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Spirit Dolls (*Muñequitas*) in New York Puerto Rican Homes:

Engaging with Saints and Ancestors

BY EILEEN M. CONDON

Introduction

Forms, functions, and meanings of altars in Puerto Rican homes on the island or the US mainland are already well documented in association with Espiritismo and Santería, two forms of Caribbean religious belief and practice. Ethnographic descriptions of the roles that dolls play within these contexts of belief are less common. In the New York Puerto Rican homes in which I was welcomed between 2004 and 2007, as a participant

observer in Puerto Rican Espiritismo, altars decorated with flowers, food, water offerings, and statues of the saints co-existed with *mesitas* and other doll displays. *Mesitas* are little tables, set with offerings for the dolls who sit beside them. The dolls sitting at these tables were mass-produced as well as handmade. The costumes and colors of the dollies were traditional and bore meanings related to Espiritismo and Santería.

In this article I report beliefs and practices

that I observed and collected via interviews related to *muñequitas*/*muñecas de trapo* (dolls/fabric dolls), as they were called by my friends in Dutchess and Orange Counties, New York, and relate these findings to the work of Raquel Romberg (2003), Margarite Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (2003), David Brown (2003), Kay Turner (1999), and Robert Farris Thompson (1983) in this area. The displays of *muñecas* created sacred places in the home, apart from and alongside



Jacinta's "Spanish lady" ancestor doll, seated at her living room *mesita*, across from her African ancestor doll, "La Negrita" (shown below). Jacinta honored her African and Spanish ancestors at the same *mesita*. All photos by Eileen Condon. The first seven photos here are courtesy of the Dutchess County Arts Council (soon to be Arts Mid-Hudson).



Jacinta's handmade "Negrita" doll up close.

the home altar, where deceased loved ones, ancestors, and saints (in the Catholic as well as the African Orisha sense in Santería) are not only honored, but expected to come and play—literally, as well as symbolically. Photos of doll displays in three Puerto Rican homes in New York are included, and contextualized within the beliefs and practices of the doll owners, members of a group practicing Espiritismo and Santería (something like what scholars Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert and others have described as “Santerismo”), across several in-home settings in Dutchess County, Orange County, and the Bronx, New York. One member of this group also made

some of the dolls. The dollmaker and the doll owners expressed their beliefs in their often playful interactions with these items but also in their stories about how loved ones, ancestors, and the saints communicate literally and symbolically through the dollies which honor them in these homes. The names of these tradition bearers have been changed, at their request, to enable the group members to continue to keep their participation in these communities of belief largely private.

Fieldwork Context

Over the course of my work as folk arts program director at the Dutchess County

Arts Council from 2004 to 2007, I developed a number of soul-nourishing friendships with a group of Puerto Rican women. About three months after I had met Rita, on the way to a work-related meeting, we stopped for lunch in a diner, and I shared with her my longstanding interest in saint lore (legends and other stories related to Catholic saints, especially the traditional genre of stories of receiving favors from St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the modern-day Carmelite saint known as the Little Flower). This piqued Rita's interest right away. She commented that her husband had a great devotion to this saint. In typical modesty about what I would later learn to be her *facultades*, or gifts as an *espiritista*—a medium and advocate for healing within her community—Rita commented very offhandedly that she had seen Saint Theresa about 10 years before. Over my chicken soup, I tried to register what Rita had just said. There was a pause. “You *saw* Saint Theresa?” I queried.

Rita explained the circumstances of her vision. Having no concept at that point of her status as a healer and never having even heard the word *espiritista*, I resolved to interview Rita about this story at a later date if I got the chance. That exchange created a bond within our developing working relationship. Eventually, I shared a meal with Rita at her home. Once again, over a meal, I sensed that some new (to me) form of spiritual practice, one for which I had no name as yet, seemed to be beckoning. “You’ll have to come downstairs and see our altar,” Rita said. “We’ll let you do that some day. Just don’t tell Father.” That half-joking remark marked, for me, the beginning of my relationship of discovery with Rita and friends. I spent most Fridays over the next two years at “circle” (also known as white table, *misa espiritual*, or *velada*) at Rita’s house. I enjoyed the old-time recordings of Celina and Reutilio, applying *cascarilla*, cigar smoke, and perfume to my head and hands, being whacked on my shoulders and back for my spiritual health with bandanas and freshly picked local plants, and above all, listening to what Rita, her husband, other *espiritistas*, and the occasional visiting *santera* (priestess in Santería) might advise me and others, in matters practical and spiritual. Later during this period, I also joined some members of the group on trips to “toques” or drumming/dance/trance



Two handmade fabric “Negritas” in Rita’s living room.

sessions honoring the Orishas or West African deities, at a Bronx *casa de santo*. Fieldwork feels like the wrong name for this adventure in my life—it was extremely fun and very nourishing to me, personally. Perhaps, it was just folklore fieldwork at its best.

