

**Readers Guide to
The Accidental Santera
By Irete Lazo**

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DISCLAIMER from Author Irete Lazo:

This guide is meant for those who have enjoyed reading *The Accidental Santera* and want to learn more about the practice of Santeria, ancestor worship and the influence the religion is having in the United States.

While there are a few suggestions for those who want to bring the energy of the orishas and the ancestors into their lives, this is not meant to imply that I am trying to convert anyone to my chosen religion.

I had the benefit of being able to turn to family members whom I could trust. Not everyone is as fortunate. I suggest that anyone interested in pursuing this religion further to do so gradually. Get to know members of the religious house you intend to join, all the while fostering relationships with your spirit guides. Use your common sense and your intuition before making any commitments.

Have faith and patience. When the orishas call, they will surely lead you to your true spiritual home. What matters most along the way is your own pure intention to honor the orishas and fulfill your God-given potential.

In the meantime, remember that Santeria is a way of life, not a quick fix. Readings are meant to give you the tools and guidance to build character and handle what comes your way in life. Likewise, as one writer put it, initiation is simply permission to study. Readings give you clues to your purpose in life, while initiation is a blessing that brings with it great responsibility.

I. Discussion Questions

1. Is Gabrielle really an *accidental* santera and would she describe herself that way by the end of the novel?
2. What do you see as Gabrielle's motivation for telling her story?
3. How does Gabrielle's longing for acceptance play out among her relatives and with her colleagues?
4. How does the science vs. religion debate play out in Gabrielle's daily life? In her ultimate decision to become a santera? In your own life? In the world today?
5. What role does Gabrielle's identity as a Latina scientist play in her relationships with her husband Benito, her best friend Patri and her extended family?
6. Give examples of how Gabrielle is guilty of making assumptions, something she points out is a no-no for scientists. Did *The Accidental Santera* challenge any of your own assumptions?
7. What do you think Gabrielle's mantra "Forget what you know" really means to her?
8. How do Gabrielle and Patri handle being Latina scientists differently?
9. Gabrielle says people sometimes have to be pushed to the edge in order to take a leap of faith. What are the things that put her on that edge, both the ones she identifies and ones which she herself may not have been aware? Do you have any experiences with taking a leap of faith? If so, did it involve that proverbial edge?
10. Gabrielle learns through her student, Lila, that other cultures practice ancestor worship. What other practices in your family or in other world religions are similar to the ones described in *The Accidental Santera*.

11. This novel is about one woman's spiritual journey, but does Gabrielle find religion or re-discover her true spiritual nature?

12. Do you think science and religion are mutually exclusive?

II. Q&A

These are questions I am frequently asked. The answers I give reflect my understanding as a fledgling santera.

Do Santeria practitioners worship many Gods?

Santeria is what academics call a monotheistic religion, meaning it includes the belief in one Supreme Being: God or Oloddumare. Many people are surprised to learn this given the popularity of the colorful orishas of the Yoruba pantheon. These orishas are viewed as earthly manifestations of God's energies that bestow their blessings and powers upon living people. Likewise, deceased ancestors are worshiped as sacred energies, collectively known as Egungun or Egun, who guide and protect loved ones.

What is the difference between Santeria, Ifá and Lucumí?

The answer to this question is likely to be different depending on whom you ask. Santeria is the religion formed by slaves in Cuba when they syncretized the Gods and Goddesses of the Yoruba pantheon with God, Jesus and the Saints of the Catholic Church. In my understanding, modern-day Ifá corresponds to the Yoruba male priesthood of the orisha Orunmila, also known as St. Francis or San Francisco to santeros. Orula, as he is also called, is the knower of all human destinies.

Babalawos are the high priest of Yoruba orisha worship and played major roles in most Santeria ceremonies. Due in part to the scarcity of babalawos in the United States in the fifties and sixties, some of the practices traditionally performed by babalawos were done by santeros instead.

With the rise of the Ifá community, especially after the 1980 Mariel Boatlift, the roles are shifting once again. For example, the tradition that came out of Cuba held that a Santeria initiate first received the sacred necklaces (*elekes* in Yoruba, called *collares* in Spanish) from a santero, then the Warriors and Orunmila at the hands of a babalawo followed lastly by the initiation into the mysteries of the person's guardian orisha by his or her godparents, or *padrinos*. Now that babalawos are more readily available, some houses of Santeria practitioners are again following this traditional ordering of sequential steps that lead to initiation.

