

# Monte, palos, herbs

## Vegetable life in the cult of the Cuban religions of African origin\*

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*Man, as the tree, is a being in which confused forces come to stand up... Vegetable life, if it is within ourselves, gives us the calm of slow rhythm, the breath of its acquiescence. Yes, the tree is the great being of rhythm, the true being of the annual rhythm. It is the clearest, the most exact, the most secure, the richest, the most exuberant in its rhythmic manifestations, since vegetation does not know contradiction. The clouds arrive to contradict the solstice sun, but no storm prevents the tree from turning green when it is its time.*

Gastón Bachelar  
La poética de la ensoñación

**E**volution of the human race could not be explained without the existence of vegetable life. All the primitive cultures and some which are not, paid and pay homage to the woods, always integrated to their religious beliefs and their mythologies. Thus, Wilhelm Grimm, the genial German philologist and writer, when studying the Teutonic terms which meant temple, detected that they all derived from the terms which formerly referred to the natural woods. In the same manner, all the cultures of ancient times worshiped one or more trees: the Celts, the live oak; the Scandinavians, the ash tree; the Hebrews and Arabs, the palm; the Germans,

the linden tree; the Indians, the fig tree (*ficus religiosa*), and the Chinese, the bamboo, the plum and the pine.

It is what goes on with the Cuban religions of African origin, alive and in full process of expansion, for which the *monte* (forest) is sacred, not only because without *yerbas* (herbs) and *palos* (plants) those religions could not function, but because the forest is the place where events take place which are considered magical or religious, and its believers enter it performing rituals characteristic of those who enter a temple, even if they fix their greatest worship upon three trees: the silk-cotton (*ceiba pentandra*, belonging to the family *Bombaceae*), the

royal palm (*roystonea regia*, of the family *Palmaceae*) and the *siguaraya* (*trichilia havanaensis* Jacq, family *Meliaceae*).

The cult of nature and especially of the woods formed a part of the vision of the world of all the ancient African cultures. The historians of Cuban culture have repeated that the African slaves, brought to Cuba by force, found in the flora and fauna of the Island plants and animals with certain similarities to those which existed in their lands of origin. However, no reference has been made to their being two floras with quite different characteristics and hardly any research has been done about the relative speed with which the new (other) nature was assimilated, nor about the possible transfer of knowledge in the matters of botany, forestry, medicine and even the liturgical use of some plants, that the natives of the Island might have made to them.

It is known that the human presence in Cuba dates back at least 6,000 years. The *taínos*, particularly, possessed great knowledge about the Cuban flora and fauna, having inhabited it for over ten centuries before the Spaniards and Africans arrived. The whole forest, as well as the trees and plants especially, were the object of their worship, because in them resided their gods and their dead, but because they, besides, served as refuge to the fauna, were producers of food and contained the basic elements for the preparation of their medicines. Besides, with their branches and leaves they built their houses, with their fibers they made many utensils and articles for domestic use and wove nets, hammocks and loincloths. The value of that knowledge is something that is felt in the Cuban daily life and is evidenced in the simple fact that a large number of the plants that existed on the Island are still referred to by the names which they assigned to them, including some of the

ones used for religious rites today, such as, for example, the tobacco, *corojo* palm (*acrocomia crispa*) and maize.

The negation of everything related with the *taínos*' influence in Cuban culture has been a prejudice that has stood in the way of formulating a fuller vision of the elements which initially integrated it and which, without a doubt, live on. José Juan Arrom, the Cuban who has most and best studied the *taino* culture, especially its mythology and language, declared that all which those people "created and believed has influenced the present culture of the West Indies more than is suspected". The sage maintained that there is ample documentary evidence to demonstrate that "the natives were decimated but not exterminated". Therefore, he stated, in the initial process of community living and trans-cultivation, along with "the material and visible of their ways of doing, they also transmitted something from the concealed and evasive of their ways of feeling":

*Learning how they perceived the world and represented the forces of nature will help us discover buried mythical roots in certain religious beliefs and in some artistic creations of today's West Indian.<sup>1</sup>*

It is known that the natives kept up their resistance for several decades in the Cuban forest and that they even lived, for some time, along with the first runaway slaves and palisaded blacks, with whom they would have shared many of their traditions and customs. From the religious point of view, the common living should not have proved very difficult, since both cultures shared common or similar elements, specifically in that related to the ways in which they represented the natural forces and in their mythic-religious concepts.

