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## The Political Agenda for Theatricalizing Religion in *Shango de Ima* and *Sortilege II: Zumbi Returns*

by  
Philip Zwerling

Amilcar Cabral, the African revolutionary, wrote: "A people who free themselves from foreign domination will not be free...unless they return to the upward paths of their own culture....We see, therefore, that if imperialist domination has the virtual need to practice cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture."<sup>1</sup> What Cabral perhaps did not envision is that expressions of culture can be politically defined and that national liberation may cede primacy to contemporary cultural realities. I wish to examine two plays that, in preferring Yoruba religion over Christianity, may be seen as theatrical manifestations of national liberation that are determined and, in one case undermined, by contemporary national necessities.

These two plays are *Shango de Ima*, attributed to the Cuban Pepe Carril and *Sortilege II: Zumbi Returns* by the Brazilian Abdias do Nascimento. I choose them because the same Yoruba religion is central to their themes and stagecraft, because accessing that religion is a statement of cultural identity for these Afro-Latin authors, and because both have been translated and anthologised in English. *Shango de Ima* has been produced in New York. Since both plays are accessible to an English speaking audience, they have had an impact far beyond their national borders.

At first glance, Cuba and Brazil might appear more dissimilar than similar: one a small island of 14 million, the other a giant land mass on the South American continent with 160 million inhabitants; one Spanish speaking, the other Portuguese, with all of the European historical and cultural connections those different languages imply. But in some significant ways, both countries share much in common. Both were long-time European colonies, their indigenous populations decimated by invaders and repopulated through many centuries of a

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<sup>1</sup> qtd. in Soyinka, Wole. *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994) ix.

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slave trade that brought captured black people from the West coast of Africa, and, more specifically, from the Yoruba lands now identified with the modern country of Nigeria. Slavery in Cuba lasted until 1873 and in Brazil until 1888. Both countries followed slavery with a strict policy of apartheid and racism while attempting, unsuccessfully, to wipe out African languages, religion, history, and art.

This attempted destruction of a culture was undertaken beneath the twin banners of modernity and civilisation and served effectively to streamline and rationalise economic exploitation which occurred along racial lines. In self-defence, the Africans clung tenaciously to the culture and religion that identified them. For example, Africans would sing in the Cuban fields, "While my body in Cuba wilts, my soul in Ife [the Yoruba holy city] blooms".<sup>2</sup> This cultural suppression was ultimately unsuccessful in both countries where Yoruba religion survived, often under a veneer of Catholicism, to flower again publicly as Santeria in Cuba and as Candomble and Macumba in Brazil.

One of the greatest differences between the two countries, of course, has been their modern political development. In Cuba, Fidel Castro and the Communist Party, (once, but no longer officially atheist), have reigned since 1959, while over that same period of time Brazil has seen a succession of right wing military dictatorships. The left-wing Brazilian Workers Party captured the presidency with the election of Lula da Silva in 2003 and ushered in a fledgling democracy.

Santeria, Macumba, and Candomble survive as religions of the Yoruba people in the Diaspora. There are other Latin American versions of African religions; for example Abakua and 'palo monte', also found in Cuba, are of the Bantu people enslaved from the Congo. Between 750,000 and one million black people were brought from Yorubaland to Cuba in chains, numbers so great that at times Africans constituted a majority of the island's population. Interestingly, anthropologists found Yoruba-speaking Cubans as late as 1951.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Canizares, Raul. *Walking With the Night: The Afro Cuban World of Santeria*. (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1993) 3.

<sup>3</sup> Carril, Pepe. *Shango de Ima: A Yoruba Mystery Play*. (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1970) 26.

Santeria centers around the 'orishas' or saints and is called 'La Regla de las Orishas' (The Law of the Saints). While these faiths had been described as syncretic hybrids of Christianity and Yoruba's indigenous religion in years past, many contemporary authors argue that, though influenced by Catholicism, Santeria, Candomble, and Macumba represent the survival of indigenous spirituality hidden by their practitioners beneath Catholic forms.

It is clear that in colonial Cuba, the Yoruba religion was denigrated as little more than black magic, and Afro Cuban culture was mocked as a part of the stereotypically primitive and uneducated 'negrito'. For example, prior to our own Civil War, white American acting companies from the United States performed minstrel shows in black face for segregated white audiences in Havana's Gran Teatro Tacon. This theatre had been built in 1838 by slave labor and Blacks were then excluded from attending.<sup>4</sup> As late as 1912, an Afro Cuban revolt, joined by many santeros, was viciously suppressed by a Cuban government allied with the United States.