Lucumi is the Yoruba word for friend. Historically, the Yoruba in Cuba came to be known as Lucumi. Modern santeros use the word to refer to Spanish version of the Yoruba language that evolved in Cuba. (Due to the oral nature of the traditions, many spellings of words can differ from person to person.) Some orisha worshipers, especially African Americans, now refer to themselves as Lucumi practitioners. Their practice,

which arrived on U.S. shores as Santeria, no longer includes the Catholic and Hispanic influences and interpretations of the Yoruba religion.

The Lucumi still share important similarities with Santeria, such as that of initiates receiving multiple orishas during initiation. Historically, individual orishas had separate worship communities, much like many Catholic countries claim a patron saint. In the New World, these individual communities collapsed into one in which all orishas were worshiped. Some experts cite the first evidence of the practice of receiving multiple orishas occurring in Cuba in 1923 and the first initiation on U.S. shores occurring in 1961 in New York.

How does ancestor worship fit into Santeria?

In Yoruba culture, deceased ancestors are worshiped as sacred entities, collectively known as egungun or egun, that guide and protect the loved ones still living. The practices associated with worship of egungun were among those lost in the Slave Trade. Without the knowledge of the specific practices, santeros turned instead to the practice known as spiritism, or *espiritismo* in Spanish, developed by a French scientist who wrote under the pseudonym of Allan Kardec. His *Guide to Mediums* and *Collection of Prayers* are basic texts used by santeros to develop their mediumistic talents and call to the egun during misas, or séances, respectively. It's important to note that many people who do not practice *Santeria* practice spiritism. It is estimated that 90 percent of Latin Americans believe in *espiritismo*.

Why do santeros sacrifice animals and is the practice legal?

The sacrificing of animals is the most sensationalized aspect of Santeria practice. It has been misrepresented as cruel, illegal and thoughtless process. Nothing could be further from the truth. At the center of the practice is the Yoruba concept of ashé, or life energy. All of God's creations possess this energy to varying degrees. Living things require the ashé of other living things in order to flourish. Whether from plants or animals, the human body requires energy to physically survive. For the Yoruba, the ashé of both plants and animals are also used for spiritual healing and wellbeing. The actual practice of the sacrifice is done with the utmost respect for the animal giving its life and only with permission of the orishas. Sacrifices are usually performed under serious circumstances or during a few specific rituals. In my view, the use of livestock is minimal compared to what is consumed for food and the taking of those lives is done in a far more humane and thoughtful way than what ends up on the dinner plates of average Americans. Lastly, the practice was deemed to be legal by the United States Supreme Court in 1993 (see [Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah, 508 U.S. 520 \[1993\]](#)).

If Santeria is so powerful, why are many santeros poor?

The assumption at the heart of this question is that santeros believe themselves to be all knowing. Again, nothing could be farther from the truth, at least among those who would never be mistaken for a charlatan. An author writing about Ifá put this into prospective: initiation is simply permission to study. I take it one step further and say that initiation into Santeria is also a call to serve. That service includes honoring the orishas, bringing forth the guidance offered to family members by departed ancestors, and offering

spiritual guidance to those who seek it. My godmother died in what some would call abject poverty. Those of us who knew her, however, know that was because her full-time job was seeing to the wellbeing of her religious and blood-related families. This job paid little in the way of money, but we were her calling and she was unselfish with her time and support. Anyone who attended her funeral saw and felt that she was rich in love, respect and many of the non-material blessings the orishas have to offer.

III. Recommendations for Further Reading on Santeria

While *The Accidental Santera* is the first novel about the making of an American-born santera, many authors have included elements of Santeria practice in their works of fiction. A few are listed below.

Fiction:

***Dreaming in Cuban, The Agüero Sisters, and Monkey Hunting* by Cristina Garcia.** Author Cristina Garcia devoted her first three novels to telling the Cuban story and, as she said once in an interview, Santeria is a cornerstone of Cuban culture and an acceptance of the mystical that doesn't exist in American culture. The lives of her main characters are often touched in ways large and small by the religion and the ghosts of their ancestors.

***The House on the Lagoon*, by Rosario Ferre.** The life of a family living in 20th-century Puerto Rico is explored, including orisha worship by the family's African-born servants who ultimately steer the family's destiny.

