

# KONGO CRUZADO

## CUBAN LUKUMÍ AND KONGO IDENTITIES

### IN THE ART OF FRANCISCO "GORDILLO" ARREDONDO

by Ivor Miller

*"My Kongo, come from the forest, I call you to work /  
when you come, come slowly, step by step to work /  
I call and you respond . . . what I want, my Kongo, is that you keep supporting us."*  
Cuban Kongo song (Los Nani, 1997)

An unearthly wail rose up into the star studded night. Standing in the chilly, humid air with chattering teeth, I could hardly believe my eyes. Dogs, one by one, raced up to the barefoot and bare-chested young man whose howl had summoned them. The man was merely a "horse" to the Kongo dog spirit riding him. Gathered around, the pack joined their wail to his, the symphony of eerie cries piercing the rural silence for several minutes. After awhile the "horse" moved slowly over to the hut behind the wooden planked house; he was guided by Uncle Félix, the master of ceremonies and family patriarch who, at age 81, seemed strong as a bull. Coming to defend the ancestral drums of the extended family kept in the hut, the Kongo spirit complained that they needed repair.

In Kongo traditions, dogs are considered mediums between ancestors and mortals and are often depicted in sculpture as two-headed — seeing in both directions, defending humans from danger by sniffing out the sources of antisocial behavior. In this case, the message was clear: the drums must be cared for to ensure the continuity of the family healing system that was brought from Africa. The drums allow the ancestors to speak and the divinities to become manifest.

After this and other interpretations of the spirit's presence were discussed, we all went back inside. Uncle Félix and other members of the extended family continued preparations for the drumming at midnight.

It was December 16, and Cubans all over the island and abroad were celebrating the vespers of St. Lazarus, the healer who is usually depicted as accompanied by three dogs. African groups in colonial Cuba associated their homeland beliefs with those of the dominant Catholic church, and St. Lazarus was identified as a parallel to Babalu-Aye, the Lukumí and Arará divinity of healing, and Kobayende, the Kongo divinity. Cubans were performing rites to these powers, each considered different paths to the well-being of their families and communities.

I had already been in Cuba for several years working with the families of African descendants to document their cultural practices and histories related to Africa, and my friend "Gordillo" had brought me to his family compound in

a rural area, where his family gathered annually to celebrate their Kongo inheritance. After studying African and African American art history with Robert Farris Thompson at Yale University, and meeting Juan Boza and other black Cuban artists in New York City who were priests of the African-derived traditions they expressed artistically, I traveled to the island to better understand the connections between the powerful and vibrant artwork, the memory of Africa in Cuba, and the spiritual bases that held it all together.

When I met "Gordillo" in Havana in 1993, it soon became clear that he is a gifted inheritor of several African-derived religious and aesthetic traditions that have existed for hundreds of years on the island, often passed on through family lineages. Gordillo's best works are moving expressions of his lived experience and inner world.

At the time, a religious boom was in progress in Cuba. After 30 years of Marxism-Leninism, in which most Cubans hid their religious identities, now it seemed that a great majority were initiates of — if not self-declared experts on — Santería, Palo Monte and other Cuban religions. Encouraged by tourism, "Afro-Cuban" art was now fashionable, and facile, stereotyped images flourished in private galleries and markets throughout Havana. In contrast, Gordillo's paintings express depth and complexity in his interactions with the rites and mythologies brought by his ancestors to the island. Since our meeting, his work has been exhibited not only in the Cuban capital, but in New York City, London, Spain and Canada.

Santería and Palo Monte mythologies are integral to Gordillo's personal experience. The brilliance of color, the complexity of metaphor, the symbolism of ritual movement and color-codes in his paintings reveal much about the vitality of Santería and Palo Monte. Observing Gordillo's work is comparable to listening to a master storyteller recite founding myths: the aesthetic pull is magnetic, bringing the audience to the frontier of intimacy. Based on West African traditions in which the family is a sacred institution, the mythology of Santería in Gordillo's paintings projects a vision of lives enriched with intimate family interactions.

