

Afro-Cuban Tales

(Selected stories)

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 Havana, May 1899 - Miami, September 1991

This book makes a valuable contribution to both black and white Cuban folklore literature, in spite of some negative opinions by critics stemming from forgivable ignorance or from ridiculous, prejudiced vanity. There are many people in Cuba who have negative attitudes, but true culture and progress means affirming rather than rejecting what is real. People who reject who they are will end up on a path of self-destruction. An old Afro-Cuban proverb puts it this way: "The goat who breaks the drum will pay for it with his own skin."

Fernando Ortiz

HICOTEA'S HORSE

Hicotea was busy reading *Havana Illustrated* beside a stream where Br'er White Horse came twice a day to drink.

"Good morning, good morning, Br'er Hicotea," said the horse.

Hicotea stared at him over the top of his glasses and, disdainfully dropping his words one by one, said:

"Horse-is-my-horse."

Br'er Horse stopped in his tracks, hardly knowing what to say. In the heat of the moment, caught off guard like that, nothing came to mind. But later in the

evening when he came back to the stream, he shouted to the tortoise, chopping his words off one by one too:

"Hicotea-doesn't-have-a-horse!"

Some time later Hicotea appeared at the court, and he said to the king: "The-horse-is-my-horse." (His words gave rise to lots of comments.)

The king sent for the horse and said to him:

"So, you're Hicotea's horse?"

The horse didn't know what to say. In the heat of the moment, caught off guard like that, nothing came to mind.

He began to think. Then he went to see Hicotea and said:

"Oooh," groaned Hicotea. "Unfortunately, I'm on my deathbed today. So I can't walk, Br'er Horse."

"If you can't walk, I'll carry you."

"Oh, but with all the pain I'm suffering, Br'er Horse?"

"You can sit back on my croup."

"But I'll fall off, Br'er Horse. I'll fall off."

The tortoise made a gallant effort. He climbed up on the horse's croup. Then he fell to the ground, like a hard, round stone.

"Wait a minute, I'll put a blanket on my back. That'll make it easier for you."

(But at the horse's slightest movements, Hicotea, all bruised and battered, collapsed.)

"Wait, I'll put a saddle on for you."

"But how can I ever hold on, Br'er Horse?"

"I'll put a bridle and bit on too."

"And what if dogs attack us along the way?"

Br'er Horse gave him a whip.

"All you have to do is crack this whip. That'll scare them off."

"Let all be done for the glory of God, Br'er Horse. If you gallop too fast, I'm done for."

And they started on their way.

"Gogorín-kinyón-kinyón, kinyón!
Gorín-gogorín-gogorín.
Kinyón-kinyón-kinyón!"

Seeing them gallop by, the trees laughed with all their leaves.

Finally, they weren't far from the king's house.

"Get down now, Hicotea. What if some member of the court saw me like this?"

"Oh no, Br'er Horse. Not on your life!"

And with that he flicked the horse with the whip.

"Get down, Br'er Hicotea!"

And they began to argue. But the king, who had already looked out his window and seen Hicotea riding his horse, came out to meet them and said:

"Oh, you are indeed Hicotea's horse. No question about it."

Then Br'er Horse began to prance and buck and raced off through the fields as if someone were pressing fiery spurs into his flanks.

Hicotea, hanging on to his mane for dear life, was able to stay in the saddle a long time. Just as they were crossing a creek, he

said "thanks," and dropped off in to the water.

Br'er Horse lost his mind and fled from this world.

He ran and ran and ran and ran until he came to the edge of the earth. And he rolled off into the darkness. He fell off into the depths of unseeing night.

Even when he was dead the White Horse continued to gallop.

Into the starry solitude, in the lonely dreams of the stars...

THE LETTER OF EMANCIPATION

Back in the days when animals could speak, when they were all good friends and men and animals got along fine, the dog was a slave. Even then he loved men more than anything else.