Overview of the Dolls and Their Place in the Homes

As a way of introducing the narrower focus of this article—*muñecas* or dolls in these friends’ homes—I will share some of the photographs I took in my three friends’ homes. None of these women consented to having their primary home altar photographed for this piece (which was originally presented as an American Folklore Society conference paper in 2006). However, none objected to my photographing her dolls. The table on the next page presents facts about the doll owners and the dolls themselves in a comparative manner. Most of this information was gleaned from semi-structured interviews with each doll owner during the fieldwork period. Based on these facts, I offer, further in the table, some general observations and further comparisons to relevant social science literature.

Placement of the Dolls in the Home

Although the placement of dolls in these homes was very varied, there did seem to be some general rules governing the dolls’ locations. Dolls were not to be placed upon the home altar. Jacinta, Maria, and Rita kept and attended complex home altars, peopled by statues of Jesus, Mary, Catholic saints, syncretic saints (such as San Lazaro, who represents the Orisha Babalú Ayé), Orisha images (such as a rooster representing Changó), Negritas, Negritos, and Indios, freshened with offerings of food, fruit, water, wine, rum, and flowers. However, the dolls were always seated or displayed elsewhere. Maria placed her mother’s smaller dolls above her altar on a closet shelf, and placed two on or near a rocking chair in the room’s opposite corner. Her mother had passed away in this chair.

Jacinta seated her dolls at what she called her *mesita*, which holds water and coffee offerings, Spanish cards, fans, and other items she believes the dolls may appreciate. Rita’s dolls were located in the living room, next to her son’s conga set. Her son knew to pull “La Negrita” nearer to his drums when he played for guests. He knew he was playing “for” La

Negrita or what she represented (an African ancestor or spirit guide). Rita’s Negritas were also moved to a chair in her basement during a *velada*, that is, a fiesta in honor of a saint, such as San Lazaro/Babalú Ayé. Therefore, another “rule” seemed to be that although the dolls would not be located upon an altar, they could be and would be moved or relocated to other areas where some form of spiritual celebration might take place in the house.

The dolls were never relocated to Rita’s altar room, despite the fact that she “works” there in prayer. Rita’s explanation was that the dolls are “too material” to be appropriate there. By contrast, two dolls graced the altar room at the Bronx *casa de santo* that this group frequents. Is there a different rule? Are those dolls “*prepara’á*” (prepared, or empowered) in such a way as to cast their protection over all who pass through that altar room into the room where the *toque*, drumming/dance celebration, is about to take place? Since I was not in a position to ask that question while I was visiting that *casa de santo*, I have searched instead for some possible answers in the literature on Espiritismo and Santería.

The use of tables dedicated to ancestors (*bóvedas*) and ground-level *Egun* (ancestor) shrines with similar offerings is well known in relation to a spectrum of Afro-Cuban religious practices (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 184). Rita was familiar with the word *bóveda* and said she had sometimes put up a *bóveda* with cups of water and a crucifix for “peace and tranquility” in the home. Her dolls, however, would not sit at a *bóveda*, she said. Jacinta’s greater familiarity with Cuban and Puerto Rican Santería in the Bronx could provide the context for her familiarity with and recreation of a *mesita* for her dolls. The concept or purpose of a *mesita* for these women was therefore not quite synonymous in their minds with a *bóveda* or an altar.

Generational Gaps in Transmission of Doll Beliefs/Practices

The doll owners I interviewed did not maintain their doll displays from childhood onward. Rather, and interestingly, they came back to their beliefs and practices related to

Descriptive Table on *Muñequitas/Muñecas de Trapo* Dutchess and Orange Counties, New York