***Voodoo Dreams and Voodoo Season* by Jewell Parker Rhodes.** These works deal with the African religion called Vodun, also derived from the Yoruba of West Africa. It shares many similarities with other forms of orisha worship, including Santeria and Lucumí. *Voodoo Dreams* is the story of Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau, while *Voodoo Season* is the story of one of her descendants, an ER physician who discovers her ancestry and begins to tap into her own spiritual powers.

***Chango's Fire* by Ernesto Quiñonez.** This novel about an arsonist aiding the forced gentrification of New York's Spanish Harlem includes a santero who attempts to guide the novel's wayward protagonist.

Non-Fiction:

Many non-fiction works about Santeria exist, including ones that delve into specifics of rituals, divination systems and other practices. The works listed are intended for non-initiates and those interested overviews of orisha worship and its philosophies.

***Finding Soul on the Path of Orisa, A West African Spiritual Tradition* by Tobe Melora Correal, The Crossing Press, 2003.**

Though this volume is written for practitioners, it is an excellent, easy-to-read overview of the philosophies and beliefs at the heart of orisha worship.

***The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts* by Baba Ifa Karade**, Weiser Books, 1994.

Without being too technical, this book works to put today's practices in to context by exploring the Yoruba roots from which they were born.

***Inner Peace: The Ifa Concept of Ori* by Awo Falokun Fatunmbi**, Athelia Henrietta Press 2005.

This fascinating work is by a white American who lived and worshiped in a community living in the Nigerian rainforest. Despite the title, it actually delves into many of the concepts at the heart of orisha worship. It covers everything from human consciousness to the evolution of the earth.

***Santeria: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion* by Mary Ann Clark**, Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 2007.

IV. Santeria in American Pop Culture

From *Newsweek* to TV's *Ugly Betty*, the secretive religion known as Santeria is increasingly making its presence known in American popular culture. Some of the references are ones most people would miss if they were not already familiar with the Gods and Goddesses of the Yoruba Pantheon worshiped by 5 million Latinos living in the U.S. and a growing number of African Americans, many of whom practice a version of Santeria that does not include associations with the Catholic saints.

Here's a sampling of recent Santeria sightings.

- Until early 2008, the horoscopes in *Latina Magazine* were for a time based on readings done by a santero instead of on astrology.
- In the Feb. 5, 2007 issue of *Newsweek*, Lisa Miller reports in the magazine's "BeliefWatch" section on the case of a santero suing the city of Euless, Texas for denying him a permit to sacrifice animals as part of his religious practice.

"The ancient Jews did it. So did the Romans and the Aztecs. Sacrificing an animal to please or placate God or the gods has been commonplace for many thousands of years. Still, it's a little bit shocking when we see the practice in our own backyards."

—From BeliefWatch: Animal Slaughter by *Newsweek's* Lisa Miller, Feb. 5, 2007.

- In the Feb. 1, 2007 episode of ABC's *Ugly Betty*, Daniel Meade is given an African idol by a globe-trotting playboy photographer. "What is it," Meade asks. "It's an *oshé Changó*," his friend answers, referring to the double-headed axe that is the symbol of the orisha warrior god, Changó.

- **Jennifer Lopez**'s ex-husband, Ojani Noa, is quoted in June 2006 as saying that J.Lo practiced what he called voodoo. In a story about Noa's claims, the New York Daily News says it wasn't the first mention of Lopez's practice of Santeria. "In 2003, it was reported that Lopez called off her wedding to Ben Affleck after her spiritual adviser, Merle Gonzalez, warned against it."
- Joe Quesada is the editor-in-chief of **Marvel Comics**. In 2006, he completed *Daredevil: Father*, a story lovingly dedicated to his own father and featuring the [Santerians](#), the first Hispanic superheroes based on some of the major orishas of Santeria.
- It was only a matter of time before Santeria wound up being misunderstood and to blame for an unsolved murder on *CSI: Miami*. It happened during an October 2006 episode called "Curse of the Coffin." Here's a description of the show that mistakenly equates Santeria with voodoo.

When strange accidents occur in the lab, the CSI team is spooked during a death investigation involving voodoo. As Halloween is near everyone starts to think that the lab is cursed.

For the record, santeros do not put curses on people or labs, for that matter.

- The word Santeria became a household word (at least for some young people) when, in 1996, the alternative rock group **Sublime** came out with a song entitled Santeria that opens with these lyrics:

I don't practice Santeria
I ain't got no crystal ball

The song actually has nothing to do with Santeria, the religion, and is actually refers to violence. *Sigh*.