Friar Ramón Pané informed that the *taíno behiques* (witch medicine men) used to establish communication with the spirits or souls of the dead (*apias* in their language), all of whose secrets<sup>2</sup> they knew. To them, many animate or inanimate beings possessed supernatural powers. In their mythology, the gods or *cemí* fulfilled different functions, all related with the natural world.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the myth and *cemí* Baybrama alludes to the felling and burning of forest areas with relation to the agricultural production and the process of manufacture of the cassava. The *cemí* inhabit the trees or, rather, these could be the very *cemí*, who would have had all kinds of supernatural faculties, including speech, as Pané tells us, when describing the practice of the *cohoba*:

*when someone takes the road he says he sees a tree which moves its root, and the man stops with great fear and asks who it is. And he replies, "Call a behique for me and he will tell you who I am". And that man, having gone to said doctor, tells him what he has seen. And the sorcerer or witch immediately runs to see the tree of which the other has spoken to him, he sits next to it and does the cohoba to it [...] The cohoba having been done, he stands up and tells him all his titles, as if they were those of a great lord, and he asks him, "Tell me who you are and what you want from me and why you have had me summoned. Tell me whether you want me to cut you down, or you want to come with me, and how you want me to take you, for I will build a house for you with an estate." Then that tree or cemí, made an idol or a devil, replies the way in which he wants him to do it. And he cuts it down and does it in the manner in which he has ordered it: he builds the house for him with an estate and many times a year he does the cohoba for him*<sup>4</sup>

The African religions base their existence in a mythology the protagonists of which, the *orishas*, inhabit the forest and each one is the "owner" of a determined number of the plants considered magical. The *orishas* are the sons of a god named Olorun or Olordumare, which is the source of the *ashe*, the spiritual energy of which is composed the universe, everything alive and all material things. They fulfill their different functions, according to their faculties and, when they are consulted, they respond through different means, according to the different divinatory systems. To solve the problems they suggest, they ask for offerings, according to their tastes and needs and they make recommendations of *ebbos*, a good portion of which is carried out with herbs and plants.

For Afro-Cuban religions, then, trees and plants "are beings gifted with soul, intelligence and will, as everything that is born, grows and lives under the sun".<sup>5</sup> The believers that go deep into a forest do it convinced that they establish a direct connection with the supernatural powers that surround him. All the *orishas* are there: Eleguá, Oggún, Ochosi, Obatalá, Shangó, Oshún, Yemayá, Oyá, Orunmila, Osain, Orisha Oko, Babalú Ayé, among the ones which "work best", and the *eggún*, the dead.

In the forest the believer has at his disposal everything necessary, not only for his magic, but also to maintain his health and his spiritual and material welfare; there he finds, besides, "everything he needs to defend himself from any adverse force, providing him with the most efficient elements of protection – or attack". – However, these religions do not make indiscriminate use of the forest, but, besides paying homage to it, they treat it with a high sense of respect. In their ethics,

to use any element of the abundant natural richness, an herb, a plant, an animal, a stone, *it is indispensable that its permission be respectfully requested, and above all, that it be religiously paid the dues, the tribute that everyone owes it with brandy, tobacco, money and, in certain occasions, with the shed of a rooster's blood.*<sup>6</sup>

## Three honors

### *The silk-cotton or kapok tree*

The silk-cotton or kapok tree is so powerful that it is considered the mother of all trees, which might be explained for its great foliage, the proportions of its trunk and its legendary longevity. Its timber, robust and imposing, reaches such height that it escapes the human scale. The presence of a silk-cotton tree, always with a halo of mystery, usually causes an impression in the believer so apprehensive as a gothic cathedral might.

The silk-cotton tree generally grows in full light, in a degree of isolation, at least from the other specimens, which makes it stand out and, in a certain manner, prevail. It is found throughout most of the country, especially in the damp areas and, when it grows in dry zones, it is generally found near permanent waters.

A fast-growing, very leafy tree, it attains its maturity near its 20th year and it reaches up to 40 meters in height and 200 centimeters in diameter. Its trunk is straight and its top spherical or rounded, with plentiful branches which rise obliquely. Its foliage is a light green. Its bark is moderately smooth, with conic thorns irregularly spread toward the higher part of the trunk.

Its leaves are digitate-compound, alternately grouped at the end of the small sprigs. It blooms between May and June and its fruit ripens toward September. Its flowers are her-



maphrodite, whitish and large. Its fruits are grayish acorns 10 to 20 centimeters long and 3 to 6 centimeters in diameter. When they are ripe, they open into 5 valves and release small puffs of very fine threads which organize in a conic shape, as a sort of parachute, from which the small seeds hang, which travel, in that way, great distances, carried by the air.

Such attributes grant the silk-cotton such a special character that they turn it into the holiest of all trees. Respect for it is so much that it leaves what is strictly religious and enters the realm of popular superstitions. According to what Esteban Roldán Oriarte attests to, among the country people "it is a very generalized belief that under a silk-cotton there is no fear of electric strikes and many old country people formally swear that no lightning bolt has ever damaged a silk-cotton".<sup>7</sup>

On her part, Lydia Cabrera affirms that the silk-cotton is a tree considered so holy

that it would be pertinent to ask oneself whether it is the object of an independent cult. In that cult, she says, “whites and blacks take part equally, with identical fervor”. For the believers, “all the dead, the ancestors, the African saints of all the nations brought to Cuba” inhabit it, and what seems most strange, “the Catholic saints go to it and permanently inhabit it”. For the Chinese as well, who were taken to Cuba as semi-slaves during colonial times and for their descendants, it was “the throne of Sanfan Kon” or, what would be the equivalent of the very Saint Barbara (Shangó) in China.<sup>8</sup>

Due to the silk-cotton being worshiped by all religions practiced in Cuba, it is not strange that the most varied offerings end up at the foot of its trunk, from flowers, candles and *ebbos* to “mortal” witchcraft concoctions. Some circular lights rise under the silk-cotton at night which the superstitious identify with the dead.

### *The royal palm*

The royal palm is a tree that grows up to a height of 40 or 50 meters. Its leaves are pinnatisect, with a long, sheathing petiole; a spadix at the base of the cylinder formed by the capsules of the leaves. It is the most characteristic plant of the Cuban countryside. It grows throughout the island, in flat terrains as well as in mountainous ones, preferably in fertile ground and damp places, such as the banks of rivers, brooks and ravines, and the edges of swamps. It is not found in savannas or in soil derived from sulfated limestone.

The royal palm, besides being very beautiful, is a very useful plant: it has emollient qualities; its root is diuretic and is used to expel kidney stones and to fight diabetes, arteriosclerosis, cramps, asthma, colds, circulation, hemorrhage, leprosy, paludic fever and sprains. The wood is used in the con-



struction of rural homes, in planking, furniture and packing for agricultural products. The leaves or fronds are good for thatching houses and to provide shade in the tobacco plantations; with the *yaguas*, the wide bases of the leaves, *catauros* (baskets) are made and bales to pack the tobacco in branches, the quality of which goes through a process inside of remarkable improvement; they are also used for the walls of the country homes and, in *ariques* (strips), to twist ropes and weave different types of crafts.

With its top or heart hats and different types of craft are woven. When the heart is “tender”, that is, it has not broken the surface, it is a great nourishment, called *palmi-to*, which is eaten in salads and stews. The royal palm blossoms and bears fruit throughout the year and each plant can produce up to eight clusters of *palmiche*, which reach up to 200 pounds each.

The *palmiche* grain, given its high content of fat, is an excellent fodder to fatten pigs and its oil has been used in the manufacture of soap and even for human consumption. When the clusters bloom, the bees suck from them a dark honey of excellent taste and, when they have been stripped of the *palmiche*, they are used as brooms.

The properties of the palm were widely known and made good use of by the *taíno* natives, who availed themselves of it for multiple uses, especially the construction of their houses, one of the types of which, the *bohío*, has remained throughout the centuries as a fundamental architectonic element of Cuban country people.

For its beauty and its very particular characteristics, the royal palm was designated national tree and it appears in the coat of arms of the country, as a symbol of the nobility and serene firmness of Cubans. Its plentifulness in the Island was such that,

towards the '70's it was calculated that there were still some 10 million specimens. However, the “palm-icide” which took place through many years must have surely produced a serious decrease in that figure.

The royal palm plays a very special role in the Cuban culture, not only because it is a national symbol, but also because it is a tree considered sacred by popular religions, for which reason it is a subject frequently mentioned in the oral tradition of the country.

The royal palm has a tall stalk and a crest ending in a point. These characteristics make it stand out over the other plants and turn into an attraction for lightning. The palm, then, is not any tree, but nothing more and nothing less than the haven for Shangó, the orisha considered the gunner of the sky and symbolized as lightning itself. In that sense, Lydia Cabrera affirms that Shangó “always falls on the royal palm”. The association with the great orisha, she says, becomes inevitable, because lightning strikes a considerable number of these trees every year: “The palm takes the lightning and keeps it inside. It has the power to tie the lightning.”<sup>9</sup> The palm also has a lofty meaning for the *ñāñigos* or *abakuá*:

*Under the palm, on the bank of a river of the Calabazar, the spirit that the ñāñigos or abakuan worship manifested itself for the first time: “Our religion was organized at the foot of the palm, that is why we worship it. The palm was an eye witness of the mystery. Sikan was buried under the palm.”*<sup>10</sup>

The psychological and religious association of the royal palm with the god of virility, fire and passion, according to some scholars, refers to the idea, so frequent in the history of human thought, of the tree as a source of cosmic fertility. Thusly, the royal



palm, the Great Father, and the silk-cotton tree, the Great Mother, create the female-male binomial, the binary principle which generated the universe.

## The siguaraya

The *siguaraya* is a perenni-foliolate bush or tree which reaches up to 12 feet in height, and its trunk, up to 40 centimeters in diameter. It is very common throughout the Island and usually grows on the banks of brooks and in the low forests or thickets.

The *siguaraya* is relatively easily recognized for its full foliage, which sets it apart from the surrounding plants. It blooms in January to April; its flowers are a greenish white color and contain a nectar which produces a dark honey with very good taste.

Its “owner” is Shangó. Given its great power, it is the first “*palo*” that the *mayomberos* salute when they enter the forest, after greeting the four winds. In the *gangas*,

it is one of the main plants. When a practitioner falls into a trance, its leaves are placed on his head, so that the spirit may take hold of him. It is called *abrecamino*, *tapacamino* and *rompecamino* (path-opener, path-closer and path-breaker), according to the use which is made of it; it opens the roads to those who invoke, but also closes them to the enemy.

The popular saying that “Cuba is the country of the *siguaraya*” constitutes a metaphor of so many meanings as circumstances in which it is used, although they all lead to one same hermeneutics: in Cuba, anything can happen.

*Mata siguaraya* is one of the best known Cuban songs in the world, and it was immortalized by Beny Moré, considered the greatest Cuban popular musician of all times.

A plant grows in my Cuba  
which may not be cut down without permission,

may not be cut down,  
because it belongs to *orisha*.

That plant grows in the forest,  
that plant has power,  
that plant is *siguaraya*.

*Siguaraya*, that go, that go,  
with permission, I’m going to cut down.

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