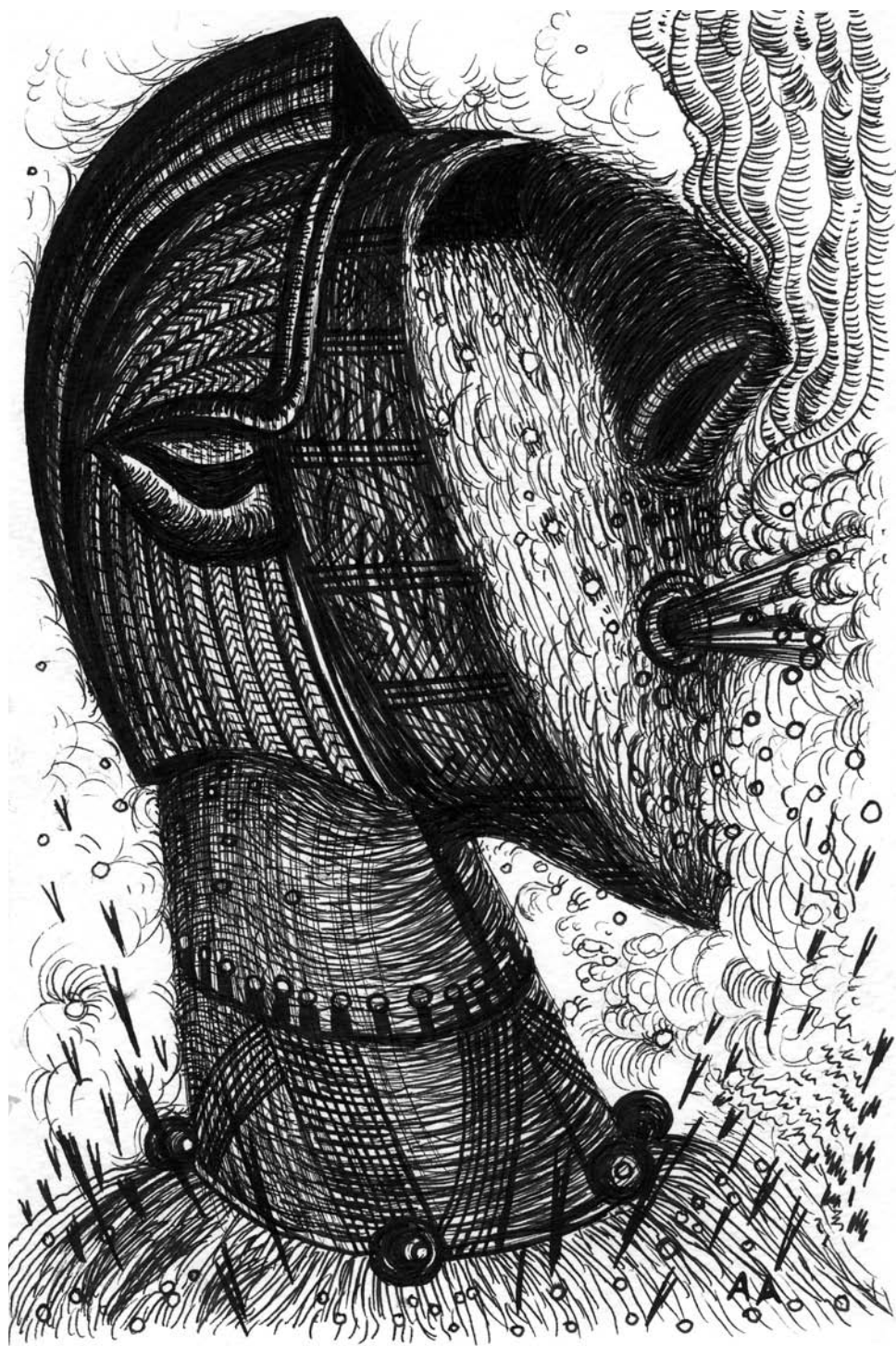
In those days, when hours were long and when nobody was ever in a hurry, the cat, the dog, and the mouse were inseparable. The best pals in Cuba. They would get together near the port in the courtyard of a grand house whose stained-glass windows caught the dying reflections of the sea. There, at the foot of a laurel tree that had been beaten down with all its birds by the new times, they would often spend half the night talking.¹

Once after Br'er Cat and Br'er Mouse (who was well acquainted with books and was quite erudite) had sung liberty's praises and spoken extensively on the rights of all the earth's children, including the children of the sky and air, Dog realized that he was a slave, and that made him sad.

The next day, he went up to see Olufi² to ask for a letter granting him his freedom.

"Badá-didé odiddena!"³

The Oldest Man of the Heavens scratched his head and thought for a while,



Dedicated to Lydia Cabrera. Alejandro Aguilera

wondering if he should grant the request or not.⁴

Finally, after shrugging his shoulders and spitting a black stream of tobacco juice, as he usually does when making a decision, he scratched his name on a sheet of parchment and gave Dog a proper letter of emancipation. That same evening, Dog was showing it proudly to his friend.