Doll Owners	Jacinta (PR, Catholic, attends Mass regularly, dollmaker, aspiring medium, formerly aspiring Santería initiate, participates in Espiritismo prayer circles, long-term experience with Santería as an uninitiated observer, consulted <i>santera</i> to understand dolls)	Maria (PR, Catholic, attends Mass periodically, daughter of <i>espiritista-santera</i> , attends Espiritismo prayer circles, recently learned significance of dolls through consultation with local <i>santera</i> , childhood experience with Santería, uninitiated in Santería)	Rita (PR, Catholic, attends Mass regularly, working <i>espiritista</i> , daughter of <i>espiritista</i> , runs prayer circles, introducing children to Espiritismo and Santería, learning significance of dolls through consultation with local <i>santera</i> , uninitiated in Santería)
# Dolls	3 (A-C)	6 (A-F)	4 (A-D)
Age of dolls	<10 years old	Circa 40 years old	<15 years old
Provenance	One from friend, one from son, one self-made	Inherited from her mother	Gifts from friends and husband's cousin
Material—doll body	Cotton and synthetic cloth, plastic	Plastic	Cotton and synthetic cloth, plastic
Material—clothes	Cotton/synthetic	Cotton/synthetic	Cotton/synthetic
Reference term or name(s) for doll	<i>Muñequita</i> , <i>muñeca</i> , <i>muneca de trapo</i> , B's spirit name not yet revealed, once revealed would be private, <i>La Negrita</i>	No personal names; dolls, <i>muñecas</i>	Twins (C-D) have personal names only she knows; otherwise <i>muñequita</i> , <i>muñeca</i> , <i>La Negrita</i> , <i>La Negra</i> , <i>La Madama</i> , <i>Mis Negritas</i> (A-B)
Handmade or mass-produced	2 hm, 1 mp	6 mp	2 hm, 2 mp
Maker/manufacturer—doll	Self (B), unknown	Uneeda Doll Co., Inc. (B), unknown	Jacinta (A), Venezuelan dollmaker (B), unknown (C-D)
Maker—clothes	Unknown, self, mp	Self, L'il Dolls, misc. children's clothing companies	Jacinta and Venezuelan dollmaker (A-B); mp (C-D); alternate hats crocheted by R's daughter
Color—doll	2 black fabric, 1 light brown tone plastic	2 brown tone plastic, 4 fair tone plastic	2 black fabric, 2 fair tone plastic
Colors—clothing	A=pink-blue floral; B=white/red, C=blue and yellow	Highly variable (yellow/white, all white, purples, pink/white, other)	Blue/yellow gingham (A), green/white (B), purple/yellow (C), and blue/white (D)
Doll meanings	"Spiritual symbols" through which you can learn about a spiritual guide/ an ancestor (distant), whose name may be discerned by a <i>santera</i> or in a dream; protection if prepared (many ways of preparation, stuffing not mentioned)	Can "symbolize" various possible "entities" (more or less enlightened), connected with the parent's guides passed to child, protection if prepared (meaning many things, not familiar with stuffing)	"Part of a tradition—my mother had one" but "anybody can own one." Akin to Feng Shui or <i>mezuzot</i> —protect the home and family. Can be "baptized," prepared in many ways, including being stuffed with herbs in middle and symbols of saints in arms, legs, head, an "African" way; twins are also "doctors" in the Church—Cosmas and Damian—good to have in home with children; make R feel "comfortable"
Clothes meanings	Colors represent any of the saints, colors and designs for B's red and white clothes came in J's dream	Colors may represent the saints, colors and designs for 2 purple outfits came in M's dream	Colors represent saints or just colors owner likes, especially son's guardians Babalú & Yemayá
Locations	Living room, bedroom, <i>mesitas</i> , shelves, chairs, any table in home	Standing on floor against wall or sitting on rocking chair in bedroom, on shelf over altar in bedroom closet, in living room on chair for a prayer circle	Living room on floor near congas or on living room chair, on chair in basement for special occasions (white table, saint's days, <i>misa espiritual</i>)
Believed to move	Yes but "when I'm not looking"	Yes, but not from room to room	Yes
Observed to have moved	No—"If they move, I move—I run!"	Yes ("They go from standing to sitting, and sitting to standing, yes.")	"No, but it's possible—well, <i>La Negrita</i> did, (A), just once."
Observed moving	No	No	No
Offerings	Glass of water, tiny mug of black coffee, cards, fans, cigars, candles	Red wine, rum in small glass	Rum, wine, black coffee, water in small glasses, music (drums)
Location of offerings	<i>Mesita</i> , floor, altar, any table in home	Home altar	Home altar or bookcase in basement, congas in living room
Dolls "Prepared"?	"Not yet" (may or may not mean stuffed)	Yes (but not meaning stuffed)	"Baptized" ("I baptize all my dolls!") though not presently stuffed
Other Decorative Dolls in Home	A few	A few	Extensive collection
Other things dolls believed to like or <i>santera</i> said they would like	Jewelry (earrings and necklaces)	Jewelry (anklet, earrings, necklace), take socks and shoes off, being taken outside house	Crib with handmade crocheted blankets, changes of clothes (C-D), being moved around house (A)



Two mass-produced spirit dolls in Rita's living room, twin dolls that she associated with the Orishas, Babalú Ayé and Yemayá.

muñequitas close to the age of 50. In regard to practices of Santería, there were some breaks in the direct transmission of these beliefs from parents. The relative secrecy of the traditions (concealments from clergy or persons believed to be unsympathetic) is not, however, the reason these women provided to explain the gap. Jacinta, who was about 60 years old, started making dolls only 10 years before. She made some for herself, four for another friend in this group, and gave one to Rita.

