Project Title: Educational Anthropology of the Babalawo

For: Stone Center and Tinker Foundation Summer Field Research Grants for Graduate Students in Latin America and the Caribbean

With the munificent support of the Stone Center for Latin American Studies at Tulane University and the Tinker Foundation, this two-week research project was completed in Puerto Rico. The topic of this project is on being a Babalawo, focused primarily on his perceptions of his education as a priest. The Babalawo is considered the high-priest within the Lucumí religion, also known as Santería, which has its origin in West Africa. This brief field report will explore the background of the project, examine the three expected outcomes of the project, and finally touch upon the importance of the project.

The original project, as submitted to the Stone center, focused on the Babalawo in Cuba. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen circumstance, travel to Cuba was unavailable. However, Puerto Rico, as an alternative, was available. Indeed, Puerto Rico has a rich history and complex identities to explore. New connections with alternative Babalawo in Puerto Rico and proceeded with the planned study in Puerto Rico, instead of Cuba.

Puerto Rico is a unique location for three reason noted by this study. First, as a dependent territory of the United States, it is not a state and treated as an outsider within the US consciousness, even though it technically is an insider. There is a double consciousness around being Puerto Rican and American. Second, the Babalawo culture in Puerto Rico is directly of Cuban origin yet has a distinct Afro-Puerto Rican flavor. Puerto Rican cultural expressions like Bomba and Plena spoken of yet, subsumed within Afro-Cuban interpretations of spirituality. Third, the practitioners are generally orthodox Lucumí, yet there are also unorthodox practitioners that bring contributions from Nigeria, Benin, and even Haiti. In Cuba, two competing Babalawo organizations maintain and defend the Babalawo tradition and Lucumí purity. In Puerto Rico, unorthodox forms are active and interwoven, as there is no credible religious body with the authority able to expunge the heretical ways. Puerto Rico is a vibrant location with
multiple identities that create a complex mosaic that this study, and eventual related dissertation, explores.

For a successful research project in Puerto Rico, the study identified three outcomes appropriate for the newness of the locale and for the limited time available in the field. The outcomes were:

- **A. Meet and interview 3-5 Babalawo,**
- **B. Collect 10 plant specimens of medicinal and religion usage for the Tulane Herbarium,**
- **C. Make general connections that would facilitate further dissertation research.**

For outcome A, the study met and interviewed four Babalawo in Puerto Rico. The Babalawo were located in the capital, in a central mountain area, and on the west coast of the island. The first Babalawo contact developed through a Facebook connection; the other contacts developed using a snowball sampling method. The Babalawo were heterogeneous in terms of ages, years of experience, race, education, and socio-economic class. There were both orthodox Lucumí practices, as well as intermixed traditions practices under one roof. There was evidence of mixing with Haitian Vodun, Cuban styled Palo Mayombe, Dominican styled 21 Division, Puerto Rican styled Sanse and Espiritismo, along with Nigerian Babalawo practices.

For outcome B, the study received an equal level of success. The ethnobotany of the Babalawo world includes methods and techniques awaiting discovery. For this study, thirteen plant specimens were collected from three locations across the island. The plants included both dicots and monocots, collected at high elevation and at the coast. The plant materials are for both spiritual and medicinal purposes. Used singly or in conjunction with other plants, the plants are accompanied by prayers and other ritual actions. The samples are located at the Herbariums of the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras (UPRRP) and Tulane University.

The actualization of outcome C provided the contacts, which were essential to outcomes A and B. The first connection was a student (ABD) researcher from the University of Puerto Rico. Sharing a similar
interest in Afro-Puerto Rican religiosity, this exchange provided several highly influential people, including noted ethnobotanist Maria Benedetti¹, and helped secure housing for several days relieving the research budget. Dr. Jim Ackerman, botanist, and Dr. Gladys Nazario, ethnobotanist, of the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras campus came to the study through connections of Tulane faculty William Balée. Dr. Ackerman loaned a plant press and miscellaneous supplies. He also provided plant-collecting permits and authorization letter. Dr. Nazario, at her mountain top botanical garden, gave quick primer on plant collecting and general plant botany along with a tour of her gardens. This brief field report cannot highlight all of the connections made during this trip. However, this study is indebted to all the people who made the research work so successful.

Overall, this study was very accomplished with four Babalawo observed and interviewed, thirteen religiously significant plant specimens collect for the Tulane Herbarium, and a network of contacts and sources obtained. The initial subject of the meetings was to discuss their educational perceptions on becoming a Babalawo. Yet, during this time, the notion that Babalawo should engage in building equity in these communities developed from various conversations. The current events during this time in Puerto Rico had reached an impasse, where foreign creditors were demand severe austerity measures to facilitate their payments. Water rationing was only one of many hardships faced across the island. As with all financial cries, the poor and underrepresented suffer to a greater degree. More often than not, these same people partake of Babalawo services. The conversation with the Babalawo, along with prior experience led to forward-looking innovative emphasis on equity. This summer research project leads directly into an expanded dissertation project which is a more timely and relevant project with greater focus.

