

Babalu

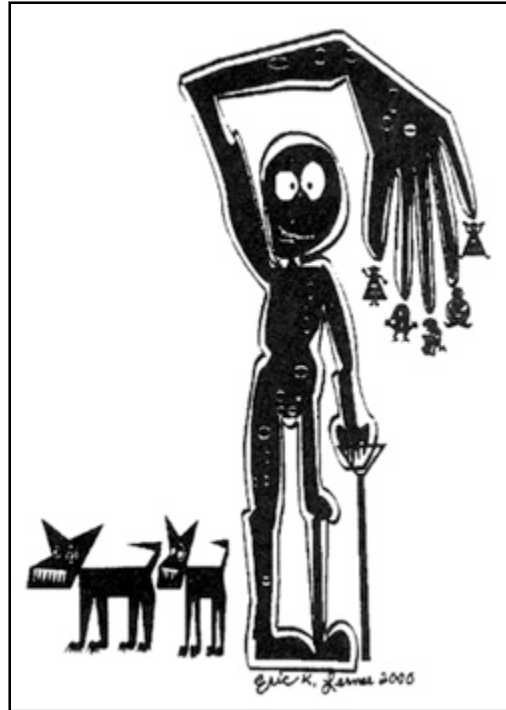
Eric K. Lerner

The young warrior reflected on his face in the still black pool. This was to be his day—when his cheeks would bare the stripes of manhood. The prospect of the pain tightened his stomach and quickened his heart. At the same time, he had a hardon his loin cloth failed to conceal. He gulped. He wanted to envision the ancestors - the distant spark of his existence communicated to him through song and prayer. He smiled wanly and startled at the touch of a leathery hand on his shoulder. This was to be his hour.

The elders were tired. This was the fourth such initiation in the past few days. They had grown weary of ritual. It had become to them like pulling tubers from earth when their stomachs were full and stash backed up to the heavens. This initiation itself might just as well be left to women. It was mundane, it had lost its grace. Power they felt in their hands no longer tingled. Knives had worn dull and become filthy with caked blood, soil and skin tatters.

His cheek failed to yield to the blunt instrument, but the elders continued in spite of his cries. To rid themselves of the act, their sacred charge, the boy’s momentary presence in their control was quickly gone. His face hideously furrowed and gushing, the young warrior curled like an aborted fetus on dead earth and punctuated silence with sobs....When he looked upon himself once more in the still black pool, the water itself seemed to whirl...so crazy, convoluted and hackneyed was his scarred face.

His scream funneled out of his lungs, sweeping droplets of his mucus, his humidity, his essence up into a vortex which shot up through the sky and fused with clouds. So immense and righteous was his anger at the elders, the clouds blackened and



rumbled. His indignation fermented in one defining moment into the birth of plague. And a scourge of pox rained down upon earth. The elders themselves felt their skins electrify as they bubbled up in web of blue-black pustules.

Long after wind whistled through the blanched bones of the corrupt elders, the warrior still walks free. Free to rain pestilence at his whim. At his side, loyal terriers—their noses sniffing out the subtleties of dirt—and his mighty hardon rubbing raw against sackcloth. All welcome his charity. That is his good will to leave them alone. So his meals are left well beyond the outskirts of villages. Nuts and grains, perhaps some hard liquor, to carry with him on his endless journey... He is never welcome, yet always to be welcomed. After all, he is Father of the Earth. The black black wind that toils and turns and walks upright as a man.

Today, I imagine Babalu still wandering, a gathering army in his wake. The lame, the sick, the queer, the addicted, those marginalized through their actions, reactions to their beings by society. I've always felt he was my friend, well before I began to fathom complexities of his character....

The first time I visited a botanica, I purchased a small statue of San Lazaro without quite examining it. Later on, I showed it to a girlfriend. At that moment, I noticed the dogs at his feet and was startled by their resemblance to my own terrier puppies. I took that to be a favorable sign.