The paintings contain layers of meanings relating to the biological as well as to the religious family, to the use of Santería myths to alleviate social ills. They are narrative,

based on names, phrases and actions referred to in the Yorùbá and Kongo-derived oral literature recounted to this day in Cuba. To establish this point, I have compared Kongo and Yorùbá texts with their Cuban derivatives in the notes.\*

Gordillo's ancestors came to Cuba from west-central Africa many generations ago. Like many other peoples from the Kongo and Angola regions in this era, they were enslaved and brought to work on sugar plantations at Las Villas (central western Cuba). Family lore recounts that Gordillo's great-great-grandfather brought his religious objects and ideas (called Fundamento) from Africa, and taught his children how to work with them. In this way they helped create a Cuban religion called Palo Monte (or Palo Mayombe), based on Kongo traditions. His great-grandparents, born as freed laborers on a ranch in Las Villas, carried on this tradition.

The Kongo rituals were performed by initiated men only. When rituals were completed, women would celebrate by dancing to percussive rhythms along the river, considered sacred because of the nyoka (serpent in Kikongo) who lived there. To this day, annual celebrations are held by family members to strengthen the African attributes, and hence the well-being of the family.

As women were excluded from the Bantu-derived religion, they began to practice Lukumi (Yorùbá-derived) religion, a more recent, early 19th century arrival from West Africa. Gordillo's great-grandmother was consecrated and received fundamentos from the Yorùbá-derived tradition later known as Santería. These fundamentos belonged to the women in the family. Since childhood Gordillo observed ceremonies performed by his grandmother, a priestess of Obatalá, divinity of peace and wisdom. When she gave tambores de fundamento (batá drum ceremonies) to her divinities, Gordillo participated. The product of both Palo Monte and Lukumi traditions, Gordillo is familiar with the myths and rituals of each.

In 1984 Gordillo, age 20, entered Cuba's leading art school, the San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts, with a desire to paint landscapes. Four years later, after studying the activities of the National Folklore Ensemble of Cuba, he realized that his rich family traditions were a deep source from which to draw while expressing his experiences, imagination and identity. Because Santería traditions are filled with colors, movement and images, Gordillo is able to express its mythic histories and esoteric knowledge as he experienced them.

One cannot dialogue meaningfully about Afro-Cuban representation in Cuban art without mentioning Wifredo Lam (1902-82; an apprentice to Pablo Picasso) who initiated the genre, and Manuel Mendive (b. 1944), both of whose works are found in major international collections. Both also had personal as well as ancestral relationships to Santería traditions. One sees their influence in Gordillo's works; for example, Picasso's *Girl in Front of a Mirror* is a visual referent for Gordillo's *Madre una sola*. In addition, Gordillo has learned from the works of Cubans Roberto Diago (1920-

1955) and Pedro Pablo Oliva, as well as the impressionists and expressionists of Europe: Manet, Monet, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse and Vlaminck.

Forging his own path, Gordillo's primary contribution to Cuban art to date lies in linking very specific esoteric knowledge to personal experience in arresting visual statements. For example, Diago's *Abanico* (1945), depicts a peacock feather fan on a yellow table. Gordillo's *Ochún Kolé Kolé* is reminiscent of *Abanico* in its use of a peacock fan and yellow, but is much further developed and complicated in its layering of specific esoteric symbolism, demonstrating an informed and intimate view of the theme.

By looking at examples of Gordillo's work and listening to his statements about their personal meanings, one learns much about the centrality of African-derived religion in the daily lives of many contemporary Cubans. A key theme of these paintings is the insistence that two specific strands of ethnic identities tied to Africa maintain their integrity.



Gordillo and Gladys Angarica, another painter with whom Ivor Miller works.



Francisco "Gordillo" Arredondo and his uncle, the one who keeps the family Kongo traditions in rural Cuba.

\*The author's notes for this article are posted on the journal's webpage at [www.hamptonu.edu/museum/publication.htm](http://www.hamptonu.edu/museum/publication.htm).



Francisco "Gordillo" Arredondo  
*Omí Lána*  
 1999  
 acrylic on paper  
 23 x 30"

## OMÍ LÁNA

In Cuban theology derived from Africa, each divinity is said to "own" specific things: the ocean, rivers, lightning, trees, drums, foods, colors, animals. This means that the thing "owned" is within their domain and powers. The idea of ownership advises mortals to respect the domain of the divinities, which includes the natural world. In Cuban Lukumí mythology, Yemayá is known as the "owner" of water, she represents the sea, the planet's life source, and is considered the mother of all orishás (divinities). "Ibí bayán odu mi: my belly hurts." Thus spoke Yemayá and from her womb came the rivers, the orishas, and all that lives on Earth.

