DIVINING THE PAST: THE LINGUISTIC RECONSTRUCTION OF ‘AFRICAN’ ROOTS IN DIA SPORIC RITUAL REGISTERS AND SONGS

Kristina Wirtz

Introduction

Itoyele sele ita Ochún

(Ide wercere ni tosun)

(Tiny pieces of brass are the mark of Oshun)

Ocha kini gba ita Ochún

(Qi gidighi ni loya)

(Very heavy beads are the mark of the orisha)

Chekcheke ita Ochún itoyle wele

(Sekekeke ni tojan)

(Rough handcuffs are the mark of Ogun)

—from Cuban sacred song to

Ochún

— from Yoruba praise poem about

Waru

The juxtaposition of the two texts above, one from a Cuban source and the other from an African source, suggests a connection between the two, but what kind of connection? As the story is usually told, the Cuban text seems to derive from the Yoruba text because—different phonological and orthographic systems aside—in places they sound similar. But are they the ’same’ lines, such that the meaning of the Yoruba lines tells us something about the meaning of the Cuban lines? What of other Yoruba texts that bear resemblance to the Cuban song? On what basis would it be reasonable to suggest that the Cuban religious song to the deity Ochún derives from the Yoruba praise poem above, or from some other Yoruba text? In this article I examine the

1 Sincere thanks to Dr. Yiwọla Awoyale, Yoruba linguist and lexicographer at Penn Linguistic Data Consortium, for noting the parallels between the Yoruba oriiki and the Cuban song. In sessions extending over a year, he listened to and provided lexical analyses of my Cuban field recordings.

2 Amanda Vincent has brought to my attention two other Yoruba texts, a song and another oriiki, that the Yoruba religious experts she worked with linked to a recording of this Cuban song. I thank her for the reminder that melodies also provide comparative information.
interpretive work through which scholars and religious practitioners recognize religious songs and ritual speech from the African diaspora as ‘African.’ I ask: what does it mean for scholars to link words and longer texts to some particular site or region in Africa, such that they become an ancestral link conveyed more or less faithfully from an African ancestral ‘homeland’ into the present? What epistemology and what historical subjectivity underly the ‘recognition’ or ‘discovery’ of such connections? In exploring how scholars approach African diasporic linguistic materials (especially those related to African diasporic religions) by seeking first and foremost to connect them to African sources and give them African histories and meanings, I wish to suggest that the interpretive process of forging such connections is key to the meaning the ‘discovered’ connections have. To make my case I will work against the grain to use divinatory practices of Cuban religious practitioners of Santería (including those applied to ritual texts) to draw attention to similar ‘divinatory’ practices by scholars. By comparing scholars’ and nonscholarly (that is, ‘local’) recuperations of African diasporic language history I seek to make explicit the chronotope underlying the scholarly production of history. Specifically, I will look at the historicity of African diasporic cultural forms like the song above and the ritual registers used in Santería and other African diasporic religions. This comparison is meant to highlight how meaningful historical connections are forged (rather than ‘discovered’) by scholars in ways that are never entirely separate from the efforts of the peoples of the Atlantic World to make meaningful historical connections through techniques of remembering.

This project, then, involves reflecting on the historical subjectivities of linguistic researchers in light of the historical subjectivities of those whose speech they study. Its genesis was my own ethnographic fieldwork among religious practitioners in the eastern Cuban city of Santiago de Cuba (ongoing since 1997; primarily in 1999–2000).3 My

3 During my fieldwork on Santería in Cuba, I attended ceremonies, conducted interviews, elicited information on Lucumí, received formal tutoring and less formal mentoring from a few key field consultants, and engaged in the long-term, often low-key hanging around religious practitioners, listening, and chatting that constitute so much of participant-observation. Wherever possible and permitted, I recorded ceremonies and other interactions. Field research was supplemented with linguistic and textual analyses of published and unpublished texts, especially religious notebooks (libretas) in which many santeros record their religious knowledge, including Lucumí vocabulary lists, texts of prayers and songs, ritual procedures, and information pertaining to divination signs.