Nothing New. It turns out the orishas have been making appearances on American television and in American music since the 1950s. Anyone who has mimicked Desi Arnaz's character Ricky Ricardo belting out "Babalú-Ayé" on *I Love Lucy* has already unknowingly invoked the spirit of an orisha. Who knew? Check out [Ricky and Little Ricky singing Babalú-Ayé](#) on one of the show's episodes.

The examples of the influence of Afro-Cuban rhythms on popular music are too numerous to name. For a list of songs from different genres, see *Celebrating the Orishas*.

More to Come. For a flavor of what's to come, check out this [cartoon pilot](#), *The Story of Oshun and Ogun* on MySpaceTV.com.

V. Orisha Worship in the New World: Maps & Timeline

Orisha worship arrived on the shores of Caribbean islands and the East coasts of the Americas with slaves brought from West Africa. (*Note: For a link to a map of the slave trade, please visit the Readers Guide section of www.accidentalsanteria.com.*)

Here are a few key dates in the evolution of Cuban Santeria:

- 1492—Christopher Columbus claims the island of Cuba for the Spanish crown.
- 1513—The first evidence of African slaves brought to the island.
- 1568—The first cabildo, Cabildo Shango, is formed in Havana. Cabildos were mutual-aid organizations formed by slaves belonging to the same ethnic group.
- 1763—Widespread raiding of Yoruba territories began in this year.
- 1806—A cabildo is founded in Matanzas, Cuba, the birthplace of Santeria.
- 1828—Cabildo Lucumí Santa Barbara is established in Matanzas.
- 1866—Cabildo Yemayá is established in the city of Regla.
- 1923—The first historical evidence of rituals as they are performed today during Santeria and Lukumí initiations, including the receipt of multiple orishas.
- 1946—The first Cuban-born babalawo settles in New York.
- 1959—The first Puerto Rican and first two African-Americans from New York are initiated in Cuba.
- 1961—The first initiation is performed in New York.
- 1980—Many practitioners of Ifá, Santeria and Lukumí arrive in the United States as part of the Mariel Boatlift.
- 1993—The Supreme Court rules in favor of the Church of the Lukumí of Babalu Aye, protecting the right to perform animal sacrifices for religious purposes.

[Sources: “[A Timeline of Lukumí History](#),” by Stuart Myers (Ócha’ni Lele). See also AfroCubaWeb.com]

Today, there are orisha practitioners all over the world. The following are a list of major centers of worship from which the practices are spreading:

Santeria & Lukumí	Cuba & United States, especially urban centers in New York, Florida, Texas, California and Illinois
Voudun	Southeastern United States & Haiti
Candomble, Umbanda & Quimbanda/Macumba	Brazil, Uruguay & Argentina

VI. Celebrating Orishas

Community Ceremonies

Tambores. These are the party-like celebrations that include ritual drumming and dancing. They are usually held to honor a particular orisha. Songs are played for

each orisha, however, and any of them may choose to show up by possessing anyone who is present, though the initiated are the most likely to be mounted.

Initiations. Initiations into Ifá and Santería are largely open to initiates only. Parts of these celebrations are open to non-initiate family members. The exceptions are *tambores* that are held during the week-long initiation into Santería which are open to the community at large.

Feast Days. Some communities hold large celebrations honoring particular orishas on the assigned feast day of the corresponding Catholic Saint. For example, the New York community holds a celebration at the beach in Long Island on September 7 from Yemayá. These feast days are also celebrated with offerings of candles and fruits in the homes of the santeros initiated into an orisha's mysteries.

Daily Life Celebrating the Orishas is not something only done during ceremonies. Here are some ways to bring the spirit and energy of the orishas, the energetic manifestations of God, into your daily life.

Prayer. Of course, an obvious way to bring the orishas into your daily life is to pray. It could mean learning the Yoruba prayers for each orisha or reciting the ones you find on the backs of prayer cards for the Catholic saints. Or, it could simply be a matter of talking to orishas as people, out loud or during silent meditation. My godmother always told me that she prayed to her guardian angel, Yemayá, just as she spoke to God. She never learned the formal Yoruba prayers by heart, believing that prayer only need be heartfelt to be understood and received.