The work *Omí Lána* is made for Yemayá. Blue, Yemaya's color, predominates. The fish, as well as the seven cowrie shells, represents Yemayá. The black hair flowing behind the neck suggests the movement of the waves.

Upon full initiation, Santería devotees receive a Lukumí name. When Gordillo's mother "made Ocha" (became a full initiate), she received the name *Omí Lána*, "the waves of the sea." Inspired by his mother's initiation, this work depicts what Gordillo describes as:

The face of a woman who could be either Yemayá or my mother, who I adore and love. This mask, emerging from the sea, represents Yemayá, but I identify it more with my mother. It is a face that is "born," just as an orishá is "born" at the hour of initiation in this religion.

Divine beings emerge from her body. Just as cowrie shells are the medium of communication between the gods and man in Santería divination, the cowrie shell eyes are symbols of the power to see beyond the mundane. The

arrows pointing down and up indicate boundaries between the sea and the earth, between humans and the orishá. They mark the place where devotees commune with the gods through ritual exchanges. The arrows represent a pact between devotee and orishá: "You give me (health and strength) and I give you (devotion and respect)."

Gordillo uses crosses and circles (zeros) – symbols of addition and emptiness – to indicate that which brings positive spirits and influences, and that which brings negative spirits and influences. These are key symbols of Palo Monte, a Cuban religion of Kongo-derivation. Within Cuban-Kongo symbolism spirits are represented by their signatures, designs which identify the territories from whence they come.

In African and African American traditions, dreams are considered a form of communication with the ancestors. Gordillo told me that he learned about his family history through both storytelling and dreams:

The legends my mother and grandmother told me about the family ceremonies in Villa Clara influenced my imagination. Other images come to my mind that seem to have been sent by my ancestors in answer to my doubts, as to all that which I did not live, facilitating my projection of the stories told to me by my parents. *Omí Lána* is about Yemayá, but it has elements of Madre Agua [Mother Water/ Mami Wata] of Mayómbé. I mix them because of my immediate family's transit from Mayómbé traditions to those of the Yorúbá. Aside from the use of crosses, I reflect Mayombe culture in this work through the dark, mystic atmosphere. Yorúbá culture predominates in this work however, through the use of light, which gives the sensation of birth.

Following Cuban tradition, Lukumí culture is more open, extroverted, using brilliant colors, while the Kongo is darker, its practitioners introverted, more jealous of their secrets. Gordillo reflects these ideas by contrasting brilliant colors with an obscure atmosphere.

The light behind the figure comes from the depths of the sea as an offering from the goddess to her new daughter, "*Omí Lána*," giving her health, prosperity and a path for her new life. The light is interwoven with light blues, greens and yellows, giving the appearance of a calm sea, as Yemayá can be at times when she is content with her "children."

The fish on her head becomes various other fish, all symbols of this goddess, flowing from her head. They are balanced on the *lerí* [head in Lukumí], because the *lerí* "eats" and "receives" the Orishá and its secrets in ceremony.

Among the rites performed during Santería initiation are those known as "refreshing" and "giving food" to the head. The "guardian angel" (orishá) of a person is also "fed" on the head of their devotee. Fish, as well as doves, are important animals for these rites, although coconuts and other ingredients are also used, following the indications of the orishá. The person who acts as godparent in a Santería initiation uses their fundamento to consecrate the initiate, creating a ritual bond between them. Gordillo told me:

The person who "crowned" my mother with Ocha was a "daughter" of Ochún [goddess of rivers]. Therefore, my mother was "born" from a fundamento of Ochún, a goddess closely related with Yemayá, because the river ends in the sea. My mother is thus a daughter of the two waters, because figuratively, if in one hand she has Yemayá, in the other she has Ochún.



