It is—or would like to be—a microbistory [microstory], the history [story] of a trade and its defeats, victories, and miseries, such as everyone wants to tell when he feels close to concluding the arc of his career, and art ceases to be long.

PRIMO LEVI, *The Periodic Table*

In certain societies at least (for example the Yoruba and the Akan) drumming is a highly specialized activity, with a period of apprenticeship and exclusive membership so that to a greater extent than in most forms of spoken art, drum literature is a relatively esoteric and specialized form of expression understood by many (at least in its simpler forms) but probably only fully mastered and appreciated by the few.

RUTH FINNEGAN, *Oral Literature in Africa*

I am Felipe García Villamil, *Balogún* for thirty years; *Olúañá*, of Matanzas, Cuba, for about forty years; *Omóañá* for almost forty-five years; *Olú Iyesá; Tata Nganga, Amasa Nkita, Rompe Monte Quinumba Maria Munda*, of the line *Yo Clava Lo Taca a Rubé; Isunekue* of the *Potencia Efik Kunambere* of Matanzas; *Ponponte Mio Siro Akanabión;* and my title in Abakuá is: *Isunekue Bijuraka Mundi, Isunekue Atara Yira Atara Kondó, Isunekue Baibo Eyene Baibo.*

I am the son of Tomasa Villamil Cárdenas and Benigno García García (with seven degrees in *Palo*), the grandson of Tomasa Cárdenas (daughter of Iñoblá Cárdenas) and Juan Villamil, and the grandson of Aniseto (Kongo) García Gómez and Carlota García.[1]

Background

Felipe García Villamil was the fifth of ten children of Tomasa Villamil and Benigno García. His parents, like many couples from their socio-economic background in Matanzas, were united in a common-law marriage. It was not uncommon for people like Felipe's parents to have successive unions during their lives, and for children to be brought up

by family members other than their biological parents. Households were complex domestic units, where the living space was shared not only by people linked through consanguineous or affinal ties but by people related to one another through ritual ties. Felipe's father had eleven other children, ten from a previous relationship and one daughter born after he separated from Felipe's mother. Every year at Christmastime, Benigno García would gather all his children around the dinner table in the small country town where he was born, Camarioca. Felipe thus knew all his half-brothers and -sisters, whom he regarded as "brothers and sisters taking away the half." Many of them were brought up in Tomasa's house, and they always showed her respect and affection.

The relationship between Felipe's parents remained cordial and supportive after Felipe's father left the house when Felipe was about ten years old. Even after both Tomasa and Benigno had entered into other common-law unions, Benigno would visit frequently and stay in Tomasa's house when he was sick and needed someone to take care of him. Felipe remembers that even when his parents were together, his father was always coming and going. Sometimes the whole family had to follow him in his peregrinations as he searched for work. Felipe recalls how, when the economic situation of the family got rough and they could not afford to live in the city, his father would carry them all—in ragged clothes and without shoes—to the countryside to work in a *batey*—a sugar mill. They would all work—even the smallest child—each according to his or her strength and capabilities. Felipe was very young when he began cutting and loading cane. He also helped his father built a *bohio*—a thatched-roof hut—when there was no house for them in the mills.

Benigno was a well-known and active *palero* (priest of the Palo religion) and trained Felipe as his ritual assistant. Even when he was not living with them anymore, he would frequently call on Felipe to assist him in the ceremonies. Benigno was also an Abakuá, a member of an all-male secret society.[2] Although he could not read or write, Felipe remembers him as someone who had a way with words, who could "communicate well with the intellectuals." He had links with many local politicians, and as Felipe describes it, he "used to do politics for others," which means Benigno would get votes for them. During election time, he would run around with the local politicians. After the elections,

the family was usually able to return to the city. According to Felipe, these were the best periods: His father would rent a house and buy clothes and shoes for everybody.

When Felipe was born, the family was living in a big house in Matanzas, in a neighborhood called Pueblo Nuevo. Felipe describes this as a "softer" neighborhood. The family was going through one of the good periods, and the house they were living in was the best Felipe ever knew. This house in Pueblo Nuevo had four bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, and a big patio surrounded by mango and avocado trees. After Felipe's parents separated, although Benigno contributed to the family expenses, the family went through hard periods. Tomasa then had to leave Pueblo Nuevo. The family moved several times until finally Tomasa settled in La Marina, a neighborhood that up to this day is one of the poorest in Matanzas. The streets have no drains, so when it rains heavily they become muddy rivers. Big wooden boards are then thrown from one side of the street to the other so that people may cross. Other members of Tomasa's family later moved to La Marina, and this neighborhood became the "territory" of the Villamil family.

When one visits Felipe's family in Matanzas, addresses and directions are unnecessary. One arrives at La Marina and simply asks to be taken to see the Villamil. Before you come to any of the houses occupied by members of the family, the word has already gotten around; they are already expecting you.

Many houses in La Marina are of the type known in Cuba as *solar*. Although the architectural design of the *solares* varies, in general each consists of a series of rooms that open to a long and narrow patio that runs the length of the building. Each room has a porch that is used as a kitchen. The toilet facilities are shared and are usually found at the end of the patio. The rooms that face the patio are either single or a large space divided into smaller rooms, by curtains or by partitions that do not reach the ceiling. Felipe's sister Beba shares the different rooms of one of these solares with her children and her grandchildren. The furnishings in Beba's house are sparse—a bed, a dining table, a few chairs, a wardrobe, an altar for the *orichas*—the spiritual entities of Santería.

Other houses in La Marina follow the traditional layout of many houses in Latin America: a living room at the entrance and a gallery of bedrooms, each with two doors—a door to connect one room to the

next and a door that opens to a central patio located in front of all the bedrooms. Bertina, Felipe's sister, lives in one of these houses, which Felipe built before he left Cuba.

The house where Felipe's mother used to live is located at the intersection of two streets, one of which is a dead-end street flanked by a river. That house has entrances from both of the streets. When I visited Matanzas, Tomasa shared the house with Osvaldo, the ritual expert of the family, and his relatives. The day I visited Osvaldo, I was received through the entrance from the street that faces the river. The day I was taken to see Tomasa, we came in through the other entrance, which seemed to be the main one. The house of Tomasa—the center of the ritual activities of the family and the place of refuge when times were hard—has several rooms in succession alongside the street. A large patio is located opposite the entrance, delimited by the gallery of rooms and the house next door. This is the patio where rituals that involve dancing take place. Here many of the ritual herbs are grown and the animals for the sacrifices are kept.

Felipe left his mother's house when he was very young and eloped with his girlfriend Sofía. Finding a separate place to live as a couple was expected of anyone who eloped, a common practice during Felipe's adolescence, when this was the road many followed to initiate a common-law union. The young man would bring the girl to the house of one of his relatives for several days, after which the fact of their union was considered established. Felipe dropped out of school in the sixth grade and, with the help of his father, built a large room in the solar where his father lived. He moved there with Sofía, and in this solar two of their eight children were born. After Felipe and Sofía separated, he lived with María Salomé, the mother of four of Felipe's daughters. When he left Cuba in 1980, Felipe had been living with the mother of his youngest Cuban son, Yaimel, who was just one year old.

Although Felipe lived in many places after he left his mother's house, he kept returning there when times were rough. Home for Felipe was always Tomasa's house.

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When Tomasa Villamil, Felipe's mother, was born (around 1903), only seventeen years had elapsed since slavery had been fully abolished in Cuba. In contrast to countries such as the United States, where the slave

trade ended in the early nineteenth century, in Cuba slaves were still arriving in the early 1870s. Of the estimated seven hundred thousand to 1 million slaves brought to Cuba, 85 percent were imported in the nineteenth century.[3]

Tomasa's maternal grandfather, Iñoblá, must have arrived in Matanzas with the slaves brought to work on the sugar plantation. Cuba, which had been late in joining other Caribbean countries in the plantation type of economy, by 1840 had become the world's largest producer of sugarcane (Klein 1986: 93). This sugar "revolution" required a large workforce, which the importation of slaves provided.

Most of the slaves brought over the Atlantic during the last decades of the trade ended up working on the sugar plantations. Hence, slavery concentrated increasingly in the major sugar zones. Among them, the provinces of Matanzas and Santa Clara alone held 46 percent of the slave population in 1846; by 1877 it had increased to 57 percent (Scott 1985: 80).

Abolition in Cuba was a slow process that began in the 1860s and was completed only in 1886. Thus, well into the nineteenth century new slaves arrived in Cuba, carrying with them their African cultures and religious practices, thereby revitalizing, replenishing, and influencing the religious knowledge of the existing slave population.

Although the living conditions of the slaves were harsh, the system of slavery was not monolithic; these conditions changed from one period, one region, or one *ingenio* (sugar plantation) to another. In many places there were cracks and fissures in the system, which the slaves took advantage of to piece together their broken lives. In doing so, the slaves had to create "core institutions" that would allow them to deal with the most ordinary yet most important aspects of their lives, that would answer to everyday needs such as cooking, cleaning, giving birth and raising children, burying the dead, establishing friendships and worshiping their deities. These institutions constituted the frameworks by which the material culture they brought from Africa could be partly maintained and transformed innovatively to adapt to the new environment.

In addition to the institutions the slaves created were others that, though created by the masters and given legal sanction, played an important role as places where the cultural material the slaves brought was kept, replenished, mixed, standardized, reinterpreted, and transformed into new traditions. The institution par excellence of this type

in Cuba was called the *cabildo*. In Cuba, the ethnic groups that represented the major cultural and linguistic groupings within the slave population were referred to as *naciones* (nations). Cabildos, officially recognized by the church and the state, grouped blacks that belonged to the same "nation" and played the double role of mutual-aid societies and centers for entertainment. In these societies the slaves were allowed to worship their gods, play their music, and participate as a group in official governmental and church activities such as processions, parades, and carnivals. Each cabildo had a house, frequently owned by the members, that served as its headquarters. Monetary quotas were collected among the members and then used to finance the activities of the cabildo, to help the members in need, to finance burials, and sometimes to buy members' freedom. The cabildo leaders were elected and were given names such as king, queen, and captain.

The government began to restrict the activities of these institutions from 1790 on, with a series of measures. In 1877 their meetings began to be supervised, and in 1882 it became mandatory for each cabildo to obtain a license, which had to be renewed every year. The process of legal intervention in the lives of the cabildos intensified after the abolition of slavery in 1886 and culminated in 1888 with a law that forbade the formation of any cabildo in the "old style," allowing them to be organized only as common-law associations. Many cabildos disappeared under these pressures, but many others continued to operate outside the law or became *casas de santo*, or house-temples.[4]

Felipe's maternal great-grandfather, a slave who bought his freedom, was the head of one of these cabildos. Like many other slaves in the Spanish colonies, Iñoblá must have obtained his freedom through a legal process known as manumission, which was based on a Spanish law that gave the right to slaves to obtain their freedom and which took place during the whole colonial period. One of the most common systems of manumission was the *coartación*, which involved the payment of a pre-established fee to the master (Castellanos and Castellanos 1988: 77–78).

Iñoblá was a Lucumí, the name given in Cuba to slaves of Yoruba origin. The slaves were assigned ethnic or tribal names that were usually attached to their personal names and helped identify the region of Africa they came from. However, these labels were frequently inexact, contradictory, or erroneous, not only because the records the slave