Appendix A – Plant Specimen Labels

PLANTS OF PUERTO RICO
UPRRP HERBARIUM

Cecropia schreberiana Miq.
Yagrumo hembra URTICACEAE

Municipality of Utuado: on the side of a hill facing Lago Caonillas. 18.271201 -66.629487, elev. 645 m. Small tree, ca. 3 m tall. In area with more mature specimens, including Yagrumo macho. Used to bring blessings into the home. A single dried leaf is hung over the front door.

VOUCHER: Ethnobotanical Studies
A. Odiduro 1 9 Aug 2015

PLANTS OF PUERTO RICO
UPRRP HERBARIUM

Miconia serrulata (DC.) Naud. det. J. D. Ackerman MELASTOMATACEAE Camasey

Municipality of Utuado: on the side of a hill facing Lago Caonillas. 18.271201 -66.629487, elev. 645 m.

VOUCHER: Ethnobotanical Studies.
A. Odiduro 2 9 Aug 2015

PLANTS OF PUERTO RICO
UPRRP HERBARIUM

Solanum rugosum Dunal.
Tabacón SOLANACEAE Det. J. D. Ackerman

Municipality of Utuado: on the side of a hill facing Lago Caonillas. 18.271201 -66.629487, elev. 645 m.

VOUCHER: Ethnobotanical Studies.
A. Odiduro 3 9 Aug 2015

PLANTS OF PUERTO RICO
UPRRP HERBARIUM

Tradescantia zanonia (L.) Sw. Cohitre Blanco (Canutillo) COMMELINACEAE

Municipality of Cayey: on hillside behind home. Area is unmaintained, but owner has planted a variety of items. 18.144467 -66.092477, elev. 495 m. No fruits or flowers present.

VOUCHER: Ethnobotanical Studies.
A. Odiduro 4 16 Aug 2015

PLANTS OF PUERTO RICO
UPRRP HERBARIUM

Piper peltatum L. Baquña, Monkey’s Hand PIPERACEAE

Municipality of Cayey: on hillside behind home. Area is unmaintained, but owner has planted a variety of items. 18.144467 -66.092477, elev. 495 m. No fruits or flowers present.

VOUCHER: Ethnobotanical Studies.
A. Odiduro 5 16 Aug 2015

PLANTS OF PUERTO RICO
UPRRP HERBARIUM

Pilea microphylla (L.) Liebm. det. J. D. Ackerman URTICACEAE

Municipality of Cayey: on hillside behind home. Area is unmaintained, but owner has planted a variety of items. 18.144467 -66.092477, elev. 495 m.

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PLANTS OF PUERTO RICO  
UPRRP HERBARIUM

Mimosa pudica L.  
Morivivi  
FABACEAE: MIMOSOIDEAE

Municipality of Cayey: on hillside behind home. Area is unmaintained, but owner has planted a variety of items. 18.144467 -66.092477, elev. 495 m. No fruits or flowers present.

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A. Odiduro 7  
16 Aug  
2015

Phyllanthus amarus Schum.  
Quinina  
PHYLLANTHACEAE

det. J. D. Ackerman

Municipality of Cayey: on hillside behind home. Area is unmaintained, but owner has planted a variety of items. 18.144467 -66.092477, elev. 495 m. Fruits present.

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2015

Alternantha ficoidea (L.) P. Beauv.  
det. J. D. Ackerman  
AMARANTHACEAE

Municipality of Cayey: on hillside behind home. Area is unmaintained, but owner has planted a variety of items. 18.144467 -66.092477, elev. 495 m.

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Plantago major L.  
Llantén  
PLANTAGINACEAE

Municipality of Cayey: on hillside behind home. Area is unmaintained, but owner has planted a variety of items. 18.144467 -66.092477, elev. 495 m.

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Momordica charantia L.  
Cundeamor  
CUCURBITACEAE

Municipality of Cayey: on hillside behind home. Area is unmaintained, but owner has planted a variety of items. 18.144467 -66.092477, elev. 495 m.

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Euphorbia thymifolia L.  
Cadillo del Camino  
EUPHORBIACEAE

Municipality of Cayey: on hillside behind home. Area is unmaintained, but owner has planted a variety of items. 18.144467 -66.092477, elev. 495 m.

VOUCHER: Ethnobotanical Studies.
A. Odiduro 12  
16 Aug  
2015
PLANTS OF PUERTO RICO
UPRRP HERBARIUM

Ceiba pentandra (L.) Gaertn.
Ceiba, White Silk-Cotton MALVACEAE

Municipality of Rincon: On private property in the center of Rincon, near an old water tower, la cambija. At least 15 m tall, several buttresses nearly 1 m high. on hillside behind home. Area is unmaintained, but owner has planted a variety of items. 18.338779 -67.2535765, elev. 7 m.

VOUCHER: Ethnobotanical Studies.
A. Odiduro 13 19 Aug 2015