Francisco "Gordillo" Arredondo  
*Ochún Kolé Kolé*  
 1998  
 acrylic on canvas  
 30 x 40"

### OCHÚN KOLÉ KOLÉ

*Ochún Kolé Kolé*, is a tour de force synthesizing Gordillo's love for his mother, as well as his received ancestral tradition of Santería, within the context of his *cubanidad* (Cuban identity). Inspired by his mother's consecration by a priestess of Ochún, the work juxtaposes several layers of metaphor from both Catholicism and Santería. In the 1940s Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz described the process of transculturation (cross-fertilization) whereby a Yorùbá divinity like Ochún became associated with a Catholic saint like *La virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* (the Virgin of Charity). Ortiz's message was that both had contributed to the formation of a national culture. The Virgin of Charity was a symbol of Cuban culture for independence warriors — who were in the majority black — during the wars against Spanish domination in the 19th century. In the 1920s, the Veteran's Association succeeded in having her declared Cuba's patron saint by the Vatican (Benítez-Rojo 1996: 54). Gordillo's ability to seamlessly merge the ideas of mother/ goddess/ nation, as well as allude to many esoteric symbols of Ochún, in an aesthetically arresting gestalt, signals the activity of a synthesizing mind connected to dexterous hands. It also illustrates the perspective of many Cubans that the powers of Ochún equal those of the Virgin, and that the ability to recognize this is inherent in assuming a contemporary Cuban national identity.

The Cuban orishas belong to a mythic family, the bonds of which are reinforced during ritual. Santería initiates receive several orichas during initiation, each with unique properties that may be evoked as the need arises. When Gordillo's mother was "crowned" with Yemayá, she also "received" Ochún. This work represents the avatar of her Ochún, called Kolé Kolé.

Layer upon layer of metaphor in this painting maintain clear boundaries, even as they overlap, creating a whole that could be described as a "national identity." Here we find Cuba's patron saint, *La Caridad del Cobre*, juxtaposed with Ochún, implying that their identities are not merged, but conversant — in dialogue —

as in the Cuban saying, "*conjunto pero no revuelto*" (together but not mixed-up).

Kolé Kolé means vulture, the messenger bird of Ochún. Devotees of Ochún know that this powerful avatar is one where she "crawls in the mud of the gully", and walks covered in dirt, because her intimate links with death give her very strong powers.

However, the vulture is not visually represented. Instead we see the scintillating, seductive, Ochún that enlivens, and who all praise when she appears waving her *abebé* (fan) of peacock feathers. The central image, in which her face appears, represents a fan made with a peacock feather, a symbol and attribute of Ochún. The fan's colors contribute to the predominant yellow — Ochún's emblematic color which symbolizes honey, the nectar that she uses to soften her lovers.

*Nuestra Señora de la Caridad* (Our Lady of Charity) is associated with Ochún; both "belong" to the "sweet" waters and dress in yellow. *La Caridad's* profile is found undulating in this work in the shape of a bell made with cowries. Bells are utilized by Ochún's devotees in order to invoke her. Also, the bell creates the idea of a cape, a cloak of the virgin. This cloak is also the bleached dress of Ochún Kolé Kolé. According to one *patakin* (origin myth), because Ochún performs her deepest work in "the mud of the gully," she constantly washes her dress, which has lost its yellow color.

One can also see a crescent moon made with cowries. The crescent moon is a classic symbol of the virgin, as well as an attribute of Ochún received by her initiates upon their consecration. At the bottom lies the skeleton of a goat, Ochún's preferred food. This implies that the vulture has already eaten, that the goddess has received her offering. The skeleton is in the form of a canoe (also a symbol of *La Caridad*), giving the sensation that the goddess paddles along the river. At the bottom appears *Eleguá* — who like Gordillo — admires the divinity.



Francisco "Gordillo" Arredondo  
*Ébo para mi hijo* (Ébo for my son)  
 1993  
 acrylic on paper  
 24 x 32"

#### ÉBO PARA MI HIJO

*Ébo para mi hijo* (sacrifice for my son) depicts an *ébo*, a protective ritual based on sacrifice that is a cornerstone of Santería practice. When a devotee has a problem — ranging in gravity from a doubt to a life crisis — they normally seek advice from a diviner. After divination, an *ébo* is prescribed based on the oracle. In this case, Gordillo's mother sought divination when her four-month-old was near death. She carried him to a *babaláwo* (an *Ifá* diviner of the Santería religion) to diagnose the illness. They learned that *Changó* (the thunder god) was Gordillo's protective divinity. Because of this, *Changó*'s red color predominates. To defend the child, *ébo* (sacrifice) was performed. This painting reflects Gordillo's imaginative remembering of this *ébo*, aided by his mother's account. In it, a child appears inside a bubble surrounded by the movement of the *ébo*, which dispelled the harm. The bubble suggests the protected milieu in which the child will develop. The ingredients and animals utilized in the *ébo* are represented; a rooster and a chick revolve around the circle to rid the *arayed* (sickness), to detach the child from *ikú* (death) and to make way for *Iré arikú* (well-being, literally: the fortune of long life). A kind of conceptual artist, Gordillo told me, "I don't seek to paint acts in themselves, but the concepts behind them."

