruba Association decides shortly before the ceremony that non-initiates can attend as well.

The offering takes place in the Yoruba Association's headquarters, which is currently undergoing renovation. The building's walls are stripped of paint and plaster; light emanates from a few bare bulbs; the air is suffused with dust. The air is also thick with smoke, though I cannot see a fire. Shortly before the ceremony begins, a woman walks through the crowd with a piece of chalk, asking each person if he or she has an *orisha*. When I reply that I do not, she marks my forehead with a white "X"; evidently this is to protect non-believers from *orishas* that might do us harm.

As the ceremony begins, five *babalos* gather in a corner of the building's main room. The *babalos* wear skull caps made from shiny fabrics in rich colors; otherwise they are casually dressed. The crowd is instructed to turn away as the *babalos* perform a sacred rite we are not allowed to watch.

We women are then told to cover our heads. Those of us who lack a white hat or cloth place one hand on our heads, again as a means of protection. The crowd



The Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba

gravitates toward the *babalao*s, who are chanting, and form a line. I tear a piece of white paper in half, and Marina and I each hold a scrap of it on our heads. A *babalao* then rubs a live rooster over each person as he or she spins slowly around. Later, a different *babalao* performs a similar rite with a pigeon. Evidently this is a blessing.

The *babalao*s and other *santeros* then go into an adjoining room where there is a candlelit figure representing Elegba, the gatekeeper *orisha*, and another representing Ochun. The non-initiates are asked to turn away. Shortly afterwards, two decapitated roosters and a headless pigeon are carried out of the room. The animals' blood has been offered as a meal for Ochun.

The following afternoon, I attend a "tambor," or drumming ceremony for Ochun. A throne to Ochun has been set up in the Yoruba Association's foyer. A piece of cloth painted with a large, colorful depiction of Ochun — a beautiful, mocha-skinned young woman with ample, rounded breasts, gold jewelry and a dress of blue and yellow (Ochun's color) — is strung across the wall. Swaths of yellow material are spread across the floor with offerings to Ochun piled atop them: several large

cakes with pink-and-white icing; pottery bowls heaped with meringues; plates of taffy and other candied sweets; massive baskets stocked with fruit. Apparently Ochun has a penchant for sweets.

Various *santeros* are dressed all in white for the tambor. Some of them are recent initiates, required to wear white for a prescribed period following their initiation; others are followers of the *orisha* Obatala, whose color is white. Because entirely white clothing is scarce and costly in Cuba, many people's otherwise white shirts are stamped with writing or small patches of color.

Santeria ceremonies always involve music and dance, which invoke the *orishas* to come to earth and possess the bodies of worshipers. In this way, the *orishas* "live" amongst their followers, giving them blessings and guidance. Drums, or "tambors," play a particularly important role in religious rites; they are believed to be spiritual entities of great power, which speak a language of their own. Santeria ceremonies involve some of the most rhythmically complex and musically influential drumming in the world. Santeria's rhythmic traditions have been integrated into Cuban popular music and have played a crucial role in a wide range of international musics.

The sacred bata drums are always played in sets of three and are used exclusively in ceremonial rituals. Only designated types of wood can be used to build these drums, and their construction involves ceremonies, chants, and special offerings. Before playing the consecrated drums in a ceremony, a drummer — always male — must be initiated with specific rites, which include drinking the blood of certain animals. Bata drums have two heads; they are laid horizontally across the lap of the drummer and played with bare hands. The largest of the three drums, or "Mother Drum," is played by the master drummer, who sits in the middle and dictates the rhythms of the other two. Varied rhythms are used to invoke individual *orishas*.

Like most things in Cuba, the Yoruba Association's tambor ceremony begins late. Elegba, the gatekeeper *orisha*, is the first to be honored; because he is the beginning and end of everything, all Yoruba ceremonies start and finish with Elegba. The three masterful drummers manage somehow to talk and joke among themselves and even smoke cigarettes while skillfully playing the complex rhythms to Elegba.