The next sign came shortly thereafter when I was departing New York for home. I was waiting in line for the Peter Pan bus at the Port Authority. I noticed a beggar with a cane and piece of burlap wrapped about his shoulders soliciting from those on line ahead of me. At first, I averted my eyes. But then a sense of obligation grabbed me as my fellow passengers rejected the beggar. I grabbed the contents of my pocket - some change and three subway tokens. I handed my offering to him and beheld his face. His yellowy eyes burned with awesome intelligence. His was a noble bearded face - not one covered or deranged by wretched circumstance. He nodded approvingly, and I was moved by a genuine sense of well being I hadn't felt in a long time. I realized divinity in that man. Right away I looked around for him again. Maybe, I had a dollar or two in my wallet I could give him or something....But he was nowhere to be seen.

Yesterday, a Jewess told me her people believe God is speaking through signs to man all the time. It is our spiritual ignorance that prevents us from interpreting them. Likewise, the Yoruba believe in constant dynamic divinity manifest throughout all. I myself feel orisha abound, and am increasingly privileged to recognize them in elements of my world. Occasionally, they grace me with a personal aside. Maybe I find a lit cigar in a train station well past midnight amidst a blizzard and know in that instant Eleggua



walks with me. Or a huge white stork alights beside me in an urban park, and I recognize Obatala favoring me with a visit....But it is Babalu on whom I continue to reflect.

The tale I used to begin is taken from Awo Fa'lókun Fátunmbi's interpretation of Odu Ika in his book *Ìba Se Òrisà*. Pataki explaining how Babalu became the orisha of plague vary somewhat. Often the story is told that he became angry at other orishas making fun of his lameness when he tried to dance at a bembé. Babalu responded by bringing plague or smallpox into the world. Hence, he was exiled from Ilé-Ife for his cruelty, and began an arduous lonely journey accompanied by dogs. In his isolation he developed compassion for the afflicted, and that quality lead to his redemption as a king in Dahomey.

I chose to begin with the odu because of its cautionary quality and application to the current AIDS epidemic. There's a cogent analogy to be drawn between the elders' negligence with the sacred knives (and their obligations) and the role "dirty" needles play in the spread of AIDS. Furthermore, the resemblance between Babalu and one living with AIDS is clear. I quote Baba Raul Canizares: "[Babalu is] depicted as a man full of leprosy. The AIDS patient is not only a biologically stricken person, he is also sociologically stricken. This is the equivalent of what the leper used to encounter in old societies. The leper was not only medically ostracized, he was also socially ostracized."

A leper, a pariah... As a person living with AIDS, I know what being thus labeled feels like. (Even though at this point in time, my condition does not fit a medical definition of AIDS, I prefer to think of every one living with the virus as having AIDS, because society looks at us the same way however sick or well we may be. I don't foresee a dinner invitation from any of the Jesse Helms or Bob Doles of this world - remember the corrupt elders - anytime soon.)

But now I wish to reflect on some of the complexities of my relationship as a person living with AIDS to Babalu. I have read that those afflicted by infectious disease in Yorubaland say thank you to Soponna (one of the names by which Babalu is known) for striking them. At first, this seems masochistic. How can someone welcome the contempt of his peers and a death sentence? But progressing spiritually is not an easy task. And we must learn to carefully examine the works of the orishas if we hope to develop good character. Being afflicted by this modern plague illustrates our own implicit divinity.

Babalu may be feared, even despised, because of how he can strike. Yet it is partly because he has the power to do so that he is worshiped. Having AIDS gives us similar power. Unlike Babalu, we are not necessarily disfigured by our ailment. Therefore, when someone sees us, they probably don't recognize the risk they face



through intimacy or sharing a set of works with us. It is our prerogative to protect or afflict them. Thus, we are god-like in wielding power.

Our responsibility is obvious. After all, we are all children of orishas, and if we honor orishas, we don't go around haphazardly poisoning their kids. Having AIDS can and should elevate us. We are given a sacred charge through which we can protect or attack our community. This requires we develop responsibility. Having AIDS empowers us. It causes us to see in ourselves a face of God that scares away most people.

There is historical precedent for Babalu's worship to involve the control of contagion. E. Bolaji Idowu in his seminal work *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* portrayed the role priests of Soponna played. It was customary for them to take charge of the bodies of those who died from infectious disease. As payment, they would frequently demand all of the deceased's personal effects which were burned as an offering. This curbed the spread of disease. However, some priests would also retain some of the dead's belongings and even their blood and body parts to use them to afflict illness and death when necessary.

Appreciating the rationale behind this is not a simple task. But coming to terms with Babalu is not easy. On one hand, he is described as prowling about at the peak of noon under a pitiless sun. On another, he is the lord of the swamp. He embodies many contradictions. I became ill through Babalu. Yet my ability to thrive in spite of this illness also issues from him. I do not think of him as malevolent. He is a kind mentor. Baba Raul Canizares also says: "When a person comes to Babalu, Babalu gives that person the strength to face whatever there is to face....Many people are turning to Babalu because of his compassion."

At times, I perceive Babalu's kindness in the warm light of a yellow candle, in a cool morning breath after a wicked humid and congested night, in the suppleness of my once cramped knees. The realization of an orisha is not necessarily an intellectually explicable act. I sometimes think my faith begins at the point where rational explanation no longer suffices. Ours' is indeed a spiritual path in which miracles occur. But I do not ask Babalu for miracle for myself. I ask him to give the tools I need to endure.

Afterall, Babalu always limps. He does not move instantly like Shango or Ochossi. He must take his time, moving on with an arduous gait. And he continues in spite of adversity. That is such an important quality to learn from him when one is facing a great illness. You're not going to go to bed lame one night and wake up the next day able to jump fences. But you can still get out of bed, take one step at a time. And perhaps with each step, you grow in strength. Today, I am a stronger person spiritually and physically then when I was uninfected years ago.



Babalu and the other orishas have taught, nurtured and empowered me. My spiritual development and my plague have progressed together. I became injured through my blood. My recovery begins in blood. I share with you a bit of wisdom from Narayan Ramos: “The path of blood heals you. The path of blood sacrifice heals you.” Making sacrifice aligns your spirit and body to overcome the obstacles to achieve the task at hand. In the case of one such as Babalu, just the act of walking can be a sacrifice. You have no right to expect something unless you are willing to give something.

Dealing with having AIDS must begin with an acknowledgment that you put yourself in this situation. This can be painful. I, myself, did not exercise good judgment. I did not consult Elegua about the steps I should take to keep my path open. I did not keep a cool head while acting as a child of Obatala should. In short, I screwed up. And I have to accept that and learn from it in order to move on just as Babalu will forever have a lame leg and walk a certain way in order to be able to keep moving.

Therefore, I give testament to the strength and dignity of Babalu. I worship an entity scaled with sores, with cowries twisted in his matted hair. I honor the virility of one who must walk with dogs, whose penis can ejaculate death. I praise him who others will not look at, nor his name speak. I respect that he must sometimes walk ahead and pave the way for Oya-Yansan in her most fearful task. To him, I make offerings of dry white wine, grains and cigars. And I acknowledge that a terrible part of him exists in me. And I beseech his kindness to show me how to endure. And I give him praise. Babalu, Ashé!

	<p>SANTERIA CUBANA El Sendero de la Noche</p>
	<p><i>Raul Canizares</i></p>
	<p>El cubano Canizares describe los metodos y rituales de los seguidores de la santeria, que van desde la prescripcion de hierbas magicas, hasta la curacion mediante el espiritismo y el sacrificio de animales; y explica como se ha mantenido durante muchos anos disimulada bajo el catolicismo, para evitar la persecucion religiosa.</p>