The *ébo* is situated in the bush (*el monte*), the place where one encounters the powers of the divinities, and where many of their sacrifices and offerings are left. The zone of white reflects the *aché* (power) received by the child, from the earth, from the bush and from the *orishas*. The arrows pointing downwards represent the negative forces carried into the earth by the work of the *ébo* and the powers of *Changó*. The white arrows represent positive forces, awaiting to complete their objective. Gordillo explained:

I utilize the *garabatos* [a crooked stick, a tool of some *orishá*] to symbolize the support of other divinities. Although *Changó* was responsible for the *ébo*, other *orishás* participated, as well as the spirits of my ancestors, my guides and protectors. The presence of these spirits is reflected in the *Mayómbé* signatures and in the animals: the serpent, the wall lizard and the centipede.

Gordillo represents his Kongo ancestors with symbols related to their religious traditions. Yet the rite practiced in the painting is Lukumí. *Ébo para mi hijo* demonstrates how African ethnicities are distinguished in Cuba, and how practice of one religion can reinforce and complement that of another.



Francisco "Gordillo" Arredondo  
*Echu 1*  
 1998  
 acrylic on paper  
 24 x 32"

#### ECHU 1

Echu is a major divinity in Lukumí religion. He is the first to eat from a sacrifice, and to receive offerings and petitions, which he then carries to the appropriate powers. He is the only one able to open and close the pathways, and has multiple avatars. This Echu is not represented in red and black, the colors commonly used by artists to paint him. The image has three cowries, the sacred number of *Eleguá* (another name for Echu). The cowries are the eyes and the mouth, in other words the medium of communication of the *orishás*. The stones used to make Echu-*Eleguá* are sought in the bush, in a river, in the sea, or wherever the "saint" indicates through divination. Upon reaching an appropriate stone, a *santero* will perform divination before it, to see whether the stone accepts its ritual fate.

The stone depicted was taken from the sea, its transparent aqua colors show its relationship to *Yemayá*. The color, symbols and attributes tell us that this Echu was created to work with *Yemayá*: the stone is shaped like a sea conch, the mouth has the silhouette of a whale. An arrow, based on a ritual "signature," represents the spine of a smoked fish, implying that the sacrifice offered to *Eleguá* has been consumed, thus accepted. Gordillo told me:

This Echu represents a person in a state of concentration. When a person confronts the gods — to consecrate them, or to ask for his own benefit or for that of his family — he needs to concentrate on what he wants, on what it means to ask a god for well-being. I represent Echu in a serious form, as the father of this religion.

I depict the personification of the *orishás* because, following their *patakines*, some were once human beings, just as others were animals or flora.

The Cuban pantheon of *orishá* is considered a sacred family and often anthropomorphized. In West Africa, the *orishá* sometimes took the form of humans, animals, or bodies of water, for example, *Oya* once took the form of a water buffalo. In this painting, Gordillo conveys that Echu, although created from stone, is a living, sentient being.



Francisco "Gordillo" Arredondo  
*El tablero de Ifá (The Ifá Tray)*  
 1994  
 acrylic on paper  
 30 x 18"