The lead singer, a reedy man dressed in white with a twangy voice and possessed of a piercing gaze, then begins a call-and-response song. All Santeria ceremonies have a lead singer who directs the course of events by ending songs and introducing new ones when appropriate. These songs sing praise to specific *orishas*, refer

to myths about *orishas*, or actually insult individual *orishas*. Insulting songs are used when an *orisha* refuses to descend, in an attempt to antagonize him or her into appearing.

After a few songs, someone hands the lead singer a wooden bowl filled with water. He places this on the floor before the Mother Drum, and worshipers line up to touch their foreheads with water. After doing so, many of them hand the lead singer money, usually in five- or ten-peso notes — another offering to Ochun. Several people also prostrate themselves before the Mother Drum, touching their foreheads to its sacred wood.

An hour or so into the ceremony, a blind, 92-year-old *babalao* cuts in and leads a song in rasping tones; a young man with a potent voice then takes over and leads another. A duel of voices results between the young upstart and the original lead singer, who finally storms to the back of the room in protest. Eventually, the drummers coax him back, and he resumes his position as lead singer.

Santeria has specific dances for each *orisha* that are carefully choreographed to represent sacred messages to and from the *orisha*. Each dance calls to an *orisha* to come down and manifest him- or herself by taking possession of a worshiper. Yeye Ife, who teaches Yoruba dance in California and clearly prides herself on her dancing prowess, takes a place at front and center of the dancers. She remains there throughout the ceremony, beaming triumphantly for a pointedly indifferent audience.

During the tambor, Ochun comes down and pos-

sesses two people. The second trance, entered into by a man who speaks frequently and at great length throughout the conference, lasts for roughly two hours. As the man enters into his trance, the lead singer sings loudly and directly at him, encouraging Ochun to take him over. The drumming builds in urgency, speed, and volume. The crowd encircles the man being possessed, eventually forming two long columns on either side of him, from which people sing and dance, watch the man, and urge him on. The man keeps his eyes partly closed throughout his trance and aggressively rubs his hands across his scalp and down his face.

The music ends at 9:00 pm., the hour most tambors finish. The cakes and other sweets from Ochun's throne are then carried into an adjoining room and divided up; the fruit baskets are brought to the center of the room and immediately descended upon by a hungry crowd. The President of the Yoruba Association struggles fruitlessly to maintain order as people grab mangoes, grapes, bananas and pineapples from the largest basket. Nearby, a woman calls out "The Line! The Line!" to deaf ears as people swarm to get cake.

* * *

Santeria plays an extremely important role in Cuba's culture, arts, and national identity. Its ceremonies involve complex percussion whose rhythms and tones have been highly influential both here in Cuba and throughout world music. Last week's International Yoruba Conference provided a helpful introduction to this complicated and intriguing religion, which I look forward to studying further in order to better understand Cuba's performing arts. □



Index to ICWA Letters by Paige Evans

| | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| B | I | S |
| <i>babaloa</i> 1.1 | International Yoruba Conference 1.1 | <i>Santeria</i> 1.1 |
| bata drums 1.5 | M | T |
| black market 1.2 | Mother Drum 1.6 | tambor 1.5 |
| C | O | <i>Taxi Collectivos</i> 1.2 |
| <i>Capitolio</i> 1.4 | Obatala 1.1, 1.5 | <i>Taxi Particula</i> 1.2 |
| Chango 1.1 | Ochun 1.4 | U |
| D | <i>orishas</i> 1.1 | U.S. Trade Embargo 1.2 |
| dollar economy 1.2 | Our Lady of Regla 1.1 | Y |
| drumming 1.5 | R | Yemaya 1.1 |
| E | <i>Regla de Ocha</i> 1.1 | Yoruba 1.1 |
| Elegba 1.5 | rickshaws 1.2 | |