

ISLAS' intention with this section, "Profiles," is to introduce our readers to the life, work, ideas and perspectives regarding Cuba today, and to the future of outstanding African descendents on the island. These black men and women are involved in politics, culture, civic activism, and religion.

VÍCTOR MANUEL BETANCOURT ESTRADA

Awo Òrúnmìlà Omolófaorò

Rogelio Montesinos
Historian and political scientist
Havana, Cuba

Every since he was a young man, Víctor M. Betancourt was known for his ability to be a leader in the area of Afro-Cuban religions, a mission to which he consecrated his life and made important contributions regarding the vigor and prestige of these traditions. They are firmly and profoundly rooted in Cuban history and culture.

He was born in Havana, on December 23rd, 1953, into a family firmly ensconced in their ancestors' African cultural traditions. His grandfather, Domingo Miranda Socarrás, greatly influenced Víctor's education and upbringing. It was he who inspired a deep religious feeling in him. When he died, at 98 years of age, this grandfather left his family and close friends the gift of many valuable anecdotes and stories about slavery and African traditions.

In a very special way, Víctor also recalls his great-grandmother, Sotera Sarracent, who was lovingly called Mamá. She was the child of Africans, but born and raised in the *batey* neighborhood of the Alacranes sugar



Victor M. Betancourt

mill (in Unión de Reyes, Matanzas). Mamá Sotero died at the age of 103, and also left myriad remembrances and stories about the colonial past.

When Víctor was ten, he began his path towards becoming consecrated in African religions. His progress in both the Bantú and Yoruba traditions took place while in the hands of important cultivators and patriarchs, till he was initiated as an Ifá priest, at 32 years of age.

Víctor is a graphic designer who specializes in offset printing. He has a solid education, much of it self-taught, which together with his religious mission, drives his ability to intellectually and theoretically communicate thoughts about Afro-Cuban religions that are usually communicated orally. He is the founder and leader of the Casa Templo Ifá Ìranlówó. Víctor is also one of the leaders of the Organizing Commission of the Letter of the Year, an independent religious entity that reveals Ifá predictions for Cuba and the world.

He is a passionate defender of the purity of the faith and practice of Yoruba religion, having become the principal promoter of the consecration of women as Ifá priestesses (*Iyaonifá*), which generated a serious debate in the religious arena. Víctor was able to deal competently with this, with an unquestionable and solid intellectual argument. Today, the consecration of *Iyaonifá* is a significant process that transcends our borders.

His priestly work is broad and solid. In 1992, he founded the first Methods School for Ifá, in which hundreds of religious people have been trained. Víctor is also the author of various books on the Yoruba religion, among them *Ifaismo y ciencia* (2007), published in Cuba, and *Bàbálawo médico tradicional* (1995), in México. In Venezuela, Ediciones Òrúnmilà has published three of Víctor's books, *Lengua ritual lukúmi*, *La Santería una tradición en decadencia*, and *Ìyaonifá: mito y realidad*.

For more than twenty years, this indefatigable religious leader has given myriad conference talks and presented papers in the most diverse academic and cultural spaces in Cuba, Argentina, and the United States. He now shares his life, ideas, and thoughts with readers of the journal *ISLAS*.

Rogelio Montesinos: To what degree did your family or social environment influence or determine your religious formation or commitment?

Víctor Betancourt: My entire religious formation was influenced by my family environment—in every sense and way. I was never apart from my family or influenced by other religious houses, or tendencies different from my family's traditions. I inherited my godparents from my parents and grandparents; my philosophy is my family's philosophy; my education is my family's education.

RM: What is most important and valuable for the intellectual formation and preparation of someone who wants to do the best job possible in fulfilling his or her religious mission with a sense of purpose in life?

VB: To be a priest, one must be religiously well prepared, because this contributes to the understanding of rituals that have deteriorated over time, due to negligence. The philosophical secret and grounding of our preaching is in the 'why' we do what we do, and not in knowing what to do. One can achieve this level of understanding and comprehension only by studying the language and deciphering the ancient texts that are available to us. We must deepen our religious concepts, because they are definitely the foundation of all solutions, and the clear window out onto all our existential problems.

RM: The day I met you, you gave a presentation in which you affirmed many things, but particularly that there was no syncretism,

despite the fact most people think the opposite. Because this is such a polemical and pervasive topic, I would like you to explain your comment without revealing the possible content of any future articles for *ISLAS*.