#### EL TABLERO DE IFÁ (THE IFÁ TRAY)

Within the vast literature of Ifá, the odu (chapter), "Orgunda Osa," recounts the encounter of Ochosi (god of the hunt) with Ogún (god of war and iron). The best of hunters, Ochosi's arrows never failed their mark. Nevertheless, Ochosi could never reach his prey through the dense vegetation. In desperation, he went to see Orula (god of divination), who advised him to make ébo (sacrifice). Ogún had a similar problem; although no one could thrash the bush faster than he, Ogún could never kill his prey. Orula instructed him to make ébo. So it was that both rivals went to the bush separately to carry out Ifá's advice. As Ogún slept against a tree, Ochosi passed by and carelessly dropped his ébo on top of Ogún. A battle ensued, but after Ochosi pleaded forgiveness, they sat down to talk about their problems. In this moment a deer passed by, far in the woods and fast as thunder. Ochosi let his arrow fly, piercing the deer in the neck. "You see?," said Ochosi, "I can't reach him. By the time I work my way through the vegetation, the vultures have eaten him." Ogún grabbed his machete and rapidly opened a path to the deer, and they shared the catch. They went to Orula, made a pact, and have worked together ever since.

In this work Ogún and Ochosi are represented with deer antlers and an Ifá tray, implements used by Orula to perform the ébo. Because of their union, today in Cuba one finds the symbol of Ochosi, a bow and arrow, inside the *prenda* (receptacle) of Ogún, where his sacred objects are found.

The Ifá tray is the medium used by Orula for divination. The yellows and greens are colors of Ifá. Through the use of texture and color, beads used by devotees, as well as the pathways and the bush are symbolized.



Francisco "Gordillo" Arredondo  
*16 de noviembre (November 16)*  
 1991  
 acrylic on paper  
 24 x 32"

#### 16 DE NOVIEMBRE (NOVEMBER 16)

This work represents Agayú-Solá, the orishá of volcanoes. Next to him is a Ceiba, a tree sacred to the Cuban Lukumí, that they renamed Iroko. Every November 16, St. Christopher's day, a public ceremony is held in Old Havana where the public circles a Ceiba, and then visits the nearby church of St. Christopher. Because the Yorùbá in Havana associated their Orishá Agayú with this saint, and their homeland Iroko tree with the Ceiba, they began to bring their drums and dances out on this day to celebrate Agayú. Recalling the circling dances of Santería, here Agayú is circled by many orishá during the celebration of his day.



Francisco "Gordillo" Arredondo  
*Limpiando lo Mundo (Purifying the world)*  
 1993  
 acrylic on paper  
 40 x 24"

### LIMPIANDO LO MUNDO (PURIFYING THE WORLD)

This work demonstrates how Santería and Palo Monte liturgies can transcend their local environment and speak to global issues. This ability is one reason they have become practiced by Cubans and their non-Cuban godchildren on all continents.

Africans who lived in Cuba as slaves were barred from receiving educations; they did not speak the king's Spanish. Instead, they developed their own ways of speaking Spanish based on their experiences, and often mixed with Yorùbá or Kongo terms. The titles of these two works reflect this form of speech, just as its theme might reflect their way of seeing the world. Here, the gendered articles 'el' or 'la' are transformed to 'lo', reflecting the lack of gender differentiation in the Yorùbá language. As African-descendants learned to speak Spanish, they continued speaking their homeland languages in ritual contexts hidden to the larger society.

During Santería litany, devotees ask the orishá to banish *áno* (sickness), *ofó* (loss), *ikú* (unnatural death), *iña* (tragedy), *eyó* (war), *tiánka* (epidemics) in order to improve their current situation. This act is accompanied by an *ébo* (ritual cleansing). "Purifying the World" represents an *ébo* where elder santeros (with black profiles), accompanied by their *Egun* (ancestral spirits with white profiles) ritually cleanse the world. They use plumed animals (a rooster and a dove) while petitioning the gods to drive away the *osorbo* (misfortune, bad luck). One sees Eleguá, who opens all roads, represented as a small child. At the right, a santero leans upon the ground together with his *Egun*. They invoke Oroíña, a divinity that lives in the earth's core, seeking his powers to support this act. Eleguá holds the earth protectively in his arms. Many signs and attributes employed by the divinities to battle evil are depicted. Gordillo:

In this work I reflect my desire to rid the world of the evil surrounding it, from the unnecessary deaths caused by war, from the sickness and epidemics sprung from laboratory experiments, from corruption and vice, from all that which harms the well-being of the earth and its children.

Through color and texture, I reflect the force and magnitude of this *ébo*. The movement of lines and figures, the expression of the faces and animals, as well as the contrast of light and shadow, creates an atmosphere related to the ritual act, giving the sensation that the forces of good answer the call of the prayers. In Cuban-Yorùbá mythology all forces are personified; in the center appears the personification of evil leaving the earth. Aside from mythology, even one powerful man with erroneous ideas and visions can destroy the well-being and prosperity of a nation, filling it with *osorbo*.



