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Cooking for the gods: sensuous ethnography, sensory knowledge, and the kitchen in Lucumí tradition

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Cooking for the gods: sensuous ethnography, sensory knowledge, and the kitchen in Lucumí tradition

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ABSTRACT This article considers the ways "sensuous ethnography" can illuminate the dynamism of embodied religious perception and behavior. It discusses the author's ethnographic research in an African-American community of Lucumí/Santería practitioners on the South Side of Chicago, and explores the sensorily attentive methodological approach adopted to engage with this house of worship, Ilé Laroye. The kitchen of Ilé Laroye became the author's main fieldwork site, and this article historicizes the kitchen in Lucumí tradition as a woman-centered space that has privileged complex forms of labor defined as generative of virtue and ritual competence. It is argued that post-sacrificial food preparation in particular has served to prepare the uninitiated for the rigors of Lucumí priesthood, and proven necessary for the internalization of dispositions and sensibilities that lead to initiation. The author contends that kitchen work has played a key role in transmitting somatic knowledge indispensable for the practice of this Afro-Cuban tradition.

KEY WORDS anthropology; ethnography/fieldwork; ritual/performance; current situation of religious studies; material culture (architecture, artefacts etc.); method and methodology; gender; Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean religions

> The good historian is like the giant of the fairy tale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies.
>
> – Marc Bloch[1]

Over the last decade, scholars engaged in the academic study of religion have increasingly come to discuss the human body not only as an historical and biological artifact, but also as a multisensory interface continually reconfigured through ritual practice. Researchers in the sociology and history of religions have profited immensely within their own disciplines from a rising emphasis on 'body pedagogics,' 'enskillment,' and hexis, while reaping insights from anthropological and neuroscientific studies of emotion and the expression of sentiment; technologies of the self; and the enlacement of sensori-motor repertoires with material culture (Csordas 1990; Mellor and Shilling 2010; van Ede 2009; Warnier

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[1]Bloch (1954: 22).

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2007).[2] These developments may be viewed as a product of the 'sensory turn' in the social sciences that succeeded the 'literary turn' of the mid-1970s to early 1990s, as 'meaning-centered' analytical approaches came under increased fire for an excessive preoccupation with the notion of culture as grammar, vision as the master trope of perception, and reduction of the body to a text, a *tabula rasa* encoded with signs and propositions about the world that, once deciphered, could serve as a topological map of social relations. It had proven difficult for scholars to resist rendering the body synonymous with the individual as a passive vehicle of 'conceptions,' on the one hand, and a receptacle for the conscious intentionality that purportedly drives action, on the other.

My entry into the ethnographic field coincided with the advent of the 'sensory turn.' I was persuaded that the most trenchant critiques of interpretive, synchronic accounts of diverse cultures dealt with their elision of the socio-economic and political, and made the case that relations of power and domination – for instance, the ways that race/ethnicity, gender, and class are produced through corporeal practices and discourses – combine to set the conditions for representations of reality. As an historian of African Diaspora religions, I nevertheless wrestled with the ethical and methodological implications of the paradigmatic shift towards embodiment, particularly for my ongoing study of Afro-Cuban Lucumí (popularly called Santería). I felt that in order to mount a serious interdisciplinary inquiry into Lucumí, an initiatory tradition whose ritual protocols had crystallized during the transatlantic slave trade, it would not suffice merely to interrogate the primacy of Western models of personhood. It also would be necessary to recognize the interanimation of the senses in divination, spirit possession, and other forms of service to the Lucumí deities, or *orishas*, of West African Yorùbá origin. Moreover, it would be imperative to emphasize somatic apprehension as a mode of cognition, and to communicate the olfactory, auditory, and haptic dimensions of participant observation that inform the investigative process, often rather unpredictably.[3]

At pains to convey the synaesthetic complexity of Lucumí as practiced on the South Side of Chicago at the dawn of the 21st century, I was drawn to the possibilities of the 'sensuous ethnography' pioneered by Paul Stoller.[4] In what follows, I explore the sensorily attentive methodological approach I adopted in the course of my research in the female-led, predominantly African-American, house of worship called Ilé Laroye. I contend that engrossment in the sensory regimes of my interlocutors generated some fresh understandings of the role played by everyday corporeal training in religious transformation. I illustrate this point by examining one ensemble of ritual performances that, while still invisible in the ever-growing literature on Afro-Cuban religions, has been the *sine qua non* of its communal life: the preparation of food for the spirits from the animals sacrificed to them. I argue that in the space of the kitchen, practitioners have historically acquired not

[2]Bourdieu (1977:93–94) writes: 'Bodily *hexis* is political mythology realized, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking, and thereby of *feeling* and *thinking*'; this definition exists in fruitful tension with such analyses as Starrett (1995).

[3]The standard for analysis of Lucumí from the perspective of the experiencing subject, as opposed to the convert, has been set by Mason (2002), whose scholarship has contributed significantly to the ethnographic literature on religious identity and the embodiment of cosmology in ritual contexts, particularly with reference to virtuosic – in the Weberian sense of the term – Yorùbá-based theological discourse.

[4]See, most notably, Stoller (1989).

only technical proficiency, but also affective dispositions and corporeal capacities indispensable for the continued existence of the Lucumí tradition.[5] After explaining the importance of cooking and related tasks for the gradual habituation, or 'seasoning,' of the uninitiated into the rigors of the priesthood, I consider the influence of my work in the kitchen on my ethnographic writing, with special reference to the intricacies of race and gender as lived through religious practice.

The aché of ashés

'Ilé' means 'house' in Yorùbá, and refers to both physical structure and extended family unit in the context of Lucumí practice. As in the case of 'church,' *'ilé'* denotes both a religious assembly and architectural edifice. One of the differences between 'church' and *'ilé,'* however, is that since the late 19th century, the latter have been located in private homes, where the leaders of Lucumí communities live with their relatives. Ilé Laroye is no exception. Since 1986, it has been located within the home of Nilaja Thomas, initiated for 25 years and considered the godmother, or ritual sponsor, of almost as many initiates.[6] In Ilé Laroye, as in other Lucumí houses, most activity has been centered around the kitchen. Indeed, a member of Ilé Laroye once told me, '[The Lucumí religion] revolves around cooking,' and this statement was only a single expression of the same sentiment verbalized, at one time or another, by all of my initiated interlocutors. The kitchen undoubtedly exerted a centripetal force that draws religious personnel to it in an orbit shaped by the exigencies of any given ritual. While remaining the locus for secular food preparation and consumption, the kitchen was also where, after rituals of consecration, the blood, organs, and extremities of fowl and four-legged animals were classified as *iñalés* or *ashés* (plural), meaning 'food for the gods,' and set apart from both meat and offal.[7]

Such sacrificial offerings – *ebó eyé* or *ebó woní* in the Lucumí ritual language – have been seen to transfer the primordial energy called *aché* (singular) from the blood of animals to the *orishas*' implements and other sacra (Nodal and Ramos 2005: 173).[8] Nilaja's oldest godchild once said of the *orishas*' paraphernalia, 'It's blood that brings them to life.'[9] Providing a definition of *aché* in the context of Yorùbá traditional religion, Rowland Abiodun (1994: 309–310) writes,

> The word, *àse*, is generally translated and understood as 'power,' 'authority,' command,' 'sceptre,' 'vital force' in all living and non-living things … It includes the notion that *àse* inhabits and energizes the awe-inspiring space of *òrìsà*, their altars … along with all their objects, utensils, offerings, and including the air around them.

[5]My terminology throughout is derived largely from Asad (2003), writing on 'moral potentialities' as inculcated through bodily training, and the treatment of 'virtue' in Mahmood (2005).

[6]Nilaja Campbell is a pseudonym. I have also changed the name of her *ilé*, and the names of its members, for reasons of confidentiality.

[7]If the rituals were of an expiatory nature, sacrificed animals were usually deposited somewhere prescribed in advance by divination, such as near a railroad track, in the forest, or beside the river. In Latino communities, *ashés* are often called *ashéses*, although some elders believe this should be discouraged because the correct term is *iñalés*.

[8]In fact, practitioners are somewhat divided on the question of whether *aché* is immanent within blood in a particularly concentrated form, or if it is sacrifice that imparts *aché* to it.

[9]Personal communication, 14 October 2005.

In addition, *aché* has been thought to emanate from, or be immanent in, speech and saliva, thus accounting for the perceived efficacy of ritual entreaty and incantation. *Aché* may be contained by or transferred to objects – for instance, money – in the mediation of exchanges between the realm of human practitioners and the spirits (Powell 2004). Within Ilé Laroye, *ashés* tended to be referred to as such, rather than as *iñalés*, no doubt because they were viewed as *aché* in a particularly potent form.[10] By eating portions of the animals sacrificed on their behalf, the subjects of rituals are believed to incorporate their *aché*, while *aché* also spreads to other practitioners through the preparation and consumption of food from the same victims.

Blessed butchery

During a major ritual such as a *matanzas*, the slaughter performed as part of an initiation, at least five goats and 40 fowl were usually sacrificed for the ordination of each novice. These animals then had to be cleaned, quartered, and roasted in a highly systematized manner, in order to convert the carcasses into meals for the gods. After they were bled over the ritual sacra of the *orishas* and beheaded, the rams and goats were put aside to be flayed and disemboweled in the basement, while the larger pieces of the carcasses were disarticulated in the kitchen.[11] After sacrifice, birds were placed in plastic or aluminum tubs, and separated according to the *orisha* and devotee on whose behalf they met their ends, instead of with respect to sex or type, because these may be easily discerned.[12] A portion of the blood spilled over the ritual sacra for each *orisha* was also collected in its own dried gourd, then marked – preferably with a laminated tag, but just as often, with a paper towel or coffee filter – and later added to the *ashés* of that *orisha* when they were to be roasted.[13] Although the sacrificial victims for different *orishas* did come into contact with one another, initiated priests, also called 'elders,' taught that they were not to be confused or commingled; for instance, at no cost could the guinea hens sacrificed for the *orisha* Oyá be combined with those for Oshún.

The physical exertion of preparing the victims rivaled the mental labor required to remain cognizant of the order and identity of the animals.[14] The heads and

[10]Among other substances called *ashé* are the contents of the containers that embody the *orisha*, and the herbal mixture placed on the heads of novices during initiation; in order to ascertain what type of *ashé* is being referred to in a given utterance, one only has recourse to context.

[11]There are exceptions to this: in the case of initiations during the summer, birds have been plucked and goats and rams prepared outdoors.

[12]Elders labeled each four-legged animal according to the *orisha to* whom and the initiate *for* whom it was offered; for instance, an index card or piece of tape reading 'Obatalá she-goat iyawo Yemayá' designates the she-goat given to Obatalá on behalf of the novice initiated to Yemayá.

[13]The dried gourds are in constant danger of not only being confused but of tipping over and spilling, due to their round bottoms, so those working at the kitchen counter must exercise an extraordinary economy of movement and possess a presence of mind difficult to maintain under normal circumstances, and especially after midnight.

[14]The first time I plucked at Nilaja's house, I wrote in my field-notes: 'My guts got twisted into knots when I realized that the tubs had been moved and I'd momentarily forgotten for which orisha the pigeon I'd finished plucking had been dedicated. The fact that pigeons had been sacrificed for other orishas didn't matter; thankfully Rashida remembered the number of birds each had received and spared me having to bluff my way through the awkwardness.' Personal communication, 28 March 2004.

bodies of birds were dipped in boiling water in order to loosen their feathers, and their feet briefly scalded so that the epidermal scales, footpad, and skin could be more easily peeled away and the outer nail, detached.[15] For plucking, initiates and non-initiates alike usually sat on wooden benches fewer than six inches high, and ideally each person had access to a bowl into which feathers, down, and other waste matter could fall; corn and other undigested food often emerged from the throats of the birds, while excrement not infrequently appeared at the other end. The shoulders of the people plucking tended to roll forward, their spines to hunch, and their legs to splay, necessitating periodic stretching and adjustments in posture. During the course of a night, someone helping in the kitchen or in any space designated as the proper area could expect to clean eight to ten birds of different types, depending on her experience, speed, and tolerance for visual, aural, olfactory, and tactile sensations that presented themselves in the course of this endeavor. Although knives were sharpened prior to and throughout the course of animal sacrifices, they quickly grew dull, and the added pressure necessary to make incisions – to say nothing of chopping goats' thoracic cages into ribs, or bisecting the spinal columns of guinea hens – led to sore digits, palms, wrists, and shoulders.

The removal of *ashés* from sacrificial animals and their roasting was overseen by an *alashé*, a person put in charge of food preparation for the duration of a given ritual; usually this was Nilaja's godchild, Arlene Stevens. She and other elders advocated a single method for dissecting poultry that began with placing the bird belly-up and carving beneath the ribcage from wing to wing, driving the tip of a blade deep enough to create a cavity but not so far in that any organs may be slashed. After the top and bottom of the bird were tugged apart, entrails were pulled gently from the esophagus downwards with so that the gallbladder, attached to the liver, did not burst, corrupting the other organs with bile. The heart was detached from what appeared to be a wet ribbon holding it aloft; spongy lungs, nudged up and scraped out from the ribcage; intestines and stomach, discarded; gizzard, slit up the side, pried open, then emptied of its sandy, fibrous contents, in order to reveal its lining's otherworldly opalescence.[16] Any eggs and testes were set aside, along with the kidneys and pygostyle, referred to as the 'butt,' although it did not include the anus. At the end of the butt, the papilla of a bird's uropygial or 'preen' gland was also sliced off and discarded. The wing-tip was severed by cutting just above the spur of bone called the alula, and reserved for roasting, along with the feet, after the point at the end of the wing had been clipped off. Roosters' coxcombs and wattles were excised and thrown away.

The art of feeding the spirits

An explanation for the roasting of *ashés* never far from elders' minds or tongues was that scorching burns off any remaining plumage and particles of dirt attached to the *ashés*, should someone become possessed during or after the *ashés*'s presentation

[15]In the case of pigeons and guinea hens, the heads are not plucked, and pigeons are almost never dipped, due to their thin skin.

[16]Many thanks to Arlene Stevens for repeated demonstrations of her *ashé*-removing technique.

to the *orishas*, and be moved to gorge on them.[17] In possession, human subjects became embodied altars, through whose eyes the gods peered out into the world, and the idea that *orishas* could assume human form and taste their *ashés* informed every step of the animal cleaning and cooking process. Arlene once used herself as an example, stating that if she got mounted, she didn't want to find feathers between her teeth later.[18] No one wanted to be responsible for an *orisha*'s disgust or a devotee's post-possession bout of botulism, but ensuring that neither came to pass required effort.[19] One could spend an untold amount of time pinching off the sheer feathers called ear coverts that tuft over the auricular openings of chickens and roosters, and those that grow in wispy fuzz under their jaws. Time seemed to stand still; tips of the fingers grew numb and palms began to seize; the birds' eyes – now open, now closed – seemed to wink in mockery of one's frustration. It would have been tough to justify such meticulous attention to detail without believing that the *alashé* inspecting the heads had the ability to anticipate correctly the *orishas'* desires, or that an *orisha* could choose to inhabit a priest's body and approach the food with appetite, instead of academic curiosity.

Through the process of learning *orishas'* food preferences and repeatedly trying to anticipate their desires by preparing *ashés* 'properly,' practitioners became accustomed to the idea that *orishas* possess multiple, non-mutually-exclusive modes of existence. *Orisha*s dwell in their respective environmental or geographical domains – Elegguá in the street and at the crossroads, Shangó in fire and lightning, and so forth – but are also embodied in ritually prepared substances that, during the ordination ceremony, are applied to incisions made on the novice's scalp.[20] In addition, *orishas* reside in the ritual *sacra* that initiates maintain in porcelain soup tureens called *soperas* and other lidded containers.[21] Yet despite the *orishas*' materialization in a variety of objects, including the human body as objectified in possession, they are not believed by practitioners to be reducible to any one of them. Moreover, a set of protocols has governed both ordained and uninitiated practitioners' intercourse with the *orishas* in any of these forms according what one could call a theory of moral behavior, in which 'moral' (as in the phrase 'moral law') designates the requirements an action must fulfill in order to be right or virtuous. As Maya Deren (1983 [1953]: 240) writes of Haitian gods that are similarly envisioned, according to practitioners: 'The [spirits], themselves non-physical … are a moral essence; they answer to moral movement, moral sound, to moral matter.'

Ashés are the main type of 'moral matter' produced in order to elicit a response from the *orishas* after rituals of object consecration or replenishment. Elders' reminders that the *ashés* were destined for the *orishas'* mouths underscored the fact that the community's aesthetic imperatives – to turn out *ashés* that conform to certain

[17]In the context of the kitchen, 'dirt' would include sweat, excrement, oil, blood, and so forth.
[18]Fieldnotes, 6 November 2005.
[19]Although various accounts of possession note that mounts do not experience the ill effects of their activities while possessed – those whose *orishas* drink massive quantities of alcohol do not emerge drunk from trance, for instance – it is possible for a mount to sustain injuries, and for this reason they are sometimes restrained if the *orishas* wish to do something potentially dangerous, such as leaving the area designated for a drum ceremony and running out into the street. It would seem that as long as spirits are acting out aspects of their mythology, as in the case of Shangó eating fire, then the mount remains unharmed, but any deviation from the norm invites mishap.
[20]This process has been thought to install the *orishas* in the crown of a practitioner's physical head.
[21]For instance, the ritual *sacra* of Shangó 'lives' in a covered wooden container called a *batea*.

criteria visually and texturally – were ethical ones: correctly prepared *ashés* were 'right' and 'good' rather than merely 'beautiful' (Eagleton 1990). Indeed, it was in aesthetic forms that values were materialized and conveyed. Cooking *ashés* was an art, according to Alfred Gell's (1998: 6) definition of the term: 'A system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it.' One analogy to be drawn would be between cooking *ashés* and executing the movements specific to each *orisha* in Lucumí dance; both have involved producing a subjective state in the creation of an artifact or effect in a process that operates according to religious principles. As Deren (1983 [1953]: 246) explains,

> It is not only the attitude of reverent dedication … which distinguishes ritual dance from secular dance; for just as the ritual does not symbolize a principle but is an exemplary demonstration of that principle in action, so the actual dance is itself principled.

Elders attempted to enforce 'the attitude of reverent dedication' in plucking and cooking, most often by underscoring that too much conversation slowed down the process. This was as much a pedagogical concern as a practical one, however, because the principled composition of *ashés* must be enfleshed gradually and through studied practice.

Ritual labor and pedagogy

Without *ashés*, there are no *orishas*, at least in a form that renders their divine energy accessible to a religious community for its reproduction as an institution, and for the purpose of communal healing. Yet since none of the elders in Ilé Laroye earned a living as a ritual specialist or butcher, the expertise they possessed had been accumulated slowly, over the course of years. It had to be taught. Accordingly, during the time of my research, Nilaja's kitchen was a veritable 'laboratory of discursive thought' as well as embodied cognition, in which elders lived by the precept, 'the only way to learn is by doing' (Wacquant 2004: 123).[22] Their ritual labor transformed the kitchen into a classroom for minute instruction in the exceedingly complicated taxonomic enterprise of what may be termed 'Lucumí charcuterie,' and a site for the elaboration of a dynamic and largely unanalyzed religious pedagogy.[23] It has been a pedagogy rooted in bondage, for to be an initiate is – according to Lucumí religious ideology – to be the property of the *orishas*, envisioned as masters, as well as monarchs, foreigners, and parents. Elders' educative praxis proved faithful to the origin of the term 'pedagogy' in the antique figure of the *paedagogos*, the slave in ancient Greece charged with accompanying a high-born boy to school, tutoring him, protecting him, supervising his conduct, and safeguarding the moral formation of his character (Marrou 1964; Yannicopoulos 1985; Young 1990).

For many elders, religious obligations have included teaching the uninitiated and inexperienced to deal competently with the end products of sacrifice, training them in butchering technique, anatomy, and morphology, as well as viscera and tissue differentiation. In Ilé Laroye, elders relied on what they perceived to be the most old-fashioned routes to learning: bodily engagement and repetition. Uninitiated practitioners were never privy to 'secrets' that could, in disclosure,

[22]Personal communication, 7 May 2007.
[23]I have Stephan Palmié to thank for coining and sharing the phrase 'Lucumí charcuterie.'

compromise the integrity of a ritual, yet textual inscription – through the jotting of notes or drawing of diagrams – was consistently discouraged. More than once, I tried to write while Arlene showed me how to remove *ashés* from a bird, and was told to watch instead, thereby perceiving at first hand without the distraction of paraphrasing her statements in transcription, or having to withdraw my gaze periodically in order to write. It was no doubt the case that writing was distracting for elders attempting to focus on anticipating questions from their students by reading the expressions on their faces. Even after chores were finished, however, writing was perceived to have a corrupting effect on one's faculties of recollection.[24] Genevieve once saw me listing the types of food prepared for a particular ritual and, without saying a word, lifted the paper from beneath my pen, folded it, and slid it beneath her tee-shirt, into her brassiere. When I parted my lips to address her, Genevieve intoned, '*Memorize! Mem-or-ize!*'

Genevieve was not advocating simple rote memorization, but referring to the absorption and synthesis of information that ideally occurs when connections are made through semantic associations (as in the case of mnemonics), and in the exercise of muscle memory. Scholars of cognitive and educational psychology call this 'scaffolding' (Bliss, Askew and Macrae 1996; Wood, Bruner and Ross 1976). Indeed, newcomers acquired the ability to take out and cook *ashés* both at a conscious discursive level and through the progressive education of the corporeal sensorium. My informants often referred to their emic understanding that, without such schooling of the body, a practitioner's learning process is over before it begins (Ong 1991). In the words of Loïc Wacquant (2004: 69, his italics),

> Theoretical mastery is of little help so long as the move is not inscribed within one's bodily schema; and it is only after it has been assimilated by the body in and through endless physical drills repeated *ad nauseam* that it becomes in turn fully intelligible to the intellect. There is indeed a *comprehension of the body* that goes beyond – and comes prior to – full visual and mental cognizance. Only the permanent carnal experimentation that is training, as a coherent complexus of 'incorporating practices,' can enable one to acquire this practical mastery of the practical rules […], which precisely satisfies the condition of dispensing with the need to constitute them as such in consciousness.

Wacquant's insights, forged in the study of a Chicago boxing gym, bear stunning similarities to my experience within Ilé Laroye. Its 'physical drills' included having the uninitiated mirror the behavior of elders in the kitchen that became examples not only of how to do specific jobs, but also of how to act more generally, according to a certain religious ethos. This training involved the sensuous internalization of sensibilities attributed to the elders; to comprehend their bodies was to apprehend – in the sense of both 'understand' and 'seize' – the bodily schema of the ideal religious subject as modeled by them.

Yet in the kitchen, it was not always the case that 'comprehension of the body' in practice came 'prior to … full visual and mental cognizance' in a linear fashion. It was always imperative to consider future applications of the training received at present, and the cultivation of a future-directed memory seemed, paradoxically, to be one of the most tradition-bound aspects of the cooking ritual. Elders placed

[24]This phenomenon has been noted and analyzed in other contexts; see, for instance, Hobart and Schiffman (2000).

serious emphasis on learning not so as to create good students, but in order to produce teachers. As an 82-year-old Cuban Obatalá priestess told Andrew Apter in an interview, with reference to one particularly labor-intensive Lucumí dish that had fallen into desuetude:

> I cast my lot with the people of the past, who used to tell me, 'Little girl, come here, child, you have to learn this … and I'm only showing you how to do it once' … So I, since I needed to learn, I would do it. I listened.[25]

While elders in Ilé Laroye evinced greater willingness to repeat themselves, they also endorsed the view, 'you have to learn this.' In fact, they occasionally emphasized 'practical mastery of the practical rules' by encouraging a supervised apprentice to display key techniques to others, thereby obliging her to assume the role of instructor and to relive her memory through the effort of performing it, as a 'lesson.' Occasionally, however, elders rendered explicit the principle that forgetting, in the sense of losing conscious recollection, is a deeper type of remembering fundamental to ritual practice, as exemplified in the phrase used by Nilaja's son Santi in paying a compliment to his godchildren: 'What you have forgotten, [others] don't even know; pat yourself on the back.'[26]

Seasoned bodies: cooking *ashés* as ritual mediation and catalyst for initiation

It was easy to assume that those initially drawn to Lucumí by the spectacular opulence of spirits' altars, the pageantry of drum feasts, and the elegance of oracular speech delivered in solemn divination sessions, would recoil when faced with the task of taking out a guinea hen's heart. Many did flinch. As one of my interlocutors – then a vegetarian – told me: 'Never in a million years would I have thought – hear me? – that I would be cooking some chicken heads, tails, gizzards, chicken feet … I would've said you was lying.' But after two and a half years of ethnographic research, I eventually arrived at the conclusion that the more kitchen work a newcomer does, the greater the probability that he or she will go on to get initiated. Although newcomers may have entered Lucumí houses as clients, to solve specific problems through the interventions of elders, they stayed and became practitioners after developing a sense of solidarity with and investment in the community. They slowly acceded to a habituation or 'seasoning' into virtue as defined by elders, through cumulative engagement in ritual labor that came to make sense for them, even as it remade their senses.[27] Most accounts of Lucumí practice have emphasized the importance of receiving consecrated objects in rites of passage for the cultivation of religious sensibilities and continued growth of the tradition. On the contrary, I would assert that cooking, seemingly the lowliest of undertakings in a Lucumí house, has been essential for the internalization of dispositions and relationships to the *orishas* that lead to initiation.

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[25]Unpublished interview, 14 September 1995, conducted by Andrew Apter, with Lauren Derby and Lázara Menéndez, as part of the research project, 'Afro-Cuban Religion and Ritual in Havana,' funded by the University of Chicago Center for Latin American Studies.

[26]Personal communication, 7 May 2007; see also the parallels with Mauss (1950).

[27]As Norris (2003: 177–178) writes, in the context of religious transformation, 'each time a gesture is repeated, the kinesthetic, proprioceptive, and emotional memory of the gesture is evoked, layering, compounding, and shaping present experience.'

This argument goes against the grain of research beginning in the early 1980s that conflated the reasons for initial attraction to the tradition, especially among African-Americans, with the reasons that they seek initiation. The bulk of this scholarship tacitly accepted the 'push–pull model' of conversion that explains religious commitment sociologically in terms of converts' preadaptations.[28] In my research, however, I found that while many sought out Afro-Cuban religions because they appeared to epitomize cultural authenticity and offer symbolic forms of protest to mainstream society – as well as tools for its transformation – the main impetus for initiation among my interlocutors was the threat or reality of illness, interpreted in divination as an urgent call from the spirits. I concluded that, insofar as my Lucumí practitioners could be described as having experienced a conversion, it has entailed the acquisition not of belief in the gods, but of a hermeneutical apparatus within which their embodied experience could be understood as communication with the spirits, and authorized as consistent with Lucumí tradition. This intersubjective frame of reference has allowed for trauma and pain to be narrated as a blessing within the spirit idiom, for suffering to be diagnosed as a symptom of nascent vocation, and for initiation to be accepted as the ultimate healing ritual.

For the most part, practitioners have learned to inhabit and perform this spirit idiom in conversation with others, in chitchat that is anything but idle. A prime site for the acquisition of this spirit idiom has been the kitchen, where elders have 'thickened' the substance of their protégées' somatic knowledge by recounting innumerable anecdotes dramatizing the *orishas*' presence and power. Although listening has often been conceptualized as a cognitive response rather than a physical one, in the kitchen, the embodied nature of 'lending an ear' was emphasized. While plucking and cooking, initiates have recited myriad Lucumí myths, or *patakínes*, particularly those related to the *orishas*' dietary preferences. In so doing, they have established that the *orishas*' patterns of consumption reflect and structure their bonds with each other, as well as with their human servants, bearing in mind the assignment of gustatory taboos to priests upon initiation. In addition, elders have turned myths into moral-ethical 'action guides,' directions for proper conduct issued outside of the divination sessions in which sacred narratives have customarily been embedded. Such communicative events have derived much of their efficacy in terms of 'ideological becoming' from their setting in the kitchen, where they have contributed to practitioners' immersion in the singular intimacy and camaraderie that exacting labor in close quarters provides (Bakhtin 1981: 294). To listen to elders communally has been to cultivate the very affective bonds and sentiments of affinity that redound to religious transformation, and go on to precipitate initiation.

It would be remiss to address the impact of religious speech genres on those preparing *ashés*, yet fail to touch on arguably the most potent sensory effect of this activity: the de-naturalization of involuntary physical responses and emotions – such as disgust – that could present an obstacle to further involvement in the

[28]Various scholars have traced the 'push–pull model' of conversion to a more general 'deprivation theory of religion' that explains religious participation as otherworldly compensation for different types of secular disadvantage, according to a 'rational choice' understanding of social action (see Glock and Stark [1965]; Stark and Bainbridge [1987]).

religion.[29] It is my conjecture that the acquisition of technique in the kitchen has gone hand in hand with mastery of an ingrained sensori-motor resistance to the labor itself among the denizens of modern cities. The elders of Ilé Laroye were unanimous in teaching that sentiments such as that of repugnance were learned at an early age, not inborn – in other words, cultural constructions, with histories and sociopolitical contexts that are not readily apparent until one attempts to alter them. To train oneself to feed the spirits, one had to become accustomed not only to unconventional sights, but also to touching objects of an initially 'repellant' texture and consistency, and to hearing sounds – such as the uncannily infantile cry of goats about to be slaughtered – that challenged the hardiest of urban sensibilities.[30] Part of this education in Ilé Laroye entailed becoming comfortable with the 'smellscape' of the kitchen, its olfactory perimeters as delineated by, among other factors: the crisp yet vaguely diesel-tinged air let in through open windows; the slight putrescence of the leaves collected downstairs for rituals; the mineral rancidity of the abattoir-cum-basement when blood started flowing; the grassy damp notes brought into the house on goats' hooves; and ripe, split coconuts' sweet richness.

Kitchen labor often offered an opportunity for elders to remind newcomers that no matter how bloody the work of plucking and disemboweling may be, until relatively recently, it was a routine part of both agrarian and urban life: to eat chicken was to have killed a chicken, or to have gone where the killing was done, or come into contact with someone whose livelihood was derived from slaughter. The contemporary distancing of consumers from the sanguinary origins of meat is evident in the end product, the nearly bloodless plastic encasing of animals cut into portions that, if they were used as the pieces of a massive jigsaw puzzle, the average North American would not be able to reassemble into the shape of a carcass. This sanitization of slaughter is also a product of the factory farming and manufacturing process, since minimally regulated factories are often staffed by immigrants and other legally vulnerable laborers with few viable alternatives. When the members of Ilé Laroye are brought into contact with animals for the first time, then, they are reminded that were it not for their ancestors' willingness to get their hands dirty by feeding their families, their descendants would not exist. Running parallel to this is the invocation of Lucumí ancestors, particularly those in Nilaja's ritual lineage, whose sacrificial practices enabled the transmission of ritual sacra that brought Ilé Laroye into being. This is one interpretation of the common Lucumí saying, '*Los muertos paren santo*': 'The dead give birth to the *orishas*.'

The uninitiated might be described colloquially as 'warming up' to the idea of joining the Lucumí priesthood, and undergoing a 'seasoning' process in the kitchen. These terms convey more than is apparent at first glance. Foods have long been conceptualized as 'progressing' from a raw and savage to a cooked and civilized state (Hage 1979). Across a wide range of societies and religious traditions, the subjects of ritual interventions have been equated with foods manipulated by culinary techniques; rites of passage in particular have been viewed as

[29]Feelings of disgust associated with plucking are documented ethnographically and explored analytically at greater length in Pérez (2010).

[30]This turn of phrase is meant to evoke the lack of exposure to such sensations in major North American cities, as opposed to rural areas with farming communities, or towns where large numbers of residents work in slaughterhouses.

transporting participants from a natural, disordered condition to a cultured, orderly one through ceremonial 'heating.'[31] In Lucumí communities, these figures of speech and thought have dovetailed with theological claims concerning *aché*, for practitioners have tended to regard its ritual accumulation as an accretion of heat. *Ashés* may be analyzed as the material embodiment of this concept. Roasted *ashés* render concrete the *orishas'* transformative power; the degree to which the victims' bodies are altered acts as an index of their conversion by *aché*. Moreover, as mentioned above, those receiving sacred objects from elders or replenishing them with *aché* have traditionally consumed a portion of the animals offered to the spirits, in order for some of the salient qualities of the substance they have ingested to be transferred to them. In submitting to ceremonial disarticulation and reconstruction, practitioners have become sources of sustenance for the *orishas*, disarticulated then re-articulated in a new form.

This much has already been suggested in the preceding sections, or could easily be extrapolated, but it is possible to go further. I would contend that Lucumí communities need the cooking process as much as the *orishas* are thought to want the food, since it is not only the subjects of ritual interventions or *ashés*, but also the people cooking them, that are being dressed and roasted for the *orishas'* consumption. To say that the cooks in the kitchen are themselves being cooked is to insist on the preparation of *ashés* as a form of ritual practice analogous to other ceremonies in which novices are seasoned in preparation for rites of passage. Lévi-Strauss and others indebted to his oeuvre have established that culinary codes convey sociocultural and cosmological distinctions; these codes also correspond to modes of ritual mediation rendered most explicit in rituals in which people are either symbolically cooked or made raw as a means of bringing individuals into communal life. Lévi-Strauss (1969: 336; the italics are his) wrote of culinary codes used to enunciate sociocultural and cosmological distinctions:

> The conjunction of a member of the social group with nature must be mediatized through the intervention of the cooking fire, whose normal function is to mediatize the conjunction of the raw product and the human consumer, and has the effect of making sure that a natural creature is at one and the same time *cooked* and *socialized*.

So it is in the kitchen: although Lévi-Strauss refers to cooking in the context of physiological processes, such as menstruation and childbirth – thereby, of course, conflating 'nature' with 'biology' – it is easy to see how cooking integrates *aborishas* into the community when they are introduced to the highly complex taxonomic operations that organize both ritual *sacra* and ritual specialists.[32]

Candidates for initiation – whether self-identified as such or not – are cooked in the sense that they transition from a green, or ignorant, condition to competence within the house, finding a role to play and situating themselves *vis-à-vis* other newcomers, uninitiated practitioners, elders, visitors, and the *orishas*. They are

[31]Lucumí initiation recapitulates and telescopes this process, from the moment of *prendición*, or 'abduction,' when the priest-to-be is lassoed with the heavy strings of beads called *mazos* and 'captured,' as a wild animal would be – or as African slaves were imagined to be.

[32]One need not accept Lévi-Strauss' assertion (1979: 495) that 'cooking is a language through which that society unconsciously reveals its structure, unless – just as unconsciously – it resigns itself to using the medium to express its contradictions,' (at least without problematizing the terms 'language,' 'unconsciously,' and 'structure') to agree that Ilé Laroye's style of cooking expresses its hierarchical organization.

compelled to conform to sartorial conventions and become subject to a dismantling and reconstitution of their corporeal *sensoria* in their encounter with *ashé* preparation. They are taught to value discipline, self-control, obedience, attentiveness to detail, timeliness – not speed, because there is such a thing as going too fast – and poise, in service to the *orishas*. This cooking does not lead inevitably to initiation, but more than one practitioner attributed her burgeoning feelings of connection with a Lucumí house to the labor she performed in its kitchen. For instance, Arlene often commented that when she entered her first *casa-templo*, she gravitated towards the kitchen out of unease as a US-born, Anglophone Black woman among immigrant Latinos, and an eagerness to blend into the social landscape of the community. However, she soon found that by distinguishing herself at the stove and dinner table, rather than moving towards the periphery of ritual practice, she was delving into the midst of it. Arlene came to realize that 'women's work,' domestic labor widely denigrated as menial and filthy, was prized as a ritual performance of enormous religious importance.

The gendered nature of this labor is not incidental. Initiation into Lucumí has been cast precisely as a wedding between the devotee, envisioned as a wife, and the god, a divine husband, bestowing on both the rights and responsibilities that the term 'marriage' connotes. Although practitioners have not officially become *iyawos* – 'wives' of the *orishas*, in the Lucumí ritual language – until their entry into the priesthood, in the kitchen, both men and women have been trained to enact the wifely qualities that are prized as comprising the ideal religious subject. Indeed, these formalized acts of 'putting dinner on the table' for the *orishas* may be understood as 'citational practices' through which the bodies of their servants have materialized, through 'a regularized and constrained repetition of norms' (Butler 1993: 10). The kitchen has been a space of subject-formation for, as Judith Butler (1993: 95) writes:

> [R]epetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal conditions for the subject … '[P]erformance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance.

Although Butler bases her analysis of subject-formation on linguistic performance, Amy Hollywood (2006) has shown that it may be extended to encompass the bodily production of ritualized action, and her interpretation undergirds my argument here. In Ilé Laroye as in other Lucumí communities, it has been through the 'sedimented effect' of doing women's work – the formation and reformation of 'wifely' dispositions in the kitchen – that individuals have been converted into 'wives' for the spirits (Asad 1993: 131; Butler 1993: 10).

When 'on the ground' means 'on the floor': body and religion in the kitchen

> **The Kitchen**: The patch of hair at the nape of the neck. This hair is usually the nappiest and most difficult to get straight with the hot comb …
>
> – 'Black Hair Glossary'[33]

> If there was ever one part of our African past that resisted assimilation, it was the kitchen. No matter how hot the iron, no matter how powerful the chemical, no

[33]Byrd and Tharps (2001: 137).

> matter how stringent the mashed-potatoes-and-lye formula of a man's 'process', neither God nor woman nor Sammy Davis, Jr., could straighten the kitchen. The kitchen was permanent, irredeemable, invincible kink. Unassimilably African. No matter what you did, no matter how hard you tried, nothing could dekink a person's kitchen.
>
> – Henry Louis Gates, Jr.[34]

Early on in my research among the members of Ilé Laroye, I made the error of 'believing in belief' (Latour 1999: 275), and in ritual as the condensation of concepts into symbolic forms. I assumed that my inquiry into Lucumí would consist of attending ceremonies later to be interpreted with reference to African precedents in order to discern their 'meaning,' and the kitchen was initially where I busied myself waiting for events to commence or conclude. After I had spent some months ignoring what was going on right under my nose and at my fingertips, elders' restrictions on the audiovisual recording of ritual practices – and their effect on my project – gradually became apparent. Eventually, over many afternoons and evenings, I began to notice the time invested by elders not only in transmitting information and mentoring in the kitchen, but in ensuring that it would be staffed during major ceremonies, largely by the uninitiated. The kitchen afforded me, as an historian committed to the ethnographic method, a vantage point that profoundly altered my perspective on Lucumí practice. I came to regard cooking not as preparatory to ritual practice but as a vital mode of ritualization, and to analyze the kitchen as a space in which religious transformations occur, along with the conversions of materials and personnel that underwrite them.[35] Although I collected data wherever the members of Ilé Laroye saw fit to congregate, the kitchen became the micro-site of my research.

In kitchens, I worked. Or rather, I was put to work, doing whatever needed to be done. I mainly worked under a group of ten initiated elders, ranging in age from their early 20s to mid-60s, and with another 15 practitioners.[36] Elders regarded kitchen work as a prelude to initiation, and I occasionally felt a heady sense of being 'way beyond seduction' by the community at the heart of my study, finding myself squarely within what Luce Giard has called 'Kitchen Women Nation': that elusive space in which the 'female' labor of cooking creates bonds of community and belonging (Giard 1998; Wacquant 2004: 4). When Arlene announced, 'Lisa do them Obatalá-lookin' *ashés* – look like they was born dissected!' referring to my habit of arranging removed *ashés* on a cutting board as if depicted in an anatomical diagram, she beamed with a pride that was of a piece with her hope that I would someday assume the mantle of the initiated *alashé*.[37] Similarly, the first time I spent the night at Nilaja's house after working in the kitchen, the last words I heard before losing consciousness were: 'She's sleeping over? She's initiated.'[38] I had finally become a solid presence, and no longer what, in comparing my investigations to those of a shadowy detective, Arlene

[34]Gates (1995: 42).
[35]For a definition of 'ritualization,' see Bell (1992).
[36]I followed three *aborishas* before their initiations and through their years as *iyawos*. In addition to interviews with adults, I conducted a handful with children.
[37]Personal communication, 24 February 2007. At Nilaja's house, I am called by my nickname, Lisa.
[38]24 July 2005.

once described as a 'partially invisible sleuth.'[39] If only by virtue of the 'mimetic empathy' required by my research, and what Rane Willerslev has termed the 'materiality grounded in my bodily experiences of their lifeworld' (Willerslev 2007: 106), I came to share the subject-position of 'servant' whether or not I resisted the call of *ocha*.

In the epigraphs above, I quote the widespread African-American usage of 'kitchen' to drive home a point about the context of my research. While the kitchen of Nilaja's house was emphatically not 'unassimilably African,' bearing in mind the Cuban creole innovations that distinguish Lucumí practice from Yorùbá traditional religion, it was the preeminent household space in which questions of race articulated with those of gender and class. To be in the kitchen was not only to admire exacting knife-work, but also to witness the exchange of unexpected presents; confessions of exhaustion accompanied by impromptu 'stay awake' dances; the occasional lyric rapped or sung as if before an audience of thousands; and the delicious gallows humor for which a puddle of blood has always been the best sauce. The kitchen was a place where competing modes of being masculine, feminine, Black, and 'ghetto' – or very much *not* – were considered, in casual, at times intense, dialogues concerning hairstyle, among other details of personal appearance; comportment; expressive modalities; African-American cultural production; and embodied knowledge. I have in mind here such instances as when a young woman named Shondra was forced to substitute one object for another at a moment's notice, then shrugged and said – as if explaining the preternatural ease with which the improvisation was made – 'We [are] Black.'[40] To treat Ilé Laroye as transhistorically representative of Lucumí experience, and proceeding to analyze its practices without reference to the ongoing construction of Blackness among its members, would be to flatten the texture of its social life and complex history as an African-American house of *ocha*.

