



Afro-Cuban Folkloric : Lucumi



The Middle Passage brought many Africans as slaves to the island of Cuba, and while they belonged to many ethnic groups, a majority were Yoruba, from the region which is now called Nigeria. The traditions so vital to Yoruba life were carried on in Cuba, though significant changes occurred in the music and dance between West Africa and the continuation of this tradition in the Americas. This was due in part to time, distance, and the arduous circumstances of slavery imposed on the devotees.

However, in Cuba people have preserved more of the dance and music in these rituals than anywhere else in the Americas, maintaining knowledge of the largest number of rhythms, dances, and songs. The Cuban version of the Yoruba language and cultural expression is called Lucumí, and the religious

system is often called Santería.

During ceremonies, the dances, songs, and rhythms honor spiritual entities called Orishas. Through a process often called syncretism, the ingenious devotees related each Orisha to a corresponding Catholic saint, in order to maintain their own beliefs and traditions under the guise of Catholicism. Being inclusive, the Yoruba practice did not lose much of its original content in its new context in Spanish-ruled Cuba, but transformed into something unique.

Orishas correspond to natural phenomena, such as the sweet river water belonging to Oshun, Chango the virile owner of lightning, drums, and fire, Yemaya the nurturing ocean mother, and Ogun the god of war and hard work. They reflect not only earthly nature, but human nature as well, and, it is easy to see a little of each archetype inside of each one of us.

In the early part of the 20th century, Cubans were forced to go underground, hiding their ceremonial practices. However, in the late 1950's, the music and dance associated with these traditions were hailed as a national treasure, and promoted nationally and internationally as Afro-Cuban folkloric dance.



National dance troupes were formed, well supported, schools for the arts began to train promising young performers, and a whole new context for this material was developed. The songs and dances in folkloric performances include interpretations and choreographed versions of the ceremonial music and dance. The staged dances often depict and present the characteristics and personalities of the

Orishas, and tell tales, or patakin describing their adventures.

In People Like Me 2001, the group Olorum (meaning "sun") presents "Wemilere," in which several Orishas exhibit their characteristics and dance both individually and together. The drums played are the traditional batá drums, a set of three drums of varied sizes, each with two heads. The melodic and hypnotic sounds of the batá along with the songs that accompany them, build from slow and sweet to intense and forceful, illustrating the diversity of expression within this one dance and music genre.