Rita got interested in spiritual dolls when various friends gave her some. She had also been a lifelong collector of dolls of all kinds. Although María, who was in her early 50s, was the daughter of an initiated *santera-espiritista*, she did not begin to explore the meanings of her mother's dolls until after her mother's death, a few years before our interview. She expressed regret that her mother never explained the practices she was exposed to as a little girl at "Doña Anna's" storefront church of Santería in El Barrio (Spanish Harlem, New York City, where María grew up). María retains vague memories of being able to "see" (spirits) in childhood and regrets that these abilities were not cultivated further. I asked María why her mother didn't explain her

practices. María said she didn't know. Later in life, María credited her mother's prescription of an offering of pumpkin and honey to La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre (Ochún) with saving her pregnancy. At the end of a high-risk pregnancy, María went into labor and the pumpkin, which had remained oddly intact

for nine months, sank and blackened immediately. For this reason, she has continued to honor Ochún/Caridad del Cobre and has passed these practices on to her son and his wife to protect her grandchild. At the same time, María confesses ambivalence about Espiritismo. A proactively helpful person in her family and in her workplace, María said she often felt passive at these gatherings, not yet comfortable with actively participating as a medium in Espiritismo. She also felt uncomfortable with waiting to receive advice from mediums at the table. Therefore, María attended *veladas* periodically and widened her spiritual practice by incorporating Reiki and other forms of alternative healing, which she actively practiced outside this circle.

Bridging the Generational Gap by Consulting a *Santera*

All three women had consulted with a younger Puerto Rican *santera*, who was part of this social/spiritual circle, in order to understand the meanings of the dolls they inherited, were given, or were inspired to create. *Muñequitas* seem to be used in relation to both Espiritismo and Santería. In the Bronx *casa de santo* with which this group was affiliated, there were two *muñecas* on



Dolls which María inherited from her mother's altar when she died. A *santera*, that María consulted confirmed that these dolls had been "prepared," or empowered, and should be treated with due respect in her home.

display in an altar room which preceded the room where people bring offerings of food for the Orisha(s) being honored at a *toque de santo* (drumming/dance/song/trance session honoring Orishas and initiates). On the right, a brown-skinned doll sat enthroned high off the ground, dressed in a ruffled yellow and white dress (Ochún) and on the left, a fair-skinned doll sat enthroned in blue for Yemayá. Both were mass-produced, plastic dolls, dressed in homemade clothing. The doll owners interviewed here believed that dolls in *casas de santo* are dressed in the colors of the Orishas governing that house, i.e., owning the heads of the house's *madrina* and *padrino* (or *babalawo*).

The Meaning of Empowered Dolls

For me, one of the most interesting aspects of understanding the meanings of *muñequitas* came through exploring the stories I had heard group members share about spirits communicating through the dolls. The doll owners frequently described how dolls and other objects could be “prepared” (*prepara’u* or *prepara’o*) to protect oneself, one’s home, or family. All three women use the term “prepared” or “*prepara’o*,” and all three believe dolls can be animated by spirits—with or without “preparation,” and with God’s permission. As I will discuss in relation to the literature, “preparation” can entail many ways of interacting with a doll or another object. These women believe objects can be prepared in many different ways, for many different purposes.

Related Perspectives in the Literature

While all of the clothing the dolls in this study wear seem to have meanings related to Orishas among the Seven African Powers, especially Yemayá, mother goddess of the sea, and Ochún, river goddess of love and marriage, the owners say that the spirits primarily associated with their dolls, literally or symbolically, are not simply the saints themselves but are actually their spirit guides—*una “Negrita”* or “*Una Española*” in Jacinta’s case. The spirits believed to be inhabiting and/or



A larger, standing spirit doll belonging to Maria, which she keeps in her bedroom.

symbolically associated with the dolls seem to correspond to some of the broad “spirit guide” categories in Espiritismo (such as *La Negra*, *La India*, *El Gitano*, etc.). These associations do not exclude additional meanings related to Santería, though, or more individual meanings and ideas.

