



IFE AXE Creative Designs
By *Gerardo*
Jewelry Inspired by The Orisha

Chapter Two

CEREMONIES

The Rule of Osha, as Santeria is formally known, has no written canon. Its traditions are passed on orally to the initiates. The written records in existence are either direct transcriptions from the oral tradition taken from initiates by interested researchers or from the notebooks in which a godmother or godfather laboriously wrote, with a smeary pencil, awful grammar and spelling, the finer points to be remembered during the ceremonies. The Lucumi language that the initiate in Santeria, the "asentado", is supposed to learn and practice is passed on in the same way.

Santeria has many variations according to the locality in which it is practiced. Distance and necessity make many of the practices vary wildly from each other. However, certain common threads run through all practices and make it possible to come up with what may be called a "generic" ceremony.



The Ceremony

It is Saturday. Everyone arrives early, dressed in their patron Saint's, their Orisha's, favorite colors and bringing the collars (Ilekes) and bundles and boxes containing the sacrificial animals and special foods and offerings needed for the ceremony. The ceremonies are long and exhausting. They can last all night and into Sunday morning.

P.O. Box 805763
CHICAGO, IL
60680-4119
USA

USA Tel: +1-312-479-1767
Tel: +52 1 55 1648 7960
Fax: +52 55 2614 8349
gbhawkins2@comcast.net

www.IFEAXEJewelry.com

A large comfortable room has been reserved in the house. The time passes in conversation, jokes and anecdotes. The altar is placed in a prominent position within the ceremonial area. Commonly, images of Christ and St. Barbara are prominently featured. Spread out before each image is a large ceramic soup tureen with a cover, usually decorated in a very rococo style. These tureens contain the stones (Otanés) sacred to the Orishas and the consecrated cowrie shells (Dilogun) used in the shell oracle (Medilogun).

Upon the mat covering the floor before the altar, the participants place the fruits, vegetables, cooked foods and the sacrificial animals they brought to the ceremony. There are also containers of Chequete (a drink made from sour orange juice, molasses, corn meal and fresh coconut milk). Bottles of aguardiente (an extremely strong drink distilled from sugar cane juice) are also placed on the mat as an offering to the Orishas. The official conducting the ceremony, either a high ranking bishop (Babalawo , or Iyalocha, if a woman), or a common priest (Santero or Santera) will fill his or her mouth with the aguardiente and spray it over the gathering as a blessing and to quiet those who have been possessed by an Orisha during the ceremony.

The conversation dies down at a signal from the Babalawo. Everyone settles down in front of the altar. The Babalawo holds up a container of Omiero (a mixture of rain water, river water, sea water and holy water; aguardiente, honey, corajo butter-extracted from the hard nuts of the corajo palm, cocoa butter, powdered eggshell, pepper and various other herbs and ingredients particular to the mixture's purpose. It is brewed by immersing a live coal wrapped in a fresh taro (Malanga) leaf into the mixture, which has been steeping since the previous day).

The container is presented to the four cardinal points and a small offering is made to each by spilling a bit of the Omiero. The Babalawo faces the altar and offers the Omiero to the Orishas, asking them to bestow their magical powers (Ashe) upon him. A little Omiero is then spilled at the room's entrance. The Babalawo returns to the center of the gathering and spills Omiero on the floor three times. The mixture is then offered to whomever would like to drink. Almost everyone does.

The Babalawo then draws the required symbols on the floor to summon the Orishas

. They are drawn with powdered eggshell mixed with earth from the roots of the favorite tree or plant of the house's tutelary Orisha. The symbol is blessed

and sprinkled with corn meal. A candle is lit at prescribed points. No one walks on these designs or steps over them.

The preliminaries being over, the youngest initiates (young in terms of time since their initiations into Santeria), along with those that aspire to join, back into the room, their faces away from the altar. They make obeisance by laying face down on the floor with their heads towards their godmother or godfather, the person sponsoring the novice and who may or may not be conducting the ceremony. This person or persons, in turn salutes the Orishas and blesses the new initiates and the novices. The blessings made, the godfather or godmother stands. The drumming begins.

