Odú in Motion: Afro-Cuban Orisha Hermeneutics and Embodied Scholarship, Life Reflections of a Lukumí Priest

by

Alexander Fernandez

The study of the Afro-Cuban Lukumí, the descendants of the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, and their religious practices, has long been of interest to anthropologists and religious studies scholars alike. Unfortunately, Western scholarship has too often relied on the juxtaposition between our rational and their irrational belief systems, explaining away, or acutely ignoring, emic interpretations of religious practice, severely limiting the kind of knowledge produced about these religious phenomena.

With the 2005 UNESCO proclamation which inscribed the Ifá divination system on the representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, Lukumí, Ifá’s diasporic reproduction, has come under closer academic inspection. However, this inspection has by and large not been conducted by those deeply involved in the tradition. As a Lukumí priest initiated in 1980, I aim to intervene upon this exclusion by investigating the ways that Lukumí religion produces, embodies and uses divinatory narratives in order to graph, express, and orientate the practitioner’s world view.

My study focuses on three distinct processes of divination and their accompanying ceremonies and ritual ledgers, examining how these shape dynamic and formative pedagogies in the Lukumí initiate’s life. Through self-ethnography, and by engaging key theorists, I explore the ways in which the body, as site of religious experience, through divination and initiation, interacts with and is informed by communitas, understood as the very spirit of the community in action.

Date: March 21, 2014  
Department: Religious Studies  
Time: 9:00 a.m.  
Major Professor: Dr. Albert Wuaku  
Place: MMC, DM 323