Colors. Each orisha is associated with different colors, but one way to bring the energy of the orisha closer is to wear white clothing. If this is hard to do during the day, try sleeping in white pajamas and on white sheets. White is the color of Obatalá, the owner of all uninitiated heads. White is also a reflective color. I believe it reflects negativity and brings clarity.

Before being initiated and being told that, for me, white clothes were a must, I loved dressing in the colors of the orisha associated with the occasion for which I was dressing. Here's a few fun tips.

Romantic Dinner. Forget the Little Black Dress. The Goddess Oshún rules love and romance. Go for metallic gold, yellow or orange. Think of the colors of honey and white wine as you shop for that special dress.

Job Interview. Here you can keep the black, but add some red. Then you'll be inviting Elegguá, God of the Crossroads. He not only opens doors to opportunity, but as the messenger god he also rules communication.

Family Function. Having trouble with family members? Try putting on your maternal hat, as it were. Wear shades of blue to help bring the maternal gifts of Yemayá closer to you. This might also help at times when you need both strength and grace, the qualities embodied by the ocean.

Business Presentation. Need to fight for your ideas, persuade someone to take your point of view? Go for clothes in red and white, the colors of Changó the warrior God. Confidence is a red power suit, layered with a crisp white shirt.

Music. Put the word “Latin” in front of nearly any genre of music, and you’ll find the influence of Afro-Cuban rhythms. Below, I list one artist and one song per category that actually specifically mentions God, orishas or offerings.

Afro-Cuban. Ave Maria by Los Muñequitos de Matanzas (*Rumba de Corazon*, 2002)

Jazz. Agua Larga Pa’ Yemayá by Omar Sosa (*Spirit of the Roots*, 2004)

Hip-Hop. Donde Se Fueron? by Ozomatli (*Ozomatli*, 1998)

Pop. A Dios le Pido by Juanes (*Un Dia Normal*, 2002)

Rap. Represent by Orishas (*A lo Cubano*, 2000)

Rock. My Way by Los Lonely Boys (*Sacred*, 2006)

Tropical. Elegua Quiere Tambo by Celia Cruz (*100% Azucar!: The Best of Celia Cruz con la Sonora Matancera*, 1997)

Visit the Web sites of botanicas and online bookstores, and you’ll find CDs of the ritual drumming played at *tambores* in honor of the orishas. Each orisha has his or her own song and dance that is played on sacred drums.

There’s nothing like cleaning the house, dancing with the orishas as you go.

Nature & Daily Surroundings. The orishas are manifestations of God’s energy on earth. As such, they inhabit earthly realms. If you need a little infusion of orisha energy, take a trip to the source of their power on earth.

- Have a health challenge or need new opportunities in your life? Whisper a prayer to Elegguá as you pass through a doorway or cross at a four-cornered intersection.
- Need peace and clarity to come up with solutions to life’s problems? Surround yourself with white (candles, flowers, clothes, sheets), inviting Obatalá’s calm.
- For strength and motherly comfort, go to the beach to visit Yemayá.
- Need help in matters of love or wealth? Ask for Oshún’s blessings next to a stream or river.
- Need to gear up for a fight? Sit in front of a fire on a cold night or light a red candle for Changó on a warm one.

- Hike through the woods looking for signs of animal life, thinking of Orúnmila, Saint Francis of Asisi, the patron saint of animals.

Whatever you do, keep in mind the blessing that you seek and the orisha from whom you are asking for guidance and favor.

VII. Praying in Yoruba

“How do you spell that?” It seems like an innocent question. Practicing Satneria in the United States, however, can be a complicated affair when it comes to language. How you spell a word that comes up in a reading depends largely on whom you ask. Even “orisha” is sometimes spelled “orisa,” or “Yemayá” is sometimes spelled “Yemoja.”

The Yoruba that evolved in Cuba is thought by some to be a different language, called Lukumí, in which the Yoruba alphabet is been replaced by the Spanish one.

Praying in Yoruba is also another matter. African-Americans and Latinos are often initiated by Spanish-speaking immigrants and elders. These teachers often mix Spanish and Yoruba during ceremonies, making it difficult for newcomers to follow what is going on.

So, aside from an English-speaker taking courses in Spanish to help with communication with godparents, what’s an American-born practitioner to do?

The truth is that there are no easy answers, but here are a few tips.