Maria and Jacinta, for example, believe it possible that the spirits associated with their dolls could be “enlightened” or “developing” spirits, of persons formerly alive now advancing their spiritual development by assisting others. This classification of *los muertos* (spirits of the dead) is well documented in relation to Kardecian and other varieties of Puerto Rican and Cuban Espiritismo (Romberg 55, 58, 147; Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 175

and 190–191, citing Harwood 1977), and not inconsistent with the orthodox Roman Catholic understanding of the intercessory role of saints and other dead in the afterlife (e.g., the proclamation of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church, that she would spend her time in heaven doing good for people on earth, sending down a shower of roses as the fruit of her ongoing intercession for humans after death).

Whereas Rita’s and Jacinta’s dolls seem to represent spirit guides who are ancestors in a general sort of way (rather than *muertos* or *muertas* known in life), Maria’s dolls are inhabited by her mother’s guides. She experiences them, she says, as a sign of her mother’s ongoing, caring presence. The “maternal



A home-sewn outfit for Maria's spirit dolls, the design of which came to her in a dream.

legacy” of daughters inheriting their mothers’ dressed statues, altar assembly techniques, and other ethnic and personal spiritual practices and beliefs was documented by Kay Turner in her study of women’s altar traditions (1999, 42–59). It is as if the dolls are an extension of Maria’s mother’s ongoing love—and vice versa, a sign of Maria’s ongoing desire to know her mother after her death—to better understand her mother’s life as an *espiritista* and *santera*. When Maria dresses the dolls, she is honoring her mother as well as her mother’s guides, who, as the consulting *santera* confirmed for Maria, do still inhabit the dolls.

Positive and Negative Associations with the Dolls

Raquel Romberg’s detailed descriptions of *botánica* supplies in modern Puerto Rico, her informants’ altar displays, and the various items they used in their work include, surprisingly, practically no reference to dolls, apart from one cautionary mention. By contrast, the women I interviewed affirmed that

muñecas were, and are, visibly part of Espiritismo and Santería in New York. Jacinta says she has seen “*muñecas de trapo*” on sidewalk tables in the Bronx, and others saw them in Bronx *botánicas* as well.

The impulse to create a *muñeca de trapo* (*trapo* meaning rag), or to buy a doll in a store and clothe it, is both personal and traditional. The impetus may come through dreams. Jacinta explained that she dreamed of her Negrita’s design and consulted

with her then-*madrina* in Santería to see if she should create a doll based on the dream. Maria dreamed of two purple outfits and similarly consulted a *santera* to ask whether the dream outfits should be applied to her mother’s dolls.

Romberg comments that “iconicity—or rather, the excess of iconicity in Afro-Latin worship—has a long colonial history in Latin America, now being recharged by the global commodification and circulation of images” (82–83). Without elaborating further on the meaning of the word “inhabit,” Romberg speaks of “the power of the entities that inhabit icons” and which Puerto Ricans honor by clothing statues and offering them flowers, food, and drink. My friends in Dutchess and Orange Counties reminded me of the continuum that exists between a statue and a doll—one which is also evident in photos of dressed Infant Jesus statues in Kay Turner’s 1999 study of Latino and multicultural women’s altar traditions (45, 48, 49). As Maria put it, she sees the movements of her dolls

as a “manifestation” which can arise by any person’s intention, in the same way that the statue of a Virgin might be seen to cry water or oil through the permission of God.

Romberg’s study presents the terms *brujería* and *brujal/brujo* (witchcraft and witch) as terms that her informants applied to themselves rather freely, indicating a range of often simultaneous practices of Espiritismo, Santería, Palo Monte, and Catholicism. My experience with this group, with whom I socialized weekly for two years, indicates that the word “*brujá*” is used rather differently. I have heard this term employed jokingly in reference to self or others—with some of the pride and empowerment that Romberg describes as common, in some social circles, in Puerto Rico. However, I have only heard the term used among friends here in New York. The group does not use this term frequently or publicly, though, and neither as a serious accusation, nor in the presence of Roman Catholic clergy. To indicate a person who practices *trabajo malo* or negative work, this group would use the phrase “works with both hands.” This was not a compliment, but it also fell short of an accusation of working with the left hand alone. The phrase signifies an extension of *el trabajo*—the good work of God, the saints, and those gifted by God with *facultades*—into something different. Working with both hands was said to make “both hands dirty.” *Trabajos malos* were said to come back threefold or even tenfold upon the practitioner, within and after his or her lifetime. Rita distinguished between work for general “protection” (to protect the home or the family from negative influences or acts), but not specifically as an undoing of a particular person’s bad works. The hypothesis of removing the bad work of another by *despojo* or other traditional cleansing practices was present, but I never heard a particular person named as the source of or doer of bad work. In other words, *brujería* could be joