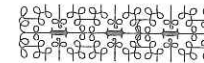


# Religion, Food, & Eating in North America

Edited by  
BENJAMIN E. ZELLER, MARIE W. DALLAM,  
REID L. NEILSON, & NORA L. RUBEL

# RELIGION, FOOD, AND EATING IN NORTH AMERICA



ARTS AND TRADITIONS OF THE TABLE  
PERSPECTIVES ON CULINARY HISTORY

ALBERT SONNENFELD, SERIES EDITOR

*For the list of titles in this series, see pages 337-338.*

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*Nine*

CRYSTALLIZING  
SUBJECTIVITIES IN THE  
AFRICAN DIASPORA

SUGAR, HONEY, AND THE GODS  
OF AFRO-CUBAN LUCUMÍ

ELIZABETH PÉREZ

SINCE THE 1889 publication of William Robertson Smith's immensely influential *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, the issue of sacrifice, along with questions concerning the ethics and aesthetics of religious violence, have governed the scholarly discussion about the offerings that gods, ancestors, and other spirits are envisioned as receiving. In many religions and traditional cultures, sacrifice has been performed by men, and food preparation by women; this division of ritual labor along gendered lines, and the widespread denigration of "women's work," has reinforced academic neglect of religious offerings that do not involve the death of a victim. As a result, considerably less attention has been paid to cooking itself and to the culinary styles devised to flatter the palates of deities and ancestors. However, scholars are increasingly aware of the fact that the tremendous variety of nutritional conventions and dietary requirements observed in the feeding of supernatural entities holds out an incomparable opportunity to analyze the way human worshippers conceptualize their relationship to them.

One undertheorized ingredient of commonly ritualized foods is sugar, appearing in such diverse contexts as the candy-pellet *prasad* distributed

in Hindu temples; the *amrit*, or holy sugar water, that plays a central role in Sikh ceremonies; and the sugar skulls arrayed on graves and altars on the Mexican Día de los Muertos that coincides with the Roman Catholic All Saints' and All Souls' Days. In the Afro-Cuban religion variously called *regla ocha*, *Santería*, or *Lucumí*, sugar is an important element in meals offered to the spirits of West African origin called *orishas*. *Lucumí* practitioners prize sugarcane and its by-products not simply for their sweetness—much less for their connection to Africa—but rather for their ability to serve as media to reinscribe and amplify highly differentiated characteristics attributed to the deities.<sup>1</sup> Although initiates tend to posit mythological origins for the *orishas*' tastes, they have been ineluctably structured with reference to the racial discourse of colonial Cuba. This discourse arranged bodies in a hierarchy according to gender, class, and color—a concept elaborated most thoroughly in the slaveholding societies of the Americas.<sup>2</sup>

The following essay explores the use of sugar by *Lucumí* practitioners and reveals the extent to which Cuban history and culture have shaped their tastes. I show that even the *orishas* did not escape the systemic discriminatory treatment inflicted on Afro-Cubans during the colonial period.<sup>3</sup> After briefly reviewing the history of sugar in Cuba, I focus on two of the major *Lucumí* *orishas*, *Ogún* and *Ochún*, understood to have food preferences deemed consistent with their respective socioeconomic statuses, and to crave different types of sugar based on them. I argue that *Lucumí* practitioners have traditionally sought to challenge the dominant socio-political and cultural order by inverting secular reality in ritual practice and transforming sugar, the commodity par excellence, into value-laden gifts for the gods.<sup>4</sup> As we will see, the religious meaning of sugar in *Lucumí* lies embedded in the soil of its cultural and historical contexts and is to be found under the fingernails of those who have labored to produce it.

## SUGAR CONSUMPTION IN HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Throughout the Caribbean, sugarcane has sweetened more fortunes and embittered more lives than any other commodity. Christopher Columbus introduced cane to the West Indies on his second voyage, possibly at the behest of a close relative: his first mother-in-law, the owner of a sugar es-

tate in Madeira.<sup>5</sup> In Cuba, the largest of the Antilles, sugar would become the central fact of its economic life. Between 1765 and 1790 about two thousand slaves arrived in Cuba per year for the sole purpose of sugar production.<sup>6</sup> In 1791 a slave uprising that became the Haitian Revolution wiped the French colony of Saint-Domingue off of the economic map, paving the way for an unprecedented agricultural boom in Cuba. The prevalence of sugar plantations, often owned by absentee landlords, shaped the island's culture, politics, and society. Despite stiff competition from Brazilian cane and German beets, by 1868, fully one-third of the world's sugar came from Cuba.<sup>7</sup> The so-called Pearl of the Antilles was made not of nacre, but of sucrose.

During the colonial period, cane cultivation called for the unprecedented movement of accumulated capital and indentured servants from Europe and Asia; slaves entered the Americas in staggering numbers. Most West and Central African slaves arrived in Cuba between 1764 and 1868. During the middle third of the nineteenth century, many of these slaves hailed from culturally and linguistically related groups later to be called *Yorùbá*.<sup>8</sup> The *Yorùbá* carried with them their historical memory and a religion replete with festivals and calendrical rites; different oracular forms, including those of the *Ifá* and sixteen-cowries systems; food taboos acquired according to divinatory mandate; and a set of protocols for initiation into the priesthood based on personal vocation rather than heredity or ethnicity.<sup>9</sup> The *Yorùbá* also rendered tribute to a category of spirits and patrons called *òrìsà* (*orisha*), considered to be the divine patrons of practitioners and periodically summoned through music in spirit possession ceremonies that promote communal cohesion and individual well-being.<sup>10</sup> By the mid-twentieth century the worship of these deities would be termed *Lucumí* or *regla ocha*—"the rule of the *orishas*"—by practitioners, and *Santería* by detractors.

Slaves interpreted the imagery, narrative, and material objects they encountered for the first time in the New World in keeping with West and Central African cultural frameworks.<sup>11</sup> Sugar was almost entirely absent from precolonial *Yorùbá*land, but in the Caribbean sugar became a main ingredient in the slave diet, providing laborers with an "energy boost" to fuel them in the cane fields and boiling-houses, where they sometimes put in two eight-hour shifts a day. Sugar eventually entered the repertoire of food offerings given to the *orishas* and other spirits, enlarging an African-derived ritual vocabulary that had long used only honey to

signify sweetness. Sugar became a node of political-economic and symbolic value creation among slaves as well as masters in Cuba; cane juice and stalks came to figure conspicuously in Lucumí cultural memory and religious worship. According to prominent orisha priest and historian Miguel "Willie" Ramos, no host of a contemporary drum ritual would consider his duties complete without first ordering dozens of pastries and special breads from a local shop. Ramos asserts, "This . . . is definitely a Cuban phenomenon, especially the addition of sweets and desserts to the *orisha's* food preferences, a practice [unheard of] in Yorubaland."<sup>12</sup>

To appreciate the significance of sugar in Lucumí, we must first become familiar with its consumption by slaves. Historical studies of *Saccharum officinarum* (sugarcane) tend to focus on African slaves as producers of sugar rather than consumers, and for good reason, as most of the cane processed before the twentieth century was shipped abroad to meet Europe's growing demand for this commodity as a sweetener.<sup>13</sup> Yet slaves also ate sugar. Many colonists approached the plantation as a laboratory, in which slaveholders and doctors could test untried techniques—including the ingestion of sugar for a variety of ills—on captive subjects. Throughout the Caribbean the leading men of science endeavored to downplay the horrors of slavery and propose that the cure for ailments from the Old World might be found in the New. Natural histories and medical manuals published prior to emancipation inadvertently paint a grim portrait of the conditions under which captives toiled on plantations. In this literature, the overall fitness of slaves despite on-the-job abuse and malnutrition is seldom viewed as cause for alarm, but instead is offered as proof of the positive attributes of sugar consumption.<sup>14</sup>

Drawing on a combination of oral tradition and trial and error, slaves and freed people developed their own applications for sucrose.<sup>15</sup> They saw the curative potential of sugarcane as well as its evils. They passed down both their ethnobotanical and culinary expertise to creole descendants, leaving an ingenious record of sugary beverages and other calorie-rich gastronomical delights.<sup>16</sup> But what of sugar's religious applications? For those initiated into Lucumí, *Saccharum officinarum* numbers among the plants, grasses, and roots belonging to the orisha Osanyin, the "lord of leaves."<sup>17</sup> Lydia Cabrera included sugar in the encyclopedic inventory of medicinal plants and herbs of her 1954 magnum opus, *El monte: igbo finda, ewe orisha, vititi nfinda*. Cabrera tells us that sugar can sweeten one's patron spirit, any adversary, and "everyone else in need of sweetening,"

relating a spell: "In a glass of water with two spoonfuls of sugar, place a lit candle and a piece of paper with the name of somebody you wish to sweeten to the point of . . . melting."<sup>18</sup> Cabrera's indications follow the principle of sympathetic magic, in which substances attract objects that have similar qualities and "an effect resembles its cause." Oils, powders, premixed cleansers, and even wands of incense laced with sugar are still sold today in the North American religious supply stores called *botánicas*, to be used in an analogous fashion by practitioners of Lucumí and other Afro-Caribbean religions.<sup>19</sup>

## EATING TO LIVE, FEEDING FOR LIFE

Lucumí myths and divinatory verses furnish the theological basis for religious offerings, including the appropriate uses of sugar. They attempt to explain gustatory patterns, speculate on the origins of spirits' consumption practices, and stress the importance of indulging each spirit's individual tastes. For instance, Bolívar Aróstegui relates a story that features Olofi, the Yorùbá ruler of the universe.<sup>20</sup> Olofi sends the orishas to fight an enemy threatening his realm, and one by one they are defeated—not by arrows, but by the delectable dishes his enemy serves to them. Prepared according to the orishas' personal preferences, the meals promptly lull the eaters to sleep. Only the cemetery-dwelling Oyá, no doubt more accustomed to the odor of decay than to that of delicacies, resists the onslaught of tempting victuals! This story not only accounts for Oyá's reputation as warrior, queen, and leader of the dead; it also illustrates that the path to an orisha's heart (and to one's own desires) runs through his or her stomach. The devotee must heed the precedent established by Olofi's enemy and observe the orishas' tastes, if one would bend them to one's will.

But how is it that, in the Lucumí tradition, orishas are understood to "want," to "request," even to "eat"? The construction of spirits' subjectivity, reflected in this choice of words, merits close attention. Practitioners treat the orishas as entities similar to themselves, crediting them with agency, sensitivity to sensory stimuli, and aesthetic sensibilities. Such spirits possess something approximating the embodied "practical sense" called "habitus" by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and defined by him as "an acquired system of preferences, of principles of vision and division (what is usually called taste), and also a system of durable cognitive structures

(which are essentially the product of the internalization of objective structures) and schemes of action which orient the perception of the situation and the appropriate response.”<sup>21</sup>

Offerings do not merely communicate an intention on the part of the devotee to build a relationship with orishas but indeed “can be held to constitute objects of devotion.”<sup>22</sup> By assigning a “habitus” to orishas, practitioners manage to render impersonal forces vividly anthropomorphic, in effect creating them as subjects with whom they may enter into relationships mediated by gestures, sentiments, and material things. Through the investigation of the orishas’ appetites, we can glean insights into the ways that orishas’ personae have changed over time, as well as their perceived social location and occupational role vis-à-vis other spirits.

By offering food to the orishas, whether on festive occasions or somber ones, practitioners today attempt to cross the divide thought to separate divine Other from human self. Lucumí are taught that the spirits temporarily assume the characteristics of mortals—sensing hunger, thirst, and pleasure—in order to become subjects with whom communities and individuals may interact. Among Lucumí and related groups in the Afro-Atlantic world, metaphors of seeing and eating overlap, as if the taste buds of the spirits were in their eyes: neglect is “hunger,” the spectacle of ritual activity, “food.”<sup>23</sup> Although practitioners put themselves in subordinate positions relative to the orishas, they strive to attain a degree of intimacy with them that demands a firm grasp of each spirit’s professed habits and proclivities. Novices soon learn that an orisha’s nutritional requirements and dietary restrictions mirror his or her temperament, accomplishments, feuds, and bonds with other spirits. Favorite dishes are shorthand for personae.

Food offerings form part of elaborate displays, such as the custom-made assortment of fruits and special dishes called *plaza*, spread out for the orishas in front of altars for rites of passage and other ceremonies. In these displays sweetening agents are meant to gladden the tongues of the orishas so that they will reply generously to petitions.<sup>24</sup> These foods are not intended solely for the orishas’ mouths, however; human guests actually consume the lion’s share of food offerings after events such as drum rituals, and the ensuing feasts serve a number of interrelated purposes.<sup>25</sup> Guests at these communal meals are thought to incorporate the *ashé*, or sacred energy, from food consecrated through the orishas’ acceptance.<sup>26</sup> Once infused with *ashé*, food becomes an extension of the orisha’s per-

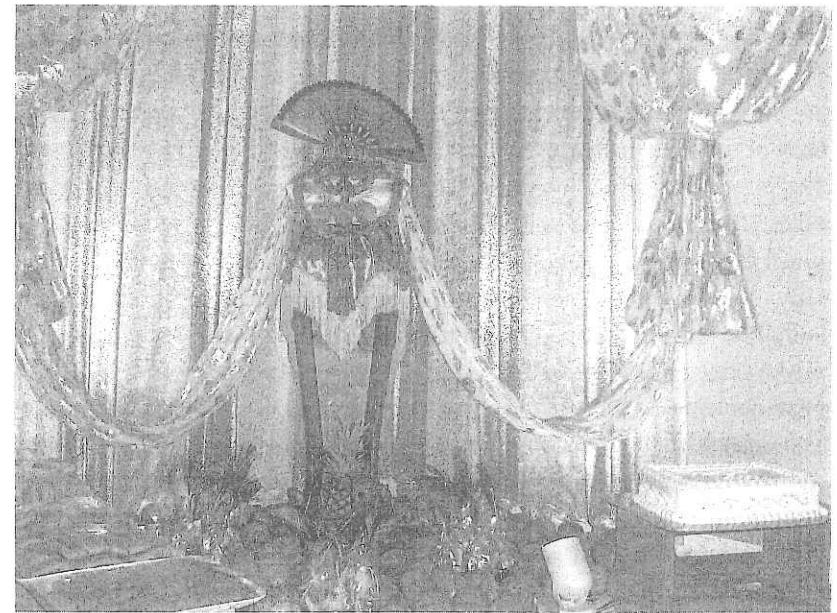


FIGURE 9.1 Altar constructed for drum ceremony in honor of Ochún, with Cuban sweets (including sponge cakes in rum syrup and guava-filled puff pastries) on the left and sheet cake on the right. In between the rows of fruit, cellophane wrappers hold party favors containing honey and brown sugar. August 2006. Photo by Elizabeth Pérez, used gratefully with permission from D.S.

son, and eating it acts to redistribute the *ashé* and seal blessings into the human body impossible to obtain without direct corporal absorption.<sup>27</sup> The function of communal meals thus goes far beyond the satisfaction of physical hunger, for “consumption activity is the joint production, with fellow consumers, of a universe of values.”<sup>28</sup> To delve more deeply into this universe, we now enter the orbits of two very dissimilar, even diametrically opposed, orishas: Ogún and Ochún.

## SOUL FOOD: THE ROOTS OF THE ORISHAS’ SWEET TEETH

Most orishas have a sweet tooth. The elderly, imperturbable creator spirit Obatalá eats meringues and rice puddings prepared with white sugar—

all relatively soft foods that may be gummed by those without teeth.<sup>29</sup> Yemayá, the maternal ruler of the seven seas, savors burnt-coconut candy encrusted with brown sugar, as well as delicacies made from sweet potato.<sup>30</sup> Fiery masquerader Oyá devours *torrejas*, the “Spanish French toast” that dresses up day-old bread in egg, milk, and cinnamon sugar.<sup>31</sup> The prank-playing, joke-telling trickster Eleguá quite literally takes the cake, snacking on “the food of license, thumb-sucking, finger-licking, lip-smacking food—popcorn, jawbreakers, candy canes, cotton candy, pull-taffy, all-day suckers, stick-out-your-tongue, nonsense foods, bubble gum, lollipops, mary janes, squirrel nuts.”<sup>32</sup> By contrast, the virile, lawgiving orisha Changó, the deity of lightning, insists on tall stems of cane with a regal demeanor reminiscent of his own; shoots cut into foot-long pieces also index his phallic potency.<sup>33</sup> In some communities Babalú Ayé, the orisha of illness, receives hard candies dotted with sesame seeds that recall the pox scars and lesions on his body; he is the only major orisha, besides Olokun, to accept white sugar crystals as well, no doubt because of their grainy texture and resemblance to tiny clogged pores scattered over pimpled flesh.<sup>34</sup>

Initiates identify most spirits as either hot or cool in temperament; the former eat strongly flavored, spicy dishes, while a few of the latter consume light-colored foods so bland they do not even contain salt. Although these terms derive from centuries-old Yorùbá categories, Lucumí practitioners now view these designations through the scratched and pitted lens of history. To wit, the “cultural hero” Ogún is the consummate hunter, warrior, and ironsmith.<sup>35</sup> He married Oyá, but she soon tired of his misanthropic ways and left him for his brother, Changó. A loner, Ogún lusts after women yet tends to mistreat them and counts among his only companions the forest-dwelling Eleguá, Ochósi, and Osanyin. According to myth, he lives in a hut next door to his forge and owns seven implements of labor, called *herramientas*, nestled in cauldron-shaped pots consecrated to him; these tools include an awl, a spade, and a hammer. Ogún rules the razor’s edge and protects human handlers of metal, including miners, tattoo artists, butchers, surgeons, and mechanics. Ogún’s solitary, arduous existence has its rewards, such as access to rare pelts and meats. He has no family to maintain and, of course, no masters—unless one counts some orishas for whom he runs errands, and others occasionally able to best him.

Ogún undoubtedly appealed most to those at the bottom of the social ladder in colonial Cuba. He lives in the woods and blazes trails, literally

and figuratively; in this sense he may be interpreted as a runaway slave, marching to the beat of his own drummer. In fact, men possessed by Ogún—in rituals that employ the sacred drums called *batá*—frequently dance stripped to the waist, with bandannas wrapped tightly around their heads and fringes of dried palm fronds fastened around their hips.<sup>36</sup> When incorporated by both men and women, Ogún executes movements in dance that evoke his mythological incarnations “as warrior (brandishing his machete as a weapon), cultivator (clearing away underbrush), and smith (hammering iron).”<sup>37</sup> The person possessed by Ogún appears to slice repeatedly through dense foliage or deliver fatal blows, performing gestures that he or she may not remember seeing or even recognize. Nevertheless, Ogún’s identity within the community condenses a collective memory of forced labor that is transmitted to every Lucumí initiate and finds routine expression at the level of the individual body.

In both Cuba and Brazil, devotees envision Ogún as the “patron deity of slave revolt.”<sup>38</sup> To judge from his brusque behavior in possession rituals, his rejection of the house slaves’ lifestyle has given him a chip on his well-muscled shoulder when dealing with more domesticated, nobler, cooler spirits. While practitioners possessed by royal orishas are dressed in crowns and vestments fit for monarchs, those seized by Ogún sometimes don “the dress attire of Spanish-Cuban military officers because of his role as a *guerrero* (‘warrior’).”<sup>39</sup> Even in this case, Ogún does not lose his association with slavery, for a large percentage of Afro-Cuban former slaves fought in the Wars of Independence as the freedom fighters called *mambíses*, rising from the status of foot soldiers to key positions within the Cuban Liberation Army.<sup>40</sup> Fernando Ortiz records accounts that some of the troops included runaway slaves pressed into service by the *mambíses* and sought Ogún’s assistance by sacrificing to him in the bush, hoping to reinforce their assaults against the Spanish with magico-religious maneuvers.<sup>41</sup>

Ogún’s consumption of sugar typifies that of field hands, no-collar laborers, and outdoorsmen.<sup>42</sup> Some of Ogún’s recipes require red palm oil, hot in color as well as taste, along with chilies and ground pepper—two spices long used to render rancid foods palatable.<sup>43</sup> Initiates’ familiarity with the manner in which sugarcane is eaten also contributes to Ogún’s reputation as rude and untutored. To get at the soft pith of the sugar cane, one cuts away the hard, woody rind of the cane, or gnaws at it with one’s teeth until the shell splits to expose the inner pulp. The juice is extracted through sheer suction, and one draws out moisture with the lips and

tongue as if slurping the marrow from a bonè. This image of consumption with neither dishware nor utensils fits Ogún to a tee; he does not hesitate to get his hands dirty and cannot help eating a vegetable as if it were meat. In addition to sugarcane, he also chews taffy (made from sugar, molasses, green lemon juice, and lard or oil), a compact treat easily concealed under the tongue from a fellow laborer or authority figure. Sharing is not Ogún's forte.

"Ogún has a cast-iron stomach and is said to be immune to poison," Mason writes. "His devotees concoct a peppery liquor called samba. . . . I have seen it peel the [flesh] off a devotee's hand."<sup>44</sup> Ogún's usual beverage of choice, *aguardiente*, an unaged rum, says volumes about not only his character as imagined by Lucumí but also the everyday life of plantation slaves. His shots of *aguardiente* remind one of the snorts handed out to cane-cutters at dawn, to jolt them into action as well as give them the illusion of greeting the day on full stomachs. According to David H. Brown, Ogún's use for this liquor does not end with intoxication: even his iron tools are periodically washed with *aguardiente* rather than water.<sup>45</sup> Ogún's aversion to bathing seems of a piece with his poverty and isolation, yet other orishas respect him as a formidable herbalist, aided in the hunt by weedy bundles of charms. His sideline as medicine man is registered in his consumption of *prú*, a pungent liqueur consisting of *aguardiente* and a tea brewed with herbs, roots, ground pepper, cinnamon, and aniseed, buried in a glass jar, and unearthed no sooner than three days later.<sup>46</sup>

## LIQUID SUGAR

In one praise-song documented during a contemporary Nigerian festival, Yorùbá elders extolled the spirit Yemoja as "receiver of the crown of childbearing women, who has breasts of honey."<sup>47</sup> In Cuba, however, the orisha Ochún—goddess of wealth, intelligence, beauty, romance, and sensory pleasure—is the spirit most strongly associated with honey. She mainly receives biscuits and pastries, including the cigar-shaped *sopas borrachas* ("drunken soups"), dripping with honey and mellowed rum. She also accepts cane sugar manipulated to mimic the taste of honey, as in her vanilla egg custards, caramel flans, fruit jellies, and *yemas dobles* ("double yolks"). Some of her favorite dishes, such as boiled winter squash daubed

with honey, shade toward the savory, but even the fishy dishes that Ochún craves taste sweet, as does the sparingly seasoned and easily digestible *ochinchín*, prepared with freshwater shrimp, Swiss chard, watercress eggs, and almonds.<sup>48</sup>

Offerings of honey and liquid sugar not only index Ochún's overwhelming sweetness of character but also bring to mind several myths in which she wields honey in the commission of a transgression, if not exactly a crime. In one story Ochún comes to "own" honey by seducing Olofi (the "owner of Heaven" himself) with the sweet substance, thus exposing his hypocrisy and vindicating Babalú Ayé, whom Olofi had excoriated for his sexual excesses.<sup>49</sup> According to a divinatory verse, her lawful husband Orúnmila suspects her of infidelity with Ogún; Orúnmila buys a parrot to spy on her, but she silences the bird by feeding it palm wine, honey, and *aguardiente*.<sup>50</sup> She even seduces the dead, plying the leader of the ancestors' realm with honey and rum.<sup>51</sup> In the most famous of her myths, however, Ochún acts as an agent of civilization. She entices Ogún out of self-imposed exile in the forest by smearing his lips with honey and luring him to town, thereby restoring the recluse to a productive place in society.<sup>52</sup>

Although honey usually connotes the epitome of sweetness in word and deed, Ochún's can turn bad in a heartbeat. Her honey can bring both pleasure and pain. Ochún is reputed to cause stomach ailments, dysentery, hepatitis, and diabetes, thus injuriously "'sweeten[ing]' the bloodstream of many an offender."<sup>53</sup> She employs her special brand of honey to capture as well as to emancipate. Castellanos points out, "'Honey' . . . can stand for her sexuality, for her suave ways of conducting business, and it also represents a means to attain freedom."<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Ochún cannot draw Ogún out of the woods without captivating him first, so she combines the role of bounty hunter with that of femme fatale, teasing him into submission before returning him to the life of hard labor he had fled. This aspect of Ochún does not leave a sour taste in the mouths of devotees but rather appears to substantiate the claim that she has brass balls as well as a honed tongue.

Ochún also avails herself of honey as a glue to affix prosperity and other blessings onto her devotees. For instance, in June 2008 a drum ceremony was held for Nilaja Campbell, the leader of the Chicago-based, predominantly African American Lucumí community Ilé Laroye, in her twenty-first year of initiation.<sup>55</sup> Ochún possessed a visiting initiate, and



after she was escorted away from the drums to be dressed in a satiny sequined cap and blouse, she rejoined the crowd balancing a white plate full of honey on her head. She not only stopped to embrace practitioners en route to salute the drums without dropping the plate but also danced vigorously with it perched atop her crown. She dipped dollar bills in the honey and pressed them to the foreheads of the praise singer and a favored few. Then she coated a five-dollar-bill with honey and pasted it onto the wall above the front door of Campbell's home, where it would stay for several days. No one could have missed the symbolism, since five is Ochún's sacred number.

Many myths juxtapose the coolly cunning Ochún with the hot-tempered Ogún, and the types of sugar they each prefer render the differences between them edible as well as tangible. Ochún's sugar disguises its origins in sweat and blood through a strenuous process of purification, becoming virtually imperishable in granulated form and dissolving into other substances, leaving no discernible trace except appetite-whetting sweetness. By contrast, the sugar that Ogún receives does not permit the initiate to forget the work necessary for its cultivation.<sup>56</sup> Ogún stands for the untrammled potential of primordial matter, while Ochún embodies the *savoir faire* necessary to convert chaos into order—or cane into sugar.<sup>57</sup> But the mythologies of Ochún and Ogún also record the struggle between the colonial figures they bring to life: the plantation slave and the mulatta. Just as Ogún, in myth and spirit possession, exemplifies the agricultural laborer of African descent seldom acknowledged historically, so Ochún embodies the iconic mixed-race, or mulatta, woman of leisure, graced with wavy hair, caramel-hued limbs, and indomitable coquetry.<sup>58</sup>

Ochún is often typecast as a "high yellow" woman capable—as a result of her relative pallor, features, and deportment—to pass as white and enter social spaces forbidden to both darker-skinned women of African descent and mulatto men. Ochún seems to toy with Ogún, never deigning to wed him (as, for example, Oyá does). The nature of their relationship bespeaks the incompatible social locations ascribed to these spirits. "By the nineteenth century," Mendieta Costa states, "[the mulatta] was part of a growing middle sector, urban and free. She was already the sensual, exotic, volatile woman, and a huntress of white men."<sup>59</sup> The mulatta had better prospects than did her male counterpart, since she was able to wrest some mobility from the social system by building alliances with elites, thereby improving her material status and that of her elders.<sup>60</sup> Con-

versely, men of color seldom enjoyed the luxury of moving up and across racial barriers through marriage or informal relations.<sup>61</sup> While in Ogún's case beggars can't be choosers, Ochún has options and eats—rice fragrant with filaments of saffron, once the costliest spice on earth; fricasseed poultry in a sauce buttery enough to convince the ascetic to become a glutton—as if she wants to do so, not out of need.

In nineteenth-century Cuba, stereotypes of mulattas gained currency in nonverbal and popular visual forms, through countless newspaper caricatures and the lithographs called *marquillas* disseminated in bundles of cigars and cigarettes.<sup>62</sup> A series of *marquillas* entitled *Samples of Sugar from My Mill* featured mulattas of varying complexions labeled with short captions that employed the blunt vocabulary of the sugar industry to indicate their desirability: *Quebrado de primera (de centrifuga)*, "First-rate (from the centrifuge)"; *Blanco de segunda (tren comun)*, "Second-grade white (common train)"; *Quebrado de segunda*, "Second-rate"; *Melaza or melao de caña*, "Molasses"; and *Cucurucho*, the brownest and lowest quality.<sup>63</sup> According to the racist discourse of the colonial period, white women presented men with well-wrought but frigid limbs, whereas women of African descent had voluptuous bodies disfigured by a combination of melanin and labor.<sup>64</sup> Ochún thus stood between first-rate and second-grade white: technically "impure," but elegant, polished, and toothsome nevertheless.<sup>65</sup>

The Lucumí tradition has addressed entrenched patterns of discrimination perpetuated by such stereotypes in a religious idiom. In the New World each orisha came to be paired with a Roman Catholic saint or apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and icons continue to represent the Lucumí spirits on household altars and elsewhere. Ochún became associated with the copper-complexioned Virgin of Charity, or Caridad. Although the everyday elevation of the mulatta over other women of African descent was anything but colorblind, Caridad eventually came to personify unity among Cubans of indigenous Taíno, African, European, and Asian descent.<sup>66</sup> Ironically, this youthful and attractive Virgin's correspondence with Ochún in popular culture has tended to reinforce the folkloric depiction of this orisha as a one-dimensional flirt. Yet Caridad's patriotic title as the patroness of Cuba—"La Virgen Mambisa . . . fierce freedom fighter"—also suggests Ochún's extraordinary martial prowess.<sup>67</sup> As if in response to the usual limitations foisted on her—as on other women of African descent—divination verses and praise-songs paint a

vibrant picture of Ochún as wizened medicine woman, affluent matron, talented diviner, weaver, potter, and merchant, with a vulture as her fearless, carrion-eating familiar.<sup>68</sup>

## TOWARD THE FUTURE OF FOOD OFFERINGS

*There is no idol as expensive as the stomach; it receives offerings every day.*

—YORUBÁ PROVERB<sup>69</sup>

African-inspired religions throughout the Americas owe much to the ingenuity of slaves faced with foreign substances and situations. Their cuisines emerged as “writing in code,” replete with neologisms, double entendres, and clever turns of phrase formulated to communicate with spirits as well as other persons.<sup>70</sup> While practitioners of the Lucumí tradition regard aesthetic forms and styles as embodying values, it is food that lays the foundation for social relations.<sup>71</sup> They feed the orishas in order to preserve themselves, and to nourish a vital source of oppositional identity and community. Sacred meals become mnemonic devices, facilitating the recollection of myths shot through with the counter-memory of Afro-Atlantic historical experience erased or omitted entirely from the official record.<sup>72</sup> It may well be that the power of sugar in Lucumí resides not so much in its sweetness as in the sweat and tears of coerced labor that sucrose crystallizes, and that devotees invite the spirits to share. As orisha worship continues to attract followers around the world, there is no guarantee that sugar will carry the same meanings delineated above, but there will undoubtedly be the need for tastes that conjure both the honeyed and bitter flavor of history.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What role did enslaved Africans and their descendants play in the development of sugar as a modern staple?
2. Identify some characteristics of Yorùbá traditional religion to be found in Afro-Cuban Lucumí. Why might these African-derived beliefs and practices have survived in the Caribbean?
3. How does eating together and feeding the spirits ceremonially create community in Lucumí?

4. In what ways do food offerings manage to convey the personalities of different spirits?
5. How does sugar serve to indicate the gendered, racial, and class distinctions between Ochún and Ogún?

## NOTES

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1. See Peter McKenzie, *Hail Orisha! A Phenomenology of a West African Religion in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Brill: Leiden, 1997), 12, 205, 264, 285; William Bascom, “Yoruba Food,” *Africa* 11 (1951), 47; and Anthony Buckley, *Yoruba Medicine* (New York: Athelia Henrietta, 1997), 8, 79.
2. Ira Berlin, “From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53 (1994): 251–88.
3. Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 147.
4. *Ibid.*, 150; and Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 36–37.
5. Hugh Thomas, *Cuba, or, The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York: Da Capo, 1998 [1971]), 28 n. 8.
6. Manuel Moreno Fraginals, *The Sugarmill: the Socioeconomic Complex of Sugar in Cuba, 1760–1860*, trans. Cedric Belfrage (New York: Monthly Review, 1976). See also Fernando Ortiz, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 1963 [1947]).
7. Ralph Lee Woodward Jr., “The Political Economy of the Caribbean,” in *The South and The Caribbean*, ed. Douglass Sullivan-González and Charles Reagan Wilson, 137, 141 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).
8. Jorge Castellanos and Isabel Castellanos, “The Geographic, Ethnologic, and Linguistic Roots of Cuban Blacks,” *Cuban Studies* 17 (1987): 95–110.
9. Stephan Palmié, “Ethnogenetic Processes and Cultural Transfer in Caribbean Slave Populations,” in *Slavery in the Americas*, ed. W. Binder (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1993), 346.
10. Possession in such traditions scarcely resembles its mainstream portrayal in films and on television; possessing spirits spend most of their time

- ceremonially listening to problems, delivering advice, diagnosing illness, performing health-related cleansing rites, and offering blessings to their worshippers.
11. Andrew Apter, "Herskovits's Heritage: Rethinking Syncretism in the African Diaspora," *Diaspora* 1, no. 3 (1991): 235–60.
  12. Miguel "Willie" Ramos, "The Empire Beats On: Oyo, Batá Drums, and Hegemony in Nineteenth-Century Cuba," M.A. thesis, Florida International University, 2000, 223–24.
  13. Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin, 1985).
  14. Benjamin Moseley, *A Treatise on Sugar with Miscellaneous Medical Observations*, 2nd ed. (London: John Nichols, 1800), 144. See also Robert John Thornton, *A New Family Herbal: or, Popular Account of the Natures and Properties of the Various Plants Used in Medicine, Diet and the Arts* (London: R. Phillips, 1810); William Ed Grimé, *Botany of the Black Americans* (St. Clair Shores, Mich.: Scholarly, 1976); and Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 175.
  15. Argelio Santiesteban, *Uno y el mismo: Notas de folklore cubano, con especial atención a sus puntos de contacto con el folklore de otros pueblos* (Habana: Ediciones Unión, 1995), 44; Lydia Cabrera, *El monte: igbo finda, ewe orisha, viti nfinda* (Miami: C&R, 1975 [1954]), 366; and José Seone Gallo, *El folclor médico de Cuba: enfermedades de la piel* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1993).
  16. Miguel Barnet, *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, trans. Nick Hill (Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 1994), 100, 141, 142; and Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui, *Afro-Cuban Cuisine: Its Myths and Legends*, trans. Carmen González Díaz de Villegas, 14–15 (La Habana: Editorial José Martí, 1998).
  17. "Wande Abimbola, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yoruba Religion and Culture in Africa* (Roxbury: Aim Books, 1997), 74.
  18. Cabrera, *El monte*, 366; ellipses in original.
  19. James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 37. See also Carolyn Morrow Long, *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001).
  20. Bolívar Aróstegui, *Afro-Cuban Cuisine*, 89–90.
  21. Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 25.
  22. Daniel Miller, *A Theory of Shopping* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 75; my italics.
  23. Robert Farris Thompson, *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1993), 28.
  24. For more concerning ebbó, see Roberto Nodal and Miguel "Willie" Ramos, "Let the Power Flow: Ebó as a Healing Mechanism in Lukumí Orisha Worship," in *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World*, ed. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, 167–86 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).
  25. At the drum feasts I have attended, spirits have often used foods displayed in plazas to cleanse initiates ritually.
  26. Brown, "Thrones of the Orichas: Afro-Cuban Altars in New Jersey, New York, and Havana," *African Arts* 26 (1993): 54.
  27. Johannes Fabian, *Power and Performance: Ethnographic Explorations Through Proverbial Wisdom and Theater in Shaba, Zaire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 24.
  28. Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (London: Routledge, 1996), 45.
  29. John Mason, *Ìdáná Fún Òrìṣà: Cooking for Selected Heads* (Brooklyn: Yorùbá Theological Archministry, 1999), 121–23.
  30. *Ibid.*, 130–31; Ramos, *The Empire Beats On*, 224.
  31. Ramos, *The Empire Beats On*, 224.
  32. Mason, *Ìdáná Fún Òrìṣà*, 52.
  33. *Ibid.*, 104–5.
  34. *Ibid.*, 99. For more examples, see Miguel "Willie" Ramos, *Adimú: Gbogbó Tén'unjé Lukumí* (Miami: Eleda.Org, 2003).
  35. Ysamur Flores-Peña, "Overflowing with Beauty: The Ochún Atlar in Lucumí Aesthetic Tradition," in *Òṣun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas*, ed. Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford, 122 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); and Julia Cuervo Hewitt, *Aché, présence africaine: tradiciones yoruba-lucumí en la narrativa cubana* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 80; my translation.
  36. David H. Brown, "Garden in the Machine: Afro-Cuban Sacred Art and Performance in Urban New Jersey and New York," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1989, 105.
  37. Morton Marks, "Havana, Cuba, ca. 1957: Rhythms and Songs for the Orishas from the Historic Recordings of Lydia Cabrera and Josefina Tarafa, Introduction" (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2001), 10–11.
  38. Margaret Thompson Drewal, "Dancing for Ògún in Yorubaland and Brazil," in *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, ed. Sandra T. Barnes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 225.