Segregation was so complete that black protagonists did not appear on the Cuban stage until the play "Canaval" in 1950, though Yoruba religion appeared on stage in "Agallu-Sola ondoco" in 1941.<sup>5</sup> Such progressive approaches appeared simultaneously with the 'costumbristas' and 'negritas' [white actors in blackface] theatre pieces which used Yoruba religion as a colorful adjunct to the usual racist melange of machismo, alcohol, sex, and the 'exotic' religious rituals and music of Afro Cubans that portray the Black Cuban. Even today, a majority of the Cuban population consider the Black Cuban as an oddity, an outsider, and 'the other'.

Though labelled, dismissively, by the Spanish colonialists and Catholic Church as pagan pantheism, Santeria offers a sophisticated metaphysics and ethics that collapses the division between the natural world and the human world of feelings and desires. Santeria believes that

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<sup>4</sup> Martin, Randy. *Socialist Ensembles: Theatre and State in Cuba and Nicaragua*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 144.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Pereira: "The Black Presence in Cuban Theatre" in *Afro-Hispanic Review*, January 1983) 15.

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the universe and all its objects are alive with a life force called *axe'*. In Santeria there is a creator god named Olofi who is no longer active in world affairs, and the orishas who are his children. The chief among the orishas is Obatala, who is both male and female. Shango is the orisha of fire, lightening and thunder. There are many creation stories and tales of orishas intervening in human affairs. In religious services, the orishas impact human beings through the santeros, or priests, who access the orishas with ceremonies and sacrifices. The future is divined through the reading of shells and bones cast by the *santero*.

The Cuban play *Shango de Ima* which opened at El Teatro Guinol in 1969 presents a series of separate stories strung together and presented as a dramatic whole about the orisha Shango. The play uses Santeria music, dancing, and ritual on stage but its thematic thrust includes more than a simple celebration of that religion.

Its mere appearance on stage is significant in the context of Cuban history. The revolutionary government has been on rocky terms with the Catholic establishment for the four decades of its existence. Catholic priests fought, died, and were captured with the invaders at Playa Giron (the Bay of Pigs). I saw on each of my visits to the island that the Church chafed under legal limitations that confined its activities within church walls. Street processions, proselytising, and church schools were banned and the government excluded believers from Party membership.

On the other hand, Afro Cubans had gained the most from the revolution which had ended *de facto* segregation and espoused racial equality. As a result, the Asantehene of Ghana, the King of the Ashanti, and the Ooni of Ife, the Nigerian city sacred to Santeria, had officially visited Cuba as guests of the government 15 years prior to the visit of Pope John Paul II (who refused to meet with a delegation of *Santeros* on his own visit to the island). However, as late as 1990 the official Cuba guidebook could state, after a brief reprise of the history of Santeria: "the primitive and pagan practices have faded into the past, Christianity is an accepted part of Cuba's heritage".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gravette, Gerald A. *Cuba Official Guide*. (Havana: National Institute of Tourism, 1993) 27.

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In 1991 the Cuban Communist Party opened membership to religious believers, whether they be Santerian or Catholic, and officially opened a museum of African religions in Guanabacoa, outside Havana, and made it, along with holy sites and Santeria ceremonies, available for foreign tourists. Some speculated that beyond attracting hard currency from visitors, Castro hoped to create an official Santeria religious and political counterweight to Catholic power. Historically Santeria meetings had functioned in colonial times as covert gathering places [*quilombos*] to plan slave uprisings and anti-Spanish rebellions. The religion was still sufficiently feared by whites that as late as 1959 the dark-skinned Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, in an effort to increase his power and frighten opponents, let it be whispered that he practiced Santeria in the Presidential palace.

Official government sanction for Santeria served other goals as well. As George Brandon wrote: "The Castro government gave the Afro Cuban religious public recognition as an element of the national cultural heritage".<sup>7</sup> In 1991 the government allowed the formation of the Yoruba Cultural Association. By November 2000, Washington Post reporter Eugene Robinson could report: "The Afro Cuban religion...is an everyday fact of life in Cuba, a constant presence....Nowadays everywhere you turn in Havana you see someone wearing a beaded bracelet or necklace or some other sign of the Yoruba faith...on university campuses and in office buildings".<sup>8</sup>

The staging of *Shango de Ima* must be seen within this context of a changing political/social scene. For here was theatre celebrating Santeria mythology both as art and, equally importantly, as a formative piece of the national Cuban patrimony.

