

Deep Language and Persistent Culture: Learning to Speak the “Tongue of the Orichas” in Cuban Santería

Kristina Wirtz

School of Arts & Sciences

Anthropology

<kwirtz@sas.upenn.edu>

My concern in this paper is to explore how religious practitioners’ approaches to learning, using, and interpreting Santería’s esoteric ritual language, Lucumí, impact Lucumí’s ritual efficacy as the sacred speech of the deities and ancestors. In particular, I wish to argue that distinct interpretive practices, situated in different contexts or deployed by differently situated actors, provide alternate visions of Lucumí’s ritual functions and African origins. Santería is one of several Cuban religious traditions that derive from reconstructed African practices of enslaved Africans and their descendants. Despite some European influences from Catholicism and Spiritism, much of Santería’s cosmology, ritual, and jargon clearly traces back to specifically Yoruba traditions that also persist in West Africa. But tracing these African links is an ideologically-charged exercise, one shaped by the interactions among circulating strands of religious culture and parallel metacultural appraisals of those forms, such as those metapragmatically encoded in santeros’ interpretive practices (Silverstein 1993; Urban 2001). In this presentation of a work-in-progress, I would like to contrast interpretive strategies santeros employ that are derived from philology and folklore to others that parallel ritual practices such as divination. The contrast shows how each approach constructs a different vision of what makes Lucumí utterances ritually efficacious and what of the “original” Yoruba language has persisted in Lucumí. This work draws upon current semiotic approaches in linguistic anthropology that examine issues of language ideologies, dialogical models of language and culture, and the interaction of cultural and metacultural patterns of circulation.

Key terms: semiotics, metadiscourse and metapragmatics, religious language, language ideology, ritual

References

- Silverstein, M. (1993). Metapragmatic discourse and metapragmatic function. In J.A. Lucy (Ed.), *Reflexive language: Reported speech and metapragmatics* (pp. 33-58). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Urban, G. (2001). *Metaculture: How culture moves through the world*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.