1. **Spelling Lesson.** Give up on trying to get the exact spellings of words. Ask your godparents how they spell the word or name of interest and go with that. The prayers are meant to be said aloud, so just try to the pronunciation down from your godparents and don’t worry too much about spelling.
2. **Translation.** You can find Yoruba/English dictionaries. I recommend “Beginner’s Yoruba,” by Kayode J. Fakinlede because it comes with two CDs. If you speak Spanish, you may want to get a copy of Lydia Cabrera’s *Anagó: Vocabulario Lucumí*, a Lucumi/Spanish dictionary. If you do not, you could still get this and also get an English/Spanish dictionary.
3. **Bilingual Books.** “The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts,” by Baba Ifa Karade, is one of the few that offers translations for Yoruba proverbs, religious songs and prayers.
4. **Recite & Repeat.** It’s like high school English class when you had to memorize Hamlet’s soliloquy by William Shakespeare. It’s also the way you know every word to that annoying summer hit that radio stations play over and over, again. The key is repetition. Write down your prayer on an index card. Translate it if that helps you with the memorization. Then say it every day, several times a day and repeating it more than once each time. It’s the only way.

VIII. Orishas on the Internet

Orisha worship is thriving on the Web, from music to chat forums to guides to ritual and prayer. Below are a few sites (in alphabetical order) that educate initiates and non-initiates alike and a few that sell cool orisha stuff. You can find exact URL's for these sites by using any web browser.

- [Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye](#) This is the organization that was involved in the [Supreme Court case](#) that upheld practitioner's rights to perform animal sacrifices.
- [Eleda.org](#) This site has everything from books and music to scholarly articles to guides to rituals and prayers.
- [FolkCuba.com](#) This full service botanica offers books, clothing and even ceremonial plants via two-day shipping.
- [IfaCollege.com](#) This site is intended for the education of initiates, pointing out that traditional apprenticeship in the modern world is nearly impossible. I love the IfaScope, an orisha version a weekly horoscope.
- [Manigua.org](#) This Chicago-based non-profit offers everything from substance abuse programs to drumming instruction. It also offers a [section](#) the herbs associated with Elegua, and a cleansing for the home.
- [MySanteria.com](#) A social networking site that requires registration to post and view some areas of the site. Select postings can be viewed on the [Forums](#) page can be viewed without registering.
- [Santeria 101](#) An informative blog.
- [Orisha.Tribe.net](#) Another social networking site. This one has links to a Santeria tribe, as well as ones for practitioners of Brazilian Candomble and Vodou. Check out this photo of this [orisha devotee](#) during a ceremony on a beach.
- [OrishaWorld.com](#) This site has a link to a great Amazon.com powered store that offers a great list Santeria and orisha books, music and DVDs. It also has a link to OrishaRadio, a subscription service that plays orisha music 24-7, and a chat forum for mediums.

What not to do online. I would not recommend buying anything more than basic supplies online and caution against doing business with anyone willing to sell you a reading or perform a long-distance ceremony. These ceremonies are performed in person and rely on the client's energy for accuracy and effectiveness. That being said,

once someone is initiated, their godparents can do simple readings for them remotely. In my opinion, no respectable practitioner would perform a long-distance initiation.

IX. Feeding the Orishas

This is a beginners' guide to the favorite foods of the orisha. It is not meant for initiates, who should follow the tradition of their religious houses.

What to offer, when & why:

A list of the major orishas and, in parentheses, the name of the Catholic Saint with whom they are associated and the Feast Day for that saint. Offerings can be made whenever the need arises (like a job interview, a challenging illness or other difficult time) or on the Saint's Feast Day as general sign of reverence. One should avoid eating the food during the days the food sits as an offering. When taking offerings to natural habitats, place the items in biodegradable bags. No plastic for Mother Earth, please.