Sometimes a participant is immediately possessed by an Orisha. At the moment of possession, the personality traits of the controlling Orisha become clearly manifested. Shaking and shuddering of the whole body are followed by very strong convulsions. The possessed individual falls on the floor.

The physical symptoms cease. Utter calm is reflected in the "montado"'s face (literally, he who is ridden. The act of possession). Voice, mannerisms and gestures change completely. The personality of the "caballo" (horse) ceases to exist. The personality of the Orisha has completely taken over the believer's body.

Nearby persons restore the "caballo"'s calm by blowing into his or her ears and mouth. Cocoa butter or corajo butter are rubbed on the person's hands and feet. If the trance becomes too violent, the "caballo" may be injured. It is the responsibility of those around the possessed individual to ensure his or her well being.

After the initial crisis is over, the Orisha's control over the possessed body becomes stronger. The Orisha dances to the welcoming beat of his or her specific rhythm and chant and "cleans" (purifies and blesses) those present. If the ceremony includes an animal sacrifice, the Orisha blesses those present by tearing or biting off the heads of sacrificial birds and sprinkling them with the blood.

If the Orisha is in a good mood, his "children" (those initiated to that particular Orisha) will joke and dance with the Saint. If the Orisha is in a bad mood or comes to punish someone, there is a profound silence. Everyone respectfully listens to the scolding.

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The Orishas speak briefly and get directly to the point. They prefer to communicate through the cowrie shell oracle or the coconut oracle (Biague).

The trance may last for seconds or for the entire ceremony. The trance's end comes spontaneously, although the godmother or godfather of the possessed person may have to intervene at times and prevent the possession from lasting too long a time. This is specially true in the case of novices whose trance capacity is not well known. Rarely can the possessed person remember what they did or said.



The Initiation (The "Asentado")

The details of each initiation ceremony vary according to the Orisha who will become the "parent" of the person being initiated into Santeria. The following information is a composite obtained from various sources and may be described as a "generic" initiation.

The first Orishas to be "asentados" (literally, seated upon) the novices head are: Obatala, Chango, Yemaya, and Oshun. Petitioning these Orishas for protection, offering them blood sacrifices and becoming possessed by them mark the entrance of the novice into Santeria.

The novice has no say in selecting the Orisha whose "child" he will become. The relationship is revealed through consulting the oracles, the physical characteristics peculiar to the "children" of a particular Orisha and through the direct intervention of the Orisha as he or she possesses a person and lays claim to that person prior to his or her novitiate.

"I remember that the first thing I had to do was to get together the money. And it was a lot! An asiento is expensive. The big one is the fee to the Babalawo, but there's also all the food to buy and the aguardiente. Not to mention all the new clothes I had to buy. You have to have all new clothes, you know, to be clean."

Both the money and the new wardrobe are turned over to the novice's godmother or godfather. It is this sponsor who administers the funds.

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The current cost of an initiation in New York or in Miami can easily run from three to five thousand dollars. The cost is determined by the Orisha, or so it is said.

"My godfather came and told me when the 'asiento was going to be. I was very excited. I was frightened, but I was mostly excited. I packed up my things and moved to my Babalawo's house. I was supposed to be there a week, but I had problems at work and I had to go back to work in four days."

If the novice is a girl who has reached the age of menstruation, the date of the "asiento" and of its accompanying rites must not correspond with that of her period. The proximity of a menstruating woman to an Orisha is considered sacrilege.

"The Babalawo sat me down in his room. He made me sit on a mat. He took out his shells and sang to them and shook them up. Then, he had me blow into them to give them Ashe. He threw them over and over again until he was sure what my Ebo was going to be. I've been pretty bad, so, let me tell you, it was a lot!"

An Ebo is any sacrifice or offering to the Orishas. In the case of an initiation, the Ebo are the sacrifices the novice must make to appease the Orishas offended by his or her past faults or evil actions.

"They brought in this big cage full of birds. There was everything in there. Chickens, roosters, pigeons, everything. I'm standing there in front of everybody and the birds are making a hell of a lot of noise. The Babalawo takes out the birds one by one and rubs it all over my body and hair. There was chicken shit everywhere. He then took out his knife and killed all the birds. That was scary. And I had to taste the blood."

Once the Babalawo has transferred the novice's impurities to the birds, the Orisha's names are called out. Each of the sacrifices is described to the Orishas in Lucumi, an archaic form of a language still commonly spoken on the Nigerian coast. The Babalawo is very careful to explain what is wanted of each Orisha. The novice is then presented to the images. They are begged to accept the novice into Santeria.

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"We stayed chanting for a long time. Then, the Babalawo cleaned me up a little bit. We all got in cars and they took me to the river. We got there just as the sun was setting. It was beautiful."

After making Ebo to the Orishas, the novice must be taken to a place holy to his or her patron Orisha.

"I was crying and glad that Oshun had chosen me. She is my favorite. I took the plates of food that we had all prepared for Oshun and went down into the water. I put the food in the river. Not like throwing it away, but with respect. When I had given all the food to Oshun, I ripped off my clothes and threw them in the water. That was great. I was naked in the water in front of all these people, crying and feeling really happy."

The novice is then carefully bathed in the river by the Babalawo with the help of the accompanying Santeros and Santeras. The ceremony is very much like a full immersion baptism. The novice is then dried and wrapped in a new towel.

"Then, I filled my new pot with the river water. We all got back into the cars and went back to the house. No, no. I wasn't naked any more. I had on my new clean clothes. When we got back to the house, Eduardo was wailing away at this big cow bell. It was just like church, but happier. Then, I had to take off my clothes again and get washed in the water from the pot."

That night, the Babalawo petitions (rogar) the novice's head. A person's head is inhabited by an Eleda, a guardian angel. The Eleda is not a Orisha. If the Eleda is ignored and proper attention is not given to the resident angel, it will abandon the person, who will become defenseless against evil influences. The intelligence will be lessened. Without feeding a person's Eleda, no important rite can take place. The Eleda is fed by drinking blood.

The Ebo to petition the Eleda is fairly simple. Doves are sacrificed and their blood is tasted by the congregation. Two deep dishes are filled with powdered egg shell, two coconuts, cocoa butter, cotton, cooked but unsalted corn meal, bread, guinea pepper, smoked fish, Jutia (a large Caribbean rodent about the size of a possum), and slugs. The Babalawo places a white cloth on the floor before the soup tureens containing the Otanes sacred to the Orishas and places the deep dishes on the cloth. Two candles are lit and placed to either side of the dishes.

A Moyuba (prayer of invocation in Lucumi. See Page 173) is offered to the Orishas, the spirits of the dead and the dead Babalawos, Babalochas, Santeros and Santeras.

"They lit the candles and sat me in this tiny chair right in front of the altar. First, I had to take off my shoes and roll up my pants. Then, I sat on the chair with my hands on my knees."

The Babalawo takes a gourd full of water and spills it on the floor three times. He prays to Olodumare.

"omi tuto, ana tuto, tut laroye, ile tuto olodumare ayuba bo wo ebe elese olodumare ayuba bai ye baye to nu."

The Babalawo makes Moyuba to the dead Elders and to the spirits of the dead.

"ibaye baye tonu bowo oku be lese olodumare mo yuba ibaye bafayaye kosi iku kosi aron kosi ina dosi eye kosi faya kosi ofo ariku baba wa."

He then makes Moyuba to the Orishas, beginning with Elegua.

The Babalawo picks up the two deep dishes and stands before the novice.

"emi bori (name of the novice) kosi iku kosi aro kosi ina kosi eye kosi ofo ariku baba wa."

"My knees are starting to cramp up a little bit by now, all scrunched up in that chair, but the Babalawo is still standing in front of me with the dishes. He says that they have this and they have that. I don't understand very much of it. Anyhow, he touches the dishes to my feet, and then to my knees and my hands. He comes a little closer and rubs the dishes on my shoulders and my forehead, and a little bit on my neck. I'm starting to smell a little strange, when he smears cocoa butter on my feet. But, he takes most of everything off with big wads of cotton. Then, he took white powder and made lines on my face. I tell you, I felt like an Indian."

The white powder is powdered eggshell. The Babalawo draws three small horizontal lines on the novice's cheeks, forehead, hands, knees and feet. If the novice is a woman, the lines are drawn vertically.

The Babalawo breaks a coconut and selects four pieces. He then picks out a meat fragment from each piece.

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"oni no iku, obi no aro, oni no eye.'

He touches the hand holding the coconut flesh to the novice's forehead, neck, shoulders, chest, hands and knees. With the same hand, he touches the floor and his own forehead.

"ile mo ku ko ori mo ku ko.'

The Babalawo throws the small pieces of coconut on the floor three times.

"obi aremi.'

He stands behind the novice.

"kekueku.'

"He put the pieces of coconut in his mouth, after throwing them on the floor and everything, and he chewed them up with a bite of cocoa butter. He spits it out on his hand and put it all over my head. I don't know. In my friend's asentado, the Iyawo used a blender. That seems better, you know?"

"Anyhow, then he put the white collar around my neck. So, with Obatala with me, I felt better. Stronger."

The placement of the first collar is a crucial moment. It is the time that the novice's relationship with the Orishas "catches".

"A couple of the women helped me get up, because I was all cramped up. They took me outside the room and sat me down on a white sheet they had laid out for me. They told me to shut up and stay quiet."

"I didn't see why, because everyone outside was laughing and talking. There was a lot of people there, because you need at least 16 Santeros to do an 'asiento'".

Osain, the god of herbs and healing, is the next Orisha invoked during an "asiento". To "make" Osain, herbs must be broken up and ground, crushed and mixed. This portion of the ceremony is generally entrusted to a herbalist of proven experience. The herbalist goes out into the wilderness, or to an empty lot next door, to obtain the Ewe (the herbs).

When the herbalist returns, he must announce himself and the herbs at the door.

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"ago ile egbe onareo ago ile."

"When he got back, he gave these big bundles of herbs to the Babalawo. The Iyalochas laid out clean mats on the floor and everyone helped to spread the herbs out. The Babalawo gave them water to drink and coconuts to eat. Then, he spit on them. He said it was to give them Ashe."

Seven ceramic pots, painted in the symbolic colors of the Orishas (White, red, blue, yellow, black, green, and brown) are set out among seven barefooted Iyalochas. The herbs are distributed. Each Iyalocha receives the herbs belonging to her patron Orisha. Each Iyalocha goes on to offer a Mayuba to her Orisha as she receives the herbs.

The Babalawo intones the prayers for the dead, the prayer for Olodumare and initiates the sixteen ritual chants, beginning with the one for Elegua. (See Page 173)

Each Iyalocha prepares her herbs and places them in her pot. The contents of all the pots will go to make the Omiero. The Omiero is the all purifying water. It regenerates and cures because in it are concentrated the powers of the medicinal plants and the influence of the Orishas.

The Omiero is formulated as follows:

The Otanes, the lodestones sacred to the Orishas, are washed with their corresponding herbs. The Orisha's ornaments and their cowrie shells and collars are washed as well and then dried with white linen cloths.

The washing of the lodestones begin with those belonging to Elegua . The stones are steeped in the herbs belonging to Elegua. (See the "Herb" sections in Chapters Four to Seven)

Ogun's stones are washed next. Then, follow the Otanes of Oshosi, Obatala, Chango, Agayu, Yemaya, Oshun and Oya.

The sap extracted from the pounded leaves is mixed with rain water, river water, sea water, coconut milk and holy water; honey, aguardiente, corajo butter, tiny bits of smoked fish, jutia, cocoa butter, powdered eggshell, toasted grains of corn and Guinea pepper. The mixture is poured into a tub and a small live coal wrapped in a taro (Malanga) leaf is dropped in. The Omiero will

tonify the body of the Iyawo (novice) and prepare him or her to receive the presence of the patron Orisha.

"When they finished washing the Orisha's stones, The Babalawo came and threw a white sheet over me. I couldn't see anything. I was stood up and someone walked me to a door.

'Knock,' the Babalawo told me.

So, I knocked.

'Who are you looking for', he said.

'Osain?'

I said, 'No.'

'Yemaya?'

'No.'

We went like that, back and forth until he said, 'Oshun?' and, I said, 'Yes!'"

Someone opened the door and pushed me through. Something warm and sticky went on my feet, but the Babalawo told me to keep my eyes closed."

After dripping the blood of a young chick on the novice's feet, the Babalawo leads him or her into the room by the hand. The novice is made to kneel in the tub full of Omiro and is washed once more by each of the Santeros present. If the novice is a woman, she is washed by the Iyalochas. He or she is then dried with the towel used after bathing in the river. The novice is then dressed in new white clothes.

"I felt really good and smelled really good too. I sat on a chair and an Iyalocha put a sheet around my shoulders. The Babalawo started to shave my head and the Iyalocha made sure that none of the hair fell on the floor. That would have been bad luck. When my head was shaved, the Babalawo started to paint it for the Orisha."

The novice's head must be prepared to ease the Orisha's entrance and possession of the body. First, a central circle, the color of the Orisha who will possess the novice, is painted. Circling it in a bull's eye pattern are seven

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concentric circles in white, red, blue, yellow, black, green, and brown. Below the circles, all the Babalawos, Iyalochas, Santeros and Santeras paint dabs of color, each one using the color of his or her patron Orisha.

"After everyone finished painting my head, they sat me on the 'pilon' (a large upright mortar) that was used to mach up the herbs. The Babalawo put water in Oshun's herbs and made a mud out of it. Then, he put the mud all over my head."

Each of the Santeros and Santeras participating in the ceremony daub a little bit of the herbal paste on the novice's head until it is covered in a helmet shaped plaster.

"The Babalawo started to pass the Otanés to me. It was pretty emotional. This was the first time that I'd been allowed to touch them. The last ones they let me hold belonged to Oshun herself. Between handling the Otanés and the singing for the Orishas and the drums, I started to feel very strange. Things started spinning around me like I was getting drunk. It was like a big hand was squeezing my chest so that I couldn't breathe. I started to shake really hard. I couldn't help it. The singing got louder. The Babalawo started singing right next to my ear. Then, I don't remember anything."

The patron Orisha is being enticed and cajoled to enter the novice's body. When the physical symptoms indicate that the Orisha has taken possession of the body, The Babalawo shouts:

"iya ye kuma kue yu mao!"

He tears off the head of a guinea hen and touches the bleeding neck to the novice's mouth so that the possessing Orisha can drink the blood. Immediately, tiny pieces of smoked fish, jutia, pepper, a little honey and a sip of Omiero are given. The Babalawo lightly incises a cross on the novice's tongue with a razor.

The Babalawo opens the possessed novice's eyes and gives his thanks to the Orisha.

"gbogbo koyu mo dupue."

The Orisha has manifested its presence. The "asentado" is effective. All the participants shout and sing. Everyone gets up to dance. The Babalawo and his assistants help the novice return to consciousness and wipe off all the Ashe

from his head with a white cloth, in which the sticky remains are wrapped and carefully saved.



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