VB: Our grandparents found themselves forced to hide their original practices. They passively became familiar with the Catholic precepts of the colonizers, whose intention it was to instruct and subject them. Yet, our grandparents tried to preserve their religions' most original rituals and traditions. Today, despite the fact that many practitioners have a multi-originated tradition, our religions' liturgical patterns are quite well defined. They are quite present both objectively and in essence. For example, no Catholic images or oratory form part of a *Regla de Òṣà-Ifá* initiation. Traditional Yoruba ethics, rituals, sacrifices, chants, and images are intact—although somewhat deteriorated—and are present in our sacred room. We have kept a barrier up against all foreign forms of worship in our *Regla Òṣà-Ifá* sacred rooms.

RM: You led an intense battle for the ordainment of women priests (*Ìyáonifá*). What was your historical-theological reasoning behind this?

VB: The initiation of women into the *Ifá* cult is nothing new for Yorubas or scholars of African religious traditions. Notwithstanding, I can assure that it is new to African descendants in the Americas—and not only *Ìyáonifá*, but also other types of initiations. Because our exodus from Yoruba lands was forced, many of our ritual practices stayed behind, in the motherland of our ancestors. The Yoruba pantheon contains 200 divinities, each with its own corresponding initiation, but only 25 came to Cuba, and initiation practices are known for only 11 of them. In Yoruba lands, there were initiations for all of

the 200 divinities in the pantheon. History tells us that other forms of adoration came to Cuba after the Yoruba exodus, and that they blended together, little by little. These include *Òrò*, *Ebíta*, *Ìyámi Òṣòróngá*, *male Ògbóní*, *female Gèlèdè*, *Igba Odù* and *female Ìyáonifá*. It is shocking and surprising that the only religions practice that captured the attention of the public was that of the *Ìyáonifá*. Despite its recent nature, I think that what is behind all this are the anti-female prejudices and machismo that permeate our society. These tendencies are inescapable for African descendants and practitioners of our religion. The fact that we decided to incorporate a woman in our priesthood was really impactful, particularly because we did it at a time of great uncertainty and religious manipulation, when interests predominate over feelings or knowledge.

RM: What is your opinion of the commercialization of religious symbols and practices? How can the faith combat this?

VB: My book *La Santería: una tradición de decadencia* was recently published. It tries to call attention to the need to rectify and restore the African practices grouped under *Santería*. We run the risk of losing our authentic values and the essence of their humanitarian objectives. Contemporary *Santería* plays with the feelings of its devotees, those who are ignorant, and the desperate. It is used to coerce and not save them; this is its principal objective. Many initiates solve their economic problems by using other people's economic problems. Fraud is on the rise; the defrauded somehow become fraudsters, and that creates a vicious circle among old and new initiates. I believe this is a grave problem that contributes to the disappearance of authentic religious practices. So, we must find a denomination totally distinct from *Santería*. That is *Regla de Òṣà-Ifá*.

RM: Many cultural and media spaces contain scenes of disrespectful characterizations of religious symbols and practices. I consider these to be manifestations of corporate racism.

VB: Yes, I agree with you. It used to be a black thing, and prohibited. The symbols were hidden, we were forced to keep them hidden in a home's unimaginable places. The very same symbols were considered to identify a marginalized, ignorant, and antisocial identity. Now they are commercial objects, a tourist attraction, a way and new product with which to make money. They use to get us to produce in the cane field and coffee plantation, so they could sell sugar and coffee abroad; they use to bury our symbols. Now, far from the cane field and coffee plantation, they harvest our symbols to also sell them abroad.

RM: What should be done to confront the problem of racism that scourges our society?

VB: The problem of racism is not in the hands of any one institution, cultural project, or social program. Historically, there have been myriad anti-racist projects in different countries all over the world, and none of them has been successful. Racism exists within human beings; what is inside people cannot be removed by social projects. It came about naturally, according to Darwin's process of selection. The Bible says that "What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them. Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and

these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them" (Matthew 15: 11, 20). Social projects can purify us from without, but not from within. All this results in is an image of what we would like to see, but not a real consciousness, which requires fundamentals. Ifá spoke to us about racism in *Òsá Òtura*: "You are what you have. He who gives what he has is left begging." I think blacks should increasingly establish themselves, and get a social space of their own, because of their own values, abilities, and talent, because they should know so much about their own traditions as to make it impossible for them not to be acknowledged for what they know. In addition, they should not give away their most valuable possession. I consider this to be their greatest wealth, the most valuable thing the New World received from the Old, which has not yet been discovered 500 years after the Conquest. Today, I visited the Pan-American Ultra store in the Los Sitios, a black neighborhood. I counted 48 employees on its three floors, and only 3 were black. I continued on to the Copextel LG store, at the intersection of Reina and San Nicolás. There were three employees: none of them was black. I went home to think. When I think about anti-black racism, particularly racism against blacks, I do my thinking in my office, and as a priest. If all blacks were Babalawos, and there were only black Babalawos, that would put an end to racism. Has anyone complained because all Catholic priests are white?