- **Eleggúá** (St. Anthony, June 13): The God of the Crossroads rules communication and health. He embodies the spirit of both a child and an old man. He is found of rum, cigars, espresso-style coffee and candy. After three days, these offerings can be poured down the drain or thrown in the trash.
- **Obatalá** (Our Lady of Mercy, September 24): The God of Purity rules clarity and mental health. He is also the 'owner' of all heads, meaning he is the patron saint of all those who have not been initiated. He is found of cotton and coconuts. After eight days, these items can be thrown in the trash.
- **Yemayá** (Our Lady of Regla, September 7): She is fond of watermelon, fried pork rinds and molasses. After seven days, throw in the trash, pour down the drain or take to the ocean. Coins that add up to multiples of seven (one nickel and two pennies, seven pennies, or two dimes and a penny) can also be tossed in the sea good luck.
- **Orúnmila** (St. Francis of Assisi, October 4): The God of Divination is privy to the destiny of every human being. His guidance is invaluable to those making life-changing decisions. He is fond of yams and fruit of any kind. On the seventh day (not 16 as in the chart), the offering can be thrown in a body of fresh water (river, creek) or in the trash.
- **Changó** (St. Barbara, December 4): The God of War rules power and control of enemies. Those who need strength to fight life's daily battles, or overcome a challenging situation at work, for example, might do well to make him an offering, asking for strength. He is fond of apples and bananas. After four or six days, the offering can be thrown in the trash.
- **Oshún** (Our Lady of Charity, September 8): The Goddess of Freshwaters rules fertility, love and wealth. She also rules illnesses of the abdominal area. She loves honey, white wine, eggs, oranges and rum cakes. On the fifth day, her offerings can be thrown in the trash or down the drain. Coins that add up to multiples of five (one nickel, five pennies or a quarter) can also be tossed in a river or stream for good luck.

How to offer:

1. Buy a candle that corresponds to that color(s) of the given orisha.
2. Place your offering in a neutral place in your home on a white plate. You can leave the fruit whole and pour just a small serving of any liquid. Avoid making offerings in your bedroom or bathroom. If asking for physical healing, you may pass the whole fruit over your body or the site of the illness before putting it on the plate.
3. Put the candle on another white plate, or two plates, one on each side of the offering, if you've bought candles of two colors. If you can't find colored candles, white candles will do for all orisha.
4. Light the candle and ask the orisha/saint for the help or guidance that you need. These requests should always be about supporting your well-being and growth or that of loved ones. Never wish harm on anyone or you may find it coming back to you.
5. You may want to buy a prayer card and recite the prayer daily in front of your offering and lit candle.
6. Leave the offering in its place for the number of days that corresponds to that orishas number. (See chart in *The Accidental Santera*.)
7. Keep it lit only when you are at home and be sure it is set on a non-flammable surface away from curtains or anything else that might catch fire. On the floor on a plate away from foot traffic is best.
8. At the end of the offering period, dispose of the offering in the appropriate location (see above).

X. Santeria in the News

As American santeros come out of the shadows, their practice makes news across the country. Unfortunately, most of the news is about the difficulty of practicing a misunderstood religion in the United States. See [In the News](#) section of MySanteria.com for recent postings. A recent selection:

[Santeria priest suing city of Euless](#), WFAA-TV—Dallas, TX
April 12, 2008

[Obituary: Carlos 'Patato' Valdés](#), The Guardian—United Kingdom
December 10 2007

[Santeria leader teaching class on African religion at FIU](#), South Florida Sun-Sentinel
September 14, 2007

[For santeros, religious freedom is anything but](#), Miami Herald
August 15, 2007

[Beliefwatch: Slaughter](#)—Newsweek
January, 2007

XI. Talking to the Gods & Ancestors

Various systems and methods are used by santeros, babalawos and spiritists to communicate with orishas and ancestors. Below are brief descriptions of the most popular methods.

Obí. Through a ritualized divination technique, practitioners gain access to the oracle of the coconut, Obí. The asking begins with a set of prayers and the asking of permission to seek council. The questions posed must be in a “yes” or “no” format. The answer to the question depends on the patterns made by four pieces of coconut shell cast as the divination tool. Interpretations are made based on the number of white sides versus shell sides showing. Five possible patterns are possible. More advanced readings take into account the pattern made by the coconut shells and/or employ two castings, giving ten patterns.

For example, four white rinds showing is called *alafia*, which means blessings. If cast again and two white rinds are showing, that is called *alafia-ejife*. *Ejife* translates to balance. In his book “Obí: The oracle of Cuban Santeria,” author Ocha’ni Lele states that this reading would be interpreted as a definite yes that is conditional upon the client’s actions to bring his or her world into balance. The goal will be achieved or the desire attained, though the work may be long and hard.

Diloggún. The Diloggún is the cowrie-shell oracle. The diloggún system, which evolved from that used by babalawos, involves the casting of 16 cowrie shells. The patterns are read based on the number of open-side up versus those that land with the open side down. The shells are cast twice, giving 256 possible combinations. Each resulting pattern is associated with an oddu—one of a possible 256 oddus, or signs, that are associated with the sacred stories called *patakís*. Once the oddu has been identified, the *italero* (an expert in the reading of the oracle) determines if the client’s reading lies in the blessings or negative predictions described in the oddu.