"Take good care of it, my friend," advised Cat as he was leaving.

Now, since Dog didn't have any pockets, he thought the safest place would be to shove it up his ass. But, after an hour or so, the rolled up parchment began to itch something awful. More and more uncomfortable, Br'er Dog had to walk stiffly, his hind legs spread apart awkwardly. He didn't dare make the slightest movement or express any feelings with his tail. The horrible itching flared up at the most awkward moment, and he couldn't stop himself from running off in desperation to rub his bottom on the ground, not thinking of the consequences. All these humiliating actions happened right in public, and everyone made fun of him. What torture! And on top of everything, he worried constantly about losing the document, or by not being careful enough, about making the document illegible and therefore null and void. Br'er Dog abstained from eating, but finally, unable to choose between freedom and his incessant suffering, he pulled the document from its hiding place and gave it to his friend Br'er Cat for safekeeping.

The cat realized how serious a responsibility it was to leave a manumission letter on a roof where it could be damaged by wind and rain, and he took it to Br'er Mouse, who had a solid house with a good roof on it. But Mouse had gone to the market to get some cheese and it was Mrs. Mouse who greeted him. So he entrusted the letter to her with all

sorts of instructions. But, wouldn't you know it! Mrs. Mouse was going into labor. She took the letter in her teeth and ripped it into tiny pieces to line her nest.

Meanwhile, Dog had a quarrel with his master.

He said, "Give me another bone!"

And the master replied, "I don't feel like it."

Dog stared at the man, who was stepping forward with his whip raised.

"I need a lot more to eat, because I'm free!"

But the man said:

"You'll eat what I want you to eat. You were born a slave, and you're my slave!"

"No sir," shouted Dog. (And his tail wagged approvingly.) I'm not your slave. I have a letter of manumission."⁵

"Well, bring it to me, and be quick about it!"

Dog ran to the courtyard, under the laurel tree, and called his friend Cat.

"Br'er Cat, quick. Quick, give me my letter of freedom."

Cat called Mouse.

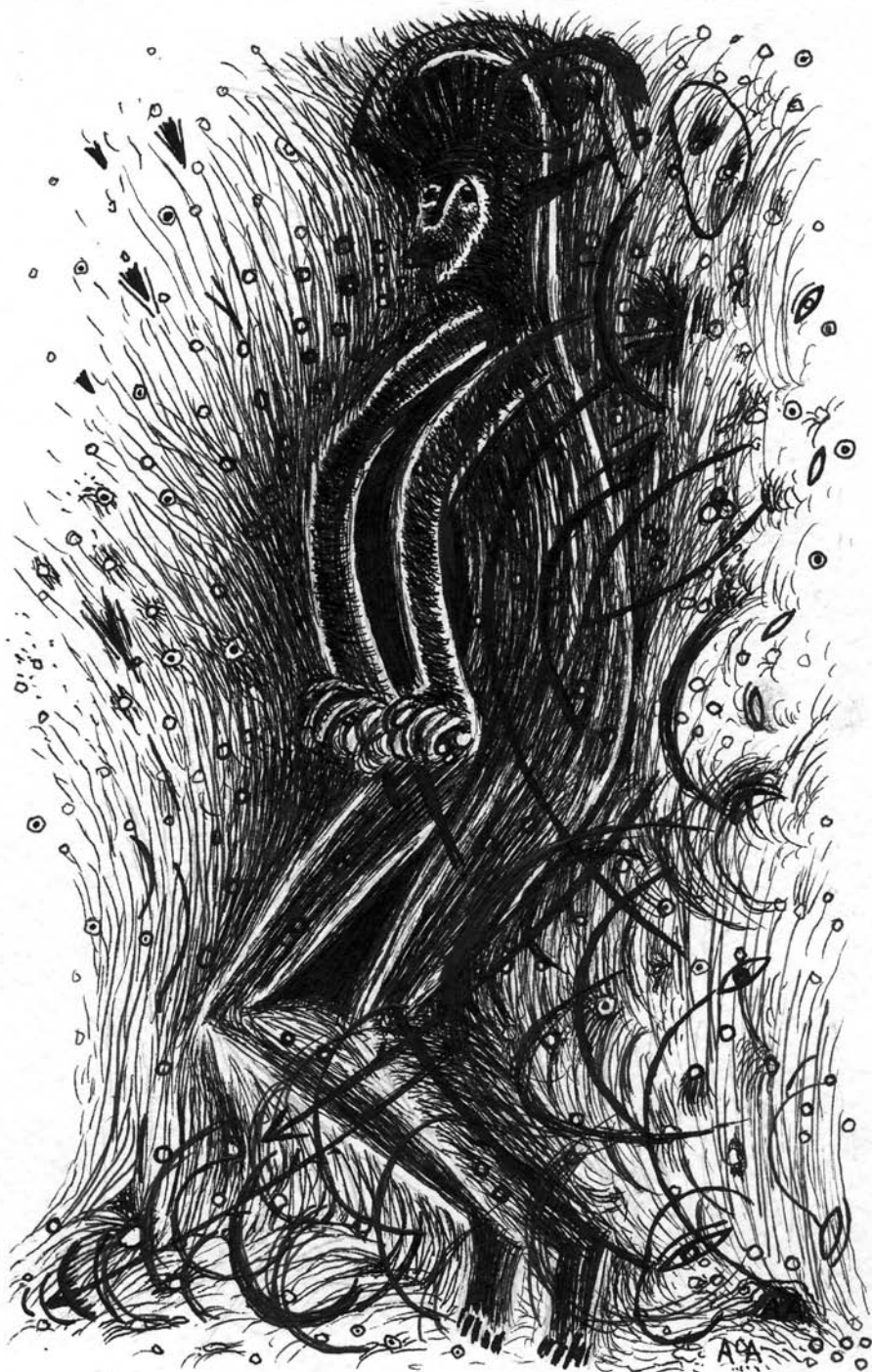
"Br'er Mouse, quick. Quick bring me Dog's letter that your wife is keeping safe."