Francisco "Gordillo" Arredondo  
*El Beso (The Kiss)*  
 1998  
 acrylic on canvas  
 30 x 40"

### EL BESO (THE KISS)

Some patakines tell that Olokun, god of the depths of the sea, is half-man, half-fish. According to others, Olokun is a woman, a siren, although Olokun remains undefined because s/he often "comes down" (arrives to the ceremony) masked. Olokun embodies those aspects of the sea terrifying and foreign to humans. According to the Ifá Odu "Iroso Orgunda," in order to demonstrate its power, Olokun wanted to "claim the land for the sea," that is, to level the land with the wrath of the sea, to drown humanity and all the animals. Hence Obatalá tied Olokun down to the bottom of the sea with seven chains. Gordillo:

My intention is not to reflect the patakines that surround this goddess, which represent her as half-woman, half-man. Instead, she is a woman in love, free of her chains and ties, possessed by the love of Ogún, who offers her a melon and a white chicken. The melon, coveted by Yemayá, becomes a being who contemplates the kiss. The chicken, who according to Yorùbá mythology was destined to create the earth, serenely observes the amorous relations of these guardians. One of the three Eleguas seen here [the one with a human form] represents a marine serpent that accompanies Olokun in the depths of the ocean. I use arrows, extracted from Bantú ritual signatures to evoke the movement of the sea. I utilize texture to give the sensation of rocks and coral.



Francisco "Gordillo" Arredondo  
*Madre una sola* (Only one mother)  
 1998  
 acrylic on paper  
 23 x 30"

### MADRE UNA SOLA (ONLY ONE MOTHER)

*Madre una sola* (Only one mother) depicts ideal love between mother and son, mythologized through reference to the love between two orishás: Changó/ son, and Yemayá/ mother. The cocoon that envelops their embrace is the mother's womb, as well as the placenta, the white tissue that, if still surrounding the emerging new-born, signals good fortune. The idea of the cocoon derives from Santería ritual, where new initiates dress themselves in white for 12 months in an enactment of rebirthing. Just as a child is born in the placenta of its mother, the initiate is reborn, along with his or her orishá. Again, Gordillo offers ample material for contemplation by placing layer upon layer of metaphor.

Blue predominates, evoking Yemayá. In the center, two figures — a mother and her child — embrace. On her head is a feather that is at the same time a head wrap. The seven white feathers on her neck are related to Yemayá. Gordillo:

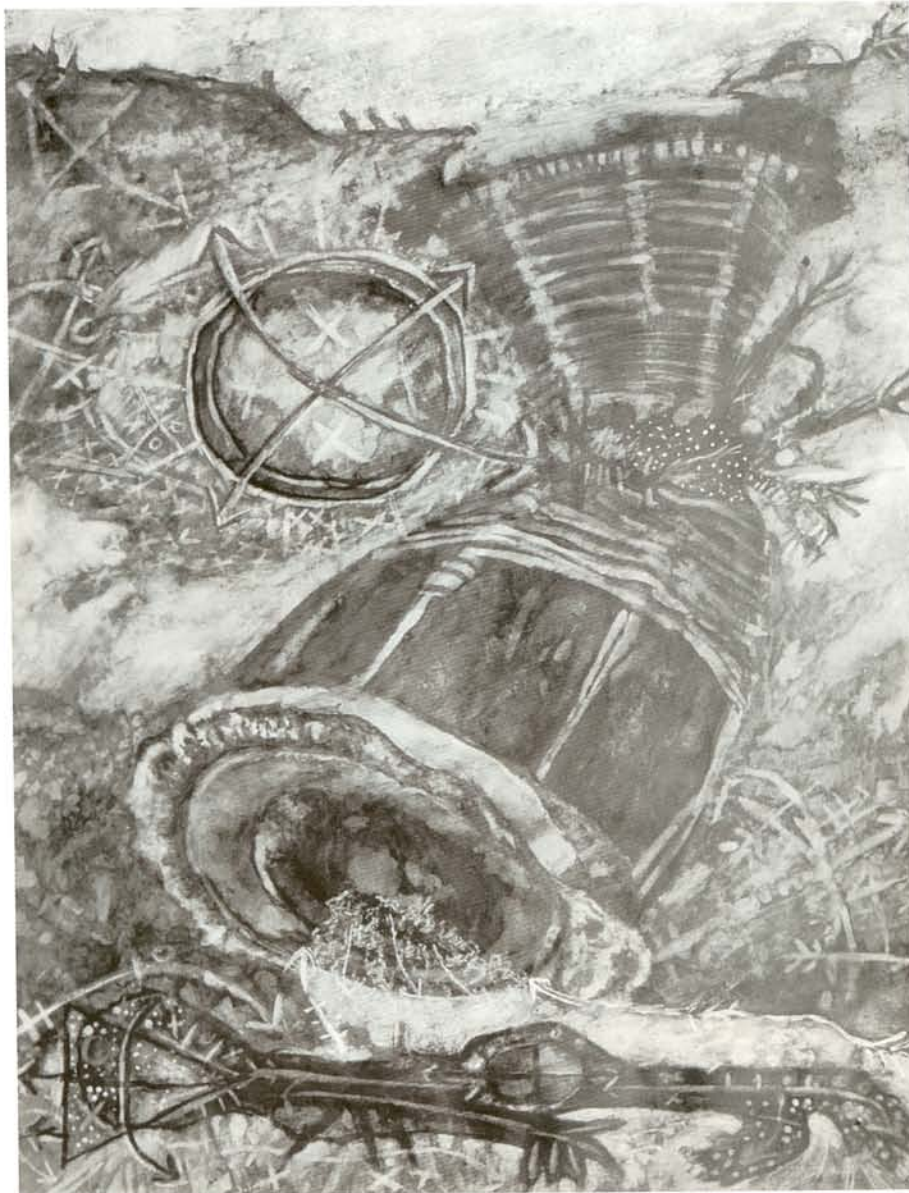
The white color represents "purity," because their love is pure. The mother embraces the cocoon firmly and securely; this cocoon is her womb.

The face of the son reflects tranquility and security. With his right arm he brings her to him, an embrace that doesn't quite encircle

but intends to. The left arm covers her head, protecting her from the wickedness of the world, represented by the red, white and blue static above their heads.

As a son, I have expressed all the respect and love I hold for my mother, that at times I can't express with words, but with acts. The patakín I represent here speaks of the reciprocal love between mother and son, or the love between Changó and Yemayá. It is told that Changó didn't know his true mother. When he arrived to Oyó, Nigeria, the land where he later became king, he encountered Yemayá and fell in love with her. Because she knew that he was her son, she told him to meet her in the sea, with the idea of castigating him. Just at the point of his drowning, Obatalá, the adoptive parent of Changó, appeared and revealed that his true mother was the "owner" of the sea. Since then, the god of fire respects and loves Yemayá Achabá [the avatar of Yemayá where she is the mother of kings] as an "omo [son] loves his iyá [mother]." As my mother is a "daughter" of Yemayá, there is reason to place in *Madre una sola* two figures, four faces; Yemayá and Changó, my mother and I.





Francisco "Gordillo" Arredondo  
*Saludo al tambor Batá (Greeting the Batá drum)*  
 1993  
 paper  
 20 x 16"

#### **SALUDO AL TAMBOR BATÁ (GREETING THE BATÁ DRUM)**

A "son" of Changó performs *móforibáile* (bowing down) before Añá, the orishá of the drum. According to mythology, Changó and the Batá drum are intimately related. The Batá depicted here contains Añá, the "secret" of the drum, that only Changó possesses. *Móforibáile* is a ritual greeting, where the devotee lies prone before either a consecrated drum or an elder santero, with head on the floor and arms at the sides. The batá is used to "bring down the saints" (call the orishás), to present an *iyawó* (a recent initiate) to the community and to enliven the *wemileres* (festive ceremonies).

The white color emerging from the instrument represents the *aché* (sacred power) of the drum which bathes the "son" of Changó. Above and next to the batá is a circle representing Africa — with its four cardinal points — the origin place of the orishas and their traditions. Behind the drum is a mystic atmosphere, with crosses, circles, arrows and other symbols of the divinities, who come to the call of the batá drum.

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