39. Brown, "Garden in the Machine," 105.
40. Matthias Rhrig Assuno and Michael Zeuske, "'Race,' Ethnicity and Social Structure in 19th Century Brazil and Cuba," *Ibero-Amerikanisches Archiv* 24 (1998): 412; and Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 48.
41. "La secta conga de los 'matiabos' en Cuba," in *Estudios etnosociológicos* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1991 [1956]), 107.
42. Brown, "Thrones of the Orichas," 51.
43. He consumes a variety of meats: rooster, goat, venison, turtle, and bush rat, among others.
44. John Mason, *Orin Òrìṣà: Songs for Selected Heads* (Brooklyn: Yorùbá Theological Archministry, 1992), 80.
45. Quoted in David H. Brown, "Toward an Ethnoaesthetics of Santería Ritual Arts: The Practice of Altar-Making and Gift Exchange," in *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. Arturo Lindsay (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1996), 135 n.37.
46. Gabriele Volpato and Daimy Godínez, "Ethnobotany of Pru, a Traditional Cuban Refreshment," *Economic Botany* 58, no. 3 (2004): 381-95.
47. J. Lorand Matory, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 144.
48. The best places to become acquainted with Ochún's sweet tastes are the lavish parties thrown in her honor in Lucumí communities, at which devotees serve and eat foods prepared in her honor.
49. Bolívar Aróstegui, *Afro-Cuban Cuisine*, 88-89.
50. Mercedes Cros Sandoval, *La religión afrocubana* (Madrid: Playor, 1975), 198.
51. Isabel Castellanos, "A River of Many Turns: The Polysemy of Ochún in Afro-Cuban Tradition" in Murphy and Sanford, *Òṣun Across the Waters*, 39.
52. Cabrera, cited in Cuervo Hewitt, *Aché*, 167.
53. Miguel "Willie" Ramos, "Afro-Cuban Orisha Worship," in *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. Arturo Lindsay (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1996), 69.
54. Castellanos, "A River of Many Turns," 44 n.13.
55. I have changed the name of the Ilé and my interlocutor for reasons of confidentiality.
56. Castellanos, "A River of Many Turns," 42.
57. Claude Lévi-Strauss observes that in the indigenous South American systems of thought on which he conducted research, neither honey nor menstrual blood is constructed as raw, but as kindred "elaborated substances, like cooked food, but through the action of what might be called 'natural cooking.'" *From Honey to Ashes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 255.
58. Brown, "Garden in the Machine," 105.
59. Raquel Mendieta Costa, "Exotic Exports: The Myth of the Mulatta," in *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*, ed. Coco Fusco (London: London, 2000), 45.
60. Thomas, *Cuba*, 173.
61. Assuno and Zeuske, "'Race,' Ethnicity and Social Structure in 19th Century Brazil and Cuba," 404.
62. Vera Kutzinski, *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 165.
63. The latter conflated the mulattas depicted in the marquillas with a cloyingly sweet, inexpensive confection still made from honey, brown sugar, and coconut, served in a flimsy paper or banana-leaf cone, and sold on the street.
64. Mendieta Costa, "Exotic Exports," 45.
65. Contrast this with the appetite attributed to her sister Yemayá, seen to be of unmixed and direct African descent. See Elizabeth Pérez, "Nobody's Mammy: Yemayá as Fierce Foremother in Afro-Cuban Religions," in *Gender, Sexuality, and Creativity in the Latina/o and Afro-Atlantic Diaspora*, ed. Solimar Otero and Toyin Falola (New York: State University of New York Press, 2013), 1-20.
66. Cros Sandoval, *La religión afrocubana*, 171. Some 142,000 Chinese laborers—indentured servants and contract workers either press-ganged or deceived into accepting exploitative arrangements—arrived in Cuba in the nineteenth century, mostly from 1847 to 1874. See Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).
67. Joseph M. Murphy, "Yéyé Cachita: Ochún in a Cuban Mirror," in Murphy and Sanford, *Òṣun Across the Waters*, 96.
68. Madeline Cámara Betancourt, "Between Myth and Stereotype: the Image of the Mulatta in Cuban Culture in the Nineteenth Century, a Truncated Symbol of Nationality," in *Cuba, the Elusive Nation: Interpretations of National Identity*, ed. Damián J. Fernández and Madeline Cámara Betancourt, 104 (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000).
69. Isaac O. Delano, *Òwe L'Esin Oro: Yoruba Proverbs—Their Meaning and Usage* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1966), 20, 106.
70. Thompson, *Face of the Gods*, 154.

71. Douglas and Isherwood, *The World of Goods*, 44.  
 72. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972), 81.

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Ten

## GOOD TO EAT

CULINARY PRIORITIES IN THE NATION OF  
 ISLAM AND THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST  
 OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

KATE HOLBROOK

WHEN IT COMES to diet, two religious groups considered outsiders by mainstream Americans have more in common than perhaps anyone imagined. Members of the Nation of Islam (Nation) have been marginalized as much for their perceived militancy and racism as for abstaining from sweet potatoes and pork, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) are as infamous for a past that included plural marriage as for prohibitions against coffee and alcohol. Yet both religious groups choose what to eat by hallmarks as similar and American as apple pie: the attainment of self-sufficiency and the pursuit of good health.

As historian R. Laurence Moore has persuasively argued, religious outsiders in the United States are, in many respects, true insiders.<sup>1</sup> To rebel, to create one's own movement—these acts are consummately American. Through their rebellion on issues of food and drink, both the Nation and the Latter-day Saints have proved themselves to be American religious insiders. In fact, recipes for the marginalized Mormons and members of the Nation flesh out Moore's account of American religious identities. Close readings of recipes and favorite dishes show that the American values of self-sufficiency, economy, and health have influenced the cuisine of the