"Br'er Mouse ran home.

His wife was sleeping, with seven newborn little mice, amidst the torn scraps of paper.

He hurried back all embarrassed and whispered into Br'er Cat's ear. And then Br'er Cat lifted his two front paws and for the first time —"Fffff!"— he extended his claws and pounced on Mouse. And for the first time Dog leaped on Cat and planted his canines in Cat's neck.

Lying on his back, Br'er Cat struggled valiantly. A veritable whirlwind of meows, slashing claws and teeth, eyes spitting fire, and dripping blood.



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Tiny Br'er Mouse scurried off at some point to his hole.

Cat was in a sorry state and, with his fur all ruffled, he climbed up the laurel tree and then out onto the roof. From there, he arched his back and went on meowing and spitting forth his bile and insults at the dog.

Then Br'er Dog quietly returned, licked his master's hands, and lay down at his feet without saying another word.

1. The French edition adds: "and chewing tobacco."

2. Olufi is the Eternal Being or the Holy Spirit.

3. "Wake up, old man, wake up!"

4. The following is found in the French text but not in the Spanish: "Because he had always said that right or wrong, each person should have what he deserved. And in that case, the Dog deserved his letter."

5. The French version adds: "given to me by Olufina."

not very much, even when it is a lot. That I know for a fact."

So, one day, the queen Eléren Güedde stood at her door, and when the queen Oloya Gúanna showed up singing

Eléren Güedde guola tóa,
Eléren Güedde guola tóa!

She said:

"Uguaka Maka! Just wait till I smash your face in!"

And she beat her silly.

The result? A real war. But Queen Oloya Gúanna no longer comes to dinner with Queen Eléren Güedde, and every day they face off and scratch each other's eyes out.

That's the story of Queen Eléren Güedde and Queen Oloya Gúanna.

TWO QUEENS

Once there were two queens. Two *Lucumí* queens.¹ They lived across from each other. One's name was Eléren Güedde, and the other Oloya Gúanna.

Eléren Güedde was an excellent cook. Both were quite rich, but Oloya Gúanna didn't like to spend her money. She would go to her friends' houses to eat. She often ate with Eléren Güedde. But finally one day Eléren Güedde got tired of being taken advantage of.

"Listen to what I have to say," said Eléren Güedde, "listen, Oloya Gúanna: The person who shares always thinks it is a lot, even if it is not much at all. But the person who is on the receiving end always thinks it is

1. In Cuba the word *Lucumí* refers to the Yoruba people and their culture and religion. See Jorge Castellanos and Isabel Castellanos, *Cultura Afro-cubana* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1988), vol. 4, 28-29.



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