

*Sightings* 4/27/06

## Color Beyond Race in an Afro-Cuban Religion

-- Elizabeth Pérez

Sometimes I forget the sight of myself, dressed top to toe in white: white head-wrap, white sweater, white petticoat, with snow-covered boots in the winter or, in the summertime, white sandals. A passerby might inquire, eyeing my grocery bags, "Can I help you carry that, sister?" assuming that I am one of Chicago's estimated 285,000 Muslims, and that the scarf covering my hair is a variation on the hijab, or veil.

In fact, I am an historian of religions, specializing in Caribbean initiatory traditions that crystallized during the transatlantic slave trade. My work focuses on the conversion of African-Americans to the Afro-Cuban religion popularly called Santería, and termed Lucumí by practitioners. I am conducting ethnographic research in a house of worship that is also a private home, located on Chicago's South Side. To participate in rituals designed to propitiate ancestors or the pantheon of gods called "orishas," I must wear the right -- white -- clothes, out of respect for the community at the heart of my study and the almost synaesthetic understanding of color that permeates Lucumí religious life.

For the Yorùbá in West Africa -- whose ritual practices form the historical basis of Lucumí -- objects and deities still are categorized according to the three chromatic groupings that organize most sensory phenomena: fúnfún (ranging from white to colorlessness); dúdú (deepest jet to green and blue); and púpà (most reds, yellows, and oranges). Although primarily visual, colors, as scholar Henry John Drewal makes clear in his research on Yorùbá art, register temperature and temperaments. Fúnfún connotes coolness and light, seniority, sagacity, and disinterested judgment; dúdú, second to fúnfún in importance, conveys warmth and mystery, magic, the uncharted wilderness, and those at the social margins; púpà indicates heat and activity, youth, passion, and warfare.

Color (re)cognition thus simultaneously engages multiple senses: sight, sound, and touch. For instance, white substances such as coconut meat, cocoa butter, cotton, and a solid eggshell powder called "efún" are believed to impart fúnfún qualities, and are carefully applied to the body in Lucumí healing and cleansing ceremonies.

White garments and head-coverings are considered to be auspicious in ritual settings and are occasionally obligatory. But it is not only the color of my clothes that sets me apart in this neighborhood. No matter how ruddy I become in the freezing cold, my fellow bus and train riders view me as racially "white." And it is often supposed that I must have a boyfriend to visit or an errand to run on the South Side -- in other words, that I must be there "for" a specific purpose. "I don't mean to offend you, but I'm curious," one candy vendor began, wondering if I was going down to 95th Street to see my "man."

Pausing for a moment to reflect on Chicago's tragic history of segregation, housing discrimination, racial violence, and urban planning failure, I consider the situation: For residents of the South Side, what passes for normal is the absence of faces that appear white, Latino, or

Asian on at least one leg of their daily commutes. This is, to some extent, also true of the community I study, although some feel I must have special insight into Lucumí because my parents are Cuban, and many of them entered the religion under the tutelage of Cuban elders. It is not uncommon for "whiteness" and "Cubanness" to be cast as incompatible, if not mutually exclusive. One evening, after I was called on publicly to translate an announcement into Spanish, I was approached by a young African-American woman with whom I fancied myself well acquainted. "Lisa," she smiled, using my nickname, "you're Cuban? I didn't know you were Cuban. All this time I thought that you were white."

Although slaves brought orishas to the New World and codified the protocols for both association and worship that are observed in urban centers around the globe today, they chose to initiate protégés of every shape and shade. This decision had long-ranging consequences; it is a distinct possibility that, had the first Lucumí practitioners decided against initiating non-Yorùbá believers, the religion might have fallen victim to Cuba's changing demographics and stridently pro-European immigration policies in the early twentieth century. Significantly, the Yorùbá color categories outlined above do not extend to complexion; despite familiar stereotypes that cast Asians as "yellow" and Native Americans as "red" -- *et cetera, ad absurdum* -- the conspicuous absence of melanin in a face does not express fúnfún, any more than its presence conjures the meanings of dúdú.

Indeed, it would seem incontrovertible that the construction of whiteness as a privileged racial category in the Afro-Atlantic world, including Cuba and Chicago, actually testifies to a historical dearth of the wisdom and impartiality that fúnfún signifies. Proud to be black in dazzling white, my informants continue to remind me that there is much more to what we call "color" than meets the eye.

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