As a cultural symbol Shango performs the Cuban iconography of publicly recognised and acceptable black personal and communal power. In the words of Cuban poet Rogelio Martinez Fure':

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<sup>7</sup> Brandon, George. *Santeria from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) 47.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson, Eugene. "An Island of Faith" in *The Washington Post*. November 20, 2000.

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Today through the streets, in the bars, Shango brags about his gold medals, his watches, his rings, burns his tobacco with obvious pleasure, scatters his seed in all directions, flaunts his sex, boastful of his potency and moving through the world as if he means to grab it all.<sup>9</sup>

*Shango de Ima* begins with a song to Elegua, orisha of the crossroads, performed onstage. Shango, child of Obatala wants to know his absent father and his real name. Obatala answers him significantly : "You can call yourself 'man', or 'the question' or you can take the name 'Black' which is like our condition and our blood." And indeed Shango is all of these things. He is a man, a black man, seeking his identity and his way in life.

In the course of the play Shango seeks out his real father, marries Obba, sleeps with his adopted-mother Yemaya and makes love to the sisters Oya and Oshun. Shango is quick to anger and reckless in his desires. (For example, when poor Obba serves him her own ears for dinner when she can find no meat, he rejects her as mutilated and earless.) Shango then rashly battles Ogun.

When all whom Shango has offended take their complaints against him to Obatala, she decides his fate: Shango's punishment will be found in his own condition, condemned to an eternal cycle of life, death and rebirth and battles without end. "All paths of the road", says Obatala, "turn toward their inevitable end in the quiet of the cemeteries."

Shango has become a sort of Everyman, given life, power and love by the gods, but out of the rebelliousness of his own nature he is unable to value or keep his gifts. By placing the story in the distant past, among deities and devoid of humans, the drama does not necessarily connect to or comment on contemporary society or political events, although it certainly elevates Santeria to both the level of art and to the level of universal spiritual importance. Shango's miscues and his punishment are all too human and, like Prometheus of Olympian

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<sup>9</sup> qtd. in *Shango de Ima* 27.

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religion, his rebelliousness, courage, and searching nature invite us as human beings, whether white or black, to weigh the dualities of our own natures.

The Brazilian play, *Sortilege II: Zumbi Returns*, has a much more immediate socio-political goal. Its author, Abdias do Nascimento, is an Afro Brazilian in a continuing color-conscious society. He served in the national legislature and founded the Negro Experimental Theatre in Rio in 1944. His play, *Sortilege I*, was the first play written by an Afro Brazilian having an Afro Brazilian theme. Written in 1951 it was banned by the police for 6 years. Abdias do Nascimento rewrote *Sortilege I* as *Sortilege II: Zumbi Returns* after spending a year (1975-76) studying in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. *Sortilege II* seems to share some elements with Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*. However, for Nascimento, the flight into the jungle and the casting aside of Western dress is a positive return to honorable roots rather than Jones' devolution into savagery.

The Zumbi of the play's title was the elected king of the black Republic of Palmares that welcomed escaping slaves and defended freedom against Portuguese slavers for 100 years (1595-1696). In this play's celebration of Candomble and Macumba (the Yoruba religions of Afro Brazilians), Zumbi is Egun. That is, Zumbi is simultaneously political and religious, King and orisha. Palmares (the place of the palms), represents *axe'*— the life force of the orisha religion, which is renewed by belief, worship and sacrifice.

Brazil was the last country in the Americas to outlaw slavery, though they never legalised segregation or criminalized miscegenation. In the 20th Century Brazil embarked on a stated policy of *embranquecimento* (literally 'whitening') believing that intermarriage would create a people of a single race. Questions of race were removed from census forms after 1950. However, little thought was given to what would be lost if the population of white, brown, and black were melted down into a single shared color or why blacks needed whitening. In the end the process failed and 44% of Brazilians remain identifiably black and brown,<sup>10</sup> though, economically and politically, Blacks "...remain powerless in Brazil".<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Fiola, Jan. *Race Relations in Brazil: A Reassessment of the "Racial Democracy"* Thesis. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1990) 102.

<sup>11</sup> Fontaine, Pierre-Michel. *Race, Class, and Power in Brazil*. (Los Angeles: University of California, 1985) 56.



It was illegal for racial discord to be examined on stage (the official reason for censoring *Sortilege I* back in the 1950's) for fear it would spread beyond the theatres. Simultaneously Black culture was appropriated and whitened in a search for a single common denominator of culture. Nascimento writes bitterly of new high rise residential buildings in Brazil named for Yoruba orishas, buildings so expensive and restricted that, in his words, "black people cannot even live [there]".<sup>12</sup> As one 1977 newspaper ad put it:

Osala is the greatest orisa. The Osaguian Building is one of the highest on 7th Avenue. Osaguian is dressed in white and marble is his symbol. The Osaguian Building is made of marble. By virtue of his color and his symbol Osaguian is the Afro Brazilian god of peace and love. The Osaguian Building features calm and luxury.<sup>13</sup>

Not only are blacks economically excluded from this residence but the ads also tell them that white is the color of peace and love, leaving one to wonder of what representation the color black might be.

In his political activities (he was elected to the National Assembly as a Black Power exponent) and in his dramatic writing, Nascimento highlights racial oppression and Black pride. In *Sortilege II: Zumbi Returns*, the Afro Brazilian lawyer turned murderer, Dr. Emanuel Esquire, is fleeing the police. Crashing through the forest, he stumbles onto a Temple of Ogun. Pausing to catch his breath, this confirmed Catholic and earner of a Ph.D. excoriates Macumba with words any white Brazilian might share: "This is why these niggers don't get anywhere. All these centuries in the middle of civilisation and what good has it done? Still believe in witchcraft,

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<sup>12</sup> Nascimento, Abdias do. *Brazil: Mixture or Massacre: Essays in the Genocide of a Black People*. (Dover, MA: The Majority Press, 1979) 147.

<sup>13</sup> qtd. in Nascimento. *Mixture or Massacre* 148.

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practice Macumba. Animistic cults, evoking savage Gods. Gods!...Science has already analysed that phenomenon. It's nothing more than collective hysteria....What ignorance!.<sup>14</sup>

But at the altar, Emanuel (a significantly Biblical name) is visited by the resident orishas and by the people he has mistreated in the past: Ifigenia, the Afro Brazilian he loved and abandoned as he sought success in the white world and his white wife Margarida whom he strangled when, out of racial animosity, she aborted their mixed race baby. As the police close in, Emanuel sees the error of his racial self-hatred, sheds his western clothes piece by piece, and reappears in formal African dress wearing the crown of Ogun. In an emotional and spell-binding climax, as drums beat in the background (again recalling *The Emperor Jones*) and as the tension rises, Emanuel says: "Now I've gotten free. Forever. I'm a true African". He kneels as a supplicant and an orisha brings a sword down upon his neck. In the sacrifice, Emanuel's *axe*' is freed and the life force replenished.

In his 1973 essay "The Fourth Stage" Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, describes Yoruba tragic drama as unique, different from Greek tragedy and from Nietzsche's depiction of the Apollonian and Dionysian. To Soyinka, Yoruba drama has its African roots in the re-enactment of a cosmic conflict in which revelation and morality are equally at play. Yoruba tragedy, he writes:

Plunges straight into the 'chthonic realm', the seething cauldron of the dark world of will and psyche, the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming. Into this universal womb once plunged and emerged Ogun, the first actor, disintegrating within the abyss.<sup>15</sup>

In the Yoruba reality, where past/present/and future simultaneously coexist, life contains "the ancestral, the living, and the unborn". But the abyss looms between gods (the orishas) and men,

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<sup>14</sup> Nascimento, Abdias do. *Sortilege II: Zumbi Returns*. in *Crosswinds: An Anthology of Black Dramatists in the Diaspora*. Ed. William B. Branch (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). 207.

<sup>15</sup> Soyinka, Wole. *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994) 28.

"a final severance",<sup>16</sup> an abyss that can only be temporarily bridged by sacrifice, rituals and ceremonies that appease the cosmic powers.

This gulf has its historical plane as well. A once harmonious Yoruba world (like a Garden of Eden, envisioned by Jews, Christians, and Muslims) has been destroyed by the slave trade that ushered in an African Diaspora that cut off adherents from their roots in the sacred Yorubaland city of Ile Ife and cast them thousands of miles away to suffer in places like Cuba and Brazil. Ironically, the importation of Christianity and Islam into the modern state of Nigeria has seen both religions working to suppress the indigenous religion of the orishas even as they battle each other.

Tragic theatre both commemorates this great separation and acts to bridge the chasm as it re-enacts simultaneously the timeless cosmic conflict and the modern tragedy of slavery, racism, and oppression. "Ogun", writes Soyinka, "is the embodiment of will and the will is the paradoxical truth of destructiveness and creativeness in acting man".<sup>17</sup> For oppressed Yoruba people in Cuba and Brazil, the daily humiliations of slavery and transportation across the Atlantic were themselves psychic re-enactments of this cosmic disruption of Yoruba cosmology. For them immersion in the rules of the orisha is a reconnection with a cultural past, a geographical reality, a religious mythos, and, sometimes, a political agenda.

A play may be a representation or use of religion for fiduciary, dramatic, political, and/or religious purposes. Each of these two plays has been written for a distinct national/political audience. With that audience and political goals in mind the dramatists selected whose stories to tell, how to tell them, and how to treat contemporary events within a common history. Black identity, Black history, and Black religion are at the heart of these two plays.

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<sup>16</sup> Soyinka. *Art* 29.

<sup>17</sup> Soyinka. *Art* 30.

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Enslavement was a cataclysmic disruption to Yorubaland. The disruption occurred on the level of family; those left behind were bereft of fathers and husbands. On the level of country, the state lost able-bodied warriors, leaders in commerce, and statesmen. Families left behind faced economic deprivation while the country was left undefended.

For those who were enslaved and transported to the Americas the event meant a near complete separation from their society, culture, and religious beliefs. For them it meant a loss of a sense of self. For all Yorubas, slavery could be seen as the cosmic disruption, the disharmony and ruin of Yoruba identity whose cyclic view of history and sense of racial continuity was shattered. Undoubtedly then, 17th and 18th century Yorubas could relate in immediate emotional ways to the origin stories of their orishas which grew out of cosmic battles, rebellion, and defeat, so similar to their own. Where Yorubas had lived in three simultaneous stages of existence (1 – past, present, future, 2 – ancestor, living, and 3 – unborn) they now entered a fourth stage, what Soyinka has called "the dark continuum of transition...."<sup>18</sup> These plays are attempts to both represent that dark transition and to navigate it into a new light and a refreshment of *axe'*, the Yoruba life force.

In the plays, for example, the orisha Ogun appears in each play, although how he is treated varies from play to play. Ogun, worshipped with palm wine, is the God of war, revolution, and restorative justice.<sup>19</sup> Shango, who of course is the main character of *Shango de Ima*, is the orisha of fire, thunder, and lightening, of anger and retributive justice. Throughout Carril's play, Shango is at war with his own emotions and the other orishas. His struggle is a struggle to understand and control himself. On two occasions Ogun and Shango fight and Ogun ultimately triumphs. When the other orishas bring their complaints against Shango to Obatala he passes a judgment upon this play's protagonist: "The joy which makes suffering possible, the birth which leads to death will be your punishment and the punishment of all men....all the

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<sup>18</sup> Soyinka *Myth* 26.

<sup>19</sup> Soyinka *Myth* 54.

paths of the road turn toward their inevitable end in the quiet of the cemeteries..."<sup>20</sup> and these last words of dialogue are followed by the chant to Elegua that opened the play.

Shango's revolt has been defeated and in his defeat is a lesson for all mankind: life, struggle, and striving only end in death. Here the catharsis of Shango's defeat (a defeat based upon personal failings similar to those of Oedipus or Willy Loman) returns the audience of this tragedy to a sense of stasis and acceptance of their fate. It is a tragedy in a Western mode based upon the fall of an individual with whom all in the audience, regardless of race, can identify and learn better how to control their own appetites to avoid a similar fate.

How could it be otherwise in Cuba in 1970? Surely no play calling for continual revolution or extolling victories to be won could be tolerated within a revolutionary Cuban society that had already triumphed. Shango becomes here the tamed mascot of a black race that has been integrated into and benefited from the political revolution of 1959. In fact Shango's temper, selfishness (the rejection of Obba and the seduction of Oya), boastfulness (his battle with Ogun), and eventual defeat make him a sort of Everyman who must be purged of his rebelliousness and reintegrated as a safe member of the larger society who does not seduce women, cheat on his wife, or battle his superiors. If Shango has not been 'whitened', he has been Cubanized.

When *Shango de Ima* toured beyond Cuba and was produced in New York City it was easy for non-Cubans and whites to embrace the drama and relate to Shango's trials and tribulations. Though there could be no doubt that these were black gods, with African hair and African features who wear African clothing, their frailties and fears were universally recognizable.

Certainly their representation on stage was a statement of Afro Cuban pride and acceptance. As Antonio Castenada, President of the Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba said: "The orishas are not just gods, they are black gods. We feel that nobody who truly is ready to

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<sup>20</sup> Carril, Shango 89.

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accept black gods can be racist".<sup>21</sup> The Cuban staging of *Shango de Ima* was a public affirmation of the country's African heritage and a political statement in a revolutionary society where a black majority is still governed by an overwhelming white Communist Party elite. Its performance is a show, a demonstration, and a lesson. As a proclaimed Marxist-Leninist society Cuba cannot, by definition, be racist. While it may recognize the historic struggle against racial oppression, that past struggle must always be seen as secondary to the economic exploitation of the proletariat, regardless of race. Producing and embracing *Shango de Ima* demonstrates the end of racial oppression and the celebration of Black culture cleansed of contemporary social commentary. Here Yoruba religion becomes significant as anthropology, history, and colorful folklore. Here Santeria adherents, white as well as black, make a personal religious choice as do Cubans who choose Catholicism. And so their choice makes no political statement.

In contemporary capitalist Brazilian society, past racial oppression may sometimes be admitted even as current discrimination must be denied. For Nascimento and other Black power advocates, *Sortilege II: Zumbi Returns* is a weapon, not a relic, icon, or symbol of the past. Nascimento as playwright chooses to emphasize the humans, Emanuel, Ifigenia, and Margarida, rather than the orishas. The human, Emanuel, enters the *terreiro*, (the sacred and hidden ground where the altar to Ogun has been erected), rather than having the gods come to him.

Emanuel's nature, self-serving, reckless, impetuous, and violent is not unlike that of the orisha Shango. He is, at first, an Everyman, whose ambitions have brought ruin to others and ultimately led to his own downfall. But there is a difference. Emanuel failed because he tried to escape his Blackness. By forsaking a black lover for a white wife, earning a higher educational degree, converting to Christianity, and dressing as a European, Emanuel has cut himself off from his black identity.

His murder of Margarida, though cruel and repellent, was inspired by her own participation in an ongoing genocide: the murder of a black baby solely because of its color. By

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<sup>21</sup> Robinson, "An Island of Faith".

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entering the *terreiro* Emanuel attracts the orishas and begins his symbolic return to his black roots. By laying aside his title, his degree, his European dress, his religious prejudices, his very 'whiteness' that he has become and under the tutelage of the orishas, he is an African again. His death at the hands of the orishas is a sacrifice of the present to the future of the race. Emanuel's last words are "I killed Margarida. I am a free black man!".<sup>22</sup> A storm breaks over the *terreiro* as he speaks (Shango's thunderbolts and lightning break on stage) and the chorus chants "Axe'" and "Axe' Xango", and then "Axe' Zumbi'" conflating the life force with the orisha Shango and then the historical black resistance hero Zumbi as Emanuel becomes a part of them all. Emanuel falls, slain, onto the altar of Ogun. The Chorus chants "Rest black man, slavery is over, freedom's here" and their final chant as the curtain slowly falls is "Axe! Axe! Axe! Axe! Axe!" And the continuing life force is invoked for the audience, to empower them to action.<sup>23</sup>

*Sortilege II: Zumbi Returns* is an angry, defiant play, enlisting historical memory and religious and cultural values in a battle for national liberation, as described by Cabral in the quotation that begins this essay. The play might well be censored or suppressed in Cuba today for challenging Communist assumptions of racial harmony. But religions remain most vital while they remain in opposition to the national status quo .

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<sup>22</sup> Nascimento, *Sortilege II* 243.

<sup>23</sup> Nascimento, *Sortilege II* 245.