By contrast, I intend for the historically Black definition of 'kitchen' to assist me in drawing attention to cultural dimensions of embodiment, as well as corporeal practices and architectural spaces, that remain undertheorized. This paper has emphasized the transformative force of quotidian routines and somatic experience not typically regarded as religious, yet it only gestures towards a more sustained development of 'body' as an analytical category. Such synthetic critiques indicate the need to 'flesh out' the bodies that populate the scholarship on religion. For example, it was often in the kitchen of Nilaja's home that her godchildren made the sacred necklaces called *elekes*, their arched fingers stringing hundreds of beads onto nylon cords in the chromatic and numerical patterns appropriate to each *orisha*. These necklaces sometimes got caught in their wearers' 'kitchens'; curls became snagged between the strands, causing discomfort and, when forcefully dislodged, pain. It is possible to see *elekes* as shaping the sensori-motor repertoires and affective responses of practitioners, thus training them to accept *mazos*, the much heavier, more elaborate necklaces donned ceremonially at the start of the ordination ritual and during other pivotal moments in the participation

[39]Personal communication, 14 July 2006. See also Winks (1970) and Roth et al. (1989).

[40]Personal communication, 13 April 2005. My fieldnotes continue: 'Then Andrea took my hand, and said, "You Black [too]" but, rather than leave it at that, I said, "I'm learning!" (this got a big laugh) as if to say, well, I'm not Black but I know that those who are have something to teach me. Keisha said, "Improvisation is key." Making do.'

trajectories of initiates. Both the work done in Lucumí kitchens, and the work done on many a person's kitchen by religious objects, await more thorough investigation, along with analogous forms of ritual labor and haptic sensation.

In alluding to the double meaning of 'kitchen,' however, my main interest lies in enjoining scholars of religion to interrogate their positionality within research environments, particularly with regard to intersecting axes of oppression, chiefly race, ethnicity, gender, and class. The enskilled bodies of scholars are among those that most urgently need fleshing out, and not merely in textual reflections on past projects, but in the midst of social scientific praxis. In my case, I was not just in the kitchen of Nilaja's home; I was also up in the 'kitchens' of my interlocutors. Yet my gender, racial, and ethnic identity both facilitated and foreclosed means of data collection. My Cuban parentage and Spanish fluency afforded me access to both Hispanophone Lucumí elders and writing on the tradition. Due to my coloring and features, however, I was perceived as racially white and correctly seen to have 'skin privilege' outside of Ilé Laroye. I was not part of the 'we' in 'We Black,' even if I used a curl relaxer on my own 'kitchen' when I went home, or if moments after Shondra said, 'We Black,' another woman in the room squeezed my hand and said, 'You Black [too]!' While redefining me as such in interstitial moments did not suffice to increase the amount of melanin in my complexion, the attempt at redefinition itself furnished me with a better grasp of Ilé Laroye's relational structures, the denial of racial difference as a rhetorical trope, and the effects of my conscious self-presentation (and its limits) within the community, as it became a subject of discourse. What a scholar takes away from her research is often predicated on what her informants make of her body, and the demands her very presence makes on their persons.

I proceeded ethnographically, then, with an awareness of difference informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of *heteroglossia* and dialogism, in hopes of allowing ethical relationships with my interlocutors to unfold within the context of my project (Bakhtin 1981: 294). In light of mounting political and methodological objections to Verstehen in the social sciences, during the research itself I focused less on overcoming limitations to 'identifying with' others than on entering into multivocal dialogues (Shields 1996). However much I may have wanted to put myself in others' shoes, I was stuck not only with my own feet, but also with my walk, so to speak, shaped in relation to my cultural center of gravity and sociopolitical location. It was not an option to borrow another's stance to position myself. Yet the approach to fieldwork I took demanded that I 'see it feelingly' – to quote the blind Gloucester's description of how he manages to grasp the world.[41] It called for a comparably 'sensuous ethnography' to illuminate the instability, dynamism, and nonlinearity of perception and behavior as thrown into relief by religious practices, especially those seldom acknowledged as such (Stoller 2004).[42] 'See[ing]

[41] *King Lear*, Act IV, Scene 6.

[42] I would take issue, however, with Stoller's invocation of Antonin Artaud on the promise of 'sensuous ethnography' to 'shock readers' into 'think[ing] new thoughts or feel[ing] new feelings,' and counter with the words of T.S. Eliot (1975 [1922]: 43), substituting ethnography for poetry: 'One error, in fact, of eccentricity in poetry is to seek for new human emotions to express; and in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse.'

it feelingly' entailed constant re-examination of my own sensory biases and recalibration of the coordinates I occupied along the axes of oppression named above. And it required a reorientation towards the kitchen as a woman-centered space that has valued female initiates and forms of labor widely dismissed as 'women's work,' reclaimed by elders of both sexes as a religious process generative of virtue, enhanced capacities for moral-ethical action, and ritual competence.

In the foregoing, I endeavored to demonstrate the analytical purchase to be gained from an emphasis on the sensory knowledge that has furnished Lucumí practitioners with a shared identity, and bound them together into communities. I dwelt on a suite of underproblematized ritual practices in order to refocus the scholarship concerning religious transformation on everyday routines that progressively implicate their performers in the material and conceptual worlds of virtuosi. So as to enlist readers in an appreciation of the density and amplitude of the subject matter, as well as to thematize my own embodiment in the field, I designed my brief ethnographic vignettes to be *thick*, not chiefly in Clifford Geertz's (1973) meaning-full sense of the term, but in the slang sense often heard on the South Side of Chicago: 'voluptuous' or '*zaftig*.' It remains to be seen whether, thus delineated, patterns of ritual practice and subject-formation embedded within a distinctly Lucumí religious imaginary have more generalizable significance. Emerging scholarship on body and religion points to the pervasive centrality of corporeal movement and carnal schema even in traditions once viewed as primarily 'bookish,' yet further interdisciplinary conversations on these questions are of the essence. The present contribution is but a start; for the ethnography of religion to fulfill its theoretical promise, and continue to enlarge its empirical scope, the attention of *its* devotees must be turned away from the altar more often. The kitchen table is only one place among many where one might savor the depth, and delicacy, of religious actors' 'acquired tastes.'

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