Ifa. Babalawos, the priests of Ifá, use two divination systems to communicate with Orúnmila, the orisha of divination.

- *Opelé.* Pronounced “okuele,” this divination chain has two sets of four oval pieces of coconut rind, seed rind or metal at each end. Each piece has its face-up and face-down side. Holding the chain in the middle, the babalawo tosses it, letting it come to rest on a straw mat so that two parallel lines result. The pattern formed by the two lines, read from top to bottom, correspond to one of 256 oddus, or signs, that are associated with the sacred stories called *patakís*.
- *Opón Ifá & Ikin.* This system involves the use of the *Opón Ifá*, or Table of Ifá, which is covered with sacred powder. The babalawo shakes the ikin in both hands. He then picks up as many of the nuts as he can with his right hand. If he picks them all up, the reading does not count. He tries again until only one or two

nuts are in his left hand (the hand of life). If one nut remains, he marks two lines on the tray with his second and third finger. If two remain he marks one line with his middle finger. These steps are repeated eight times until the correct oddu is revealed.

Which ever tool the babalawo uses, the results are two parallel lines of binary code. For example, this pattern is called Irete Meji. “By riverbank, endurance is rooted.”

0	0
0	0
1	1
0	0

Among other things, Irete Meji is a story that marks the time in human evolution when symbolic behavior, such as speech, has become possible.

Tarot. Several types of tarot decks are used by santeros, though the practice is relatively rare. Tarot of the Orisha by Zolrak includes cards depicting the major orisha, as well as element cards and ones that incorporate mystical beings, like fairies and gnomes.

Misas. Misas are akin to séances and are held by spiritists and santeros alike. The santeros will either sit around a table or in front of one that is set up as an altar. Prayers are recited amidst flowers while incense and candles burn. The mediums of the group can give messages from loved ones of those in the room, describe spiritual entities that accompany a given participant or channel their own spirit guides who then offer messages to those in attendance.

The wisdom of this ancient African tradition teaches us that there are other planes of existence and that the orishas and our ancestors wish to communicate with us so as to help us achieve our full potential on this earthly plane. It is truly a mystical and humbling experience to watch babalawos and santeros use these tools on your behalf.

XII. How to Build an Ancestor Altar

Ancestor worship, or veneration, is practiced by a variety of cultures all over the world. There are many ways of honoring departed loved ones and welcoming their support and guidance in everyday life. Having an ancestor altar, or *boveda* in Spanish, is one way.

One of my favorite books, *Finding Soul on the Path to Orisa: A West African Spiritual Tradition* by Tobe Melora Correal, gives a great description of building an altar dedicated to the ancestors, or *egun* in Yoruba.

Here's my version based on what I was taught by my godmother.

1. **Table.** Dedicate a small table or top of a bookshelf to your altar. It should be out of the way where no one will touch the items on it. My godmother even suggested the top of the refrigerator!
2. **White Cloth.** Cover the surface with a white cloth.
3. **Photos & Mementos.** On the cloth, place photos of deceased loved ones (only) and mementos that belonged to them. You can also include a list of the names of loved ones and their dates of birth. Follow your instincts about other items to include. If a small doll or knick-knack calls to you, maybe it belongs on the altar.
4. **Water.** In the center of the altar, place a glass of water. The smaller and more simple the glass the better, but some people use large brandy glasses.
5. **Candle.** I like using tea candles or other short-lived sizes.
6. **Food & Drink.** Offer favorite food or drink to your ancestors. Rum and espresso are safe bets if you are not sure what else to offer. My maternal grandfather asked for Sanka in my sister's dream, so that's what he gets. My paternal grandmother loved *cafecito*, caramels and gladiolas. I try to offer these things weekly.
7. **Weekly tending.** Replace the water, food and flowers weekly, but remove flowers before they die or wilt and food before it goes moldy. Whatever you decide to offer, you should either make the offerings weekly or save the offerings for special occasions, like birthdays. For example, I make my grandfather his favorite pie on his birthday.
8. **Communicate.** Talk to your ancestors. Ask for their help. Pray to them. Ask them to offer you guidance in a form you can understand. Then, look for the omens, signs and dreams that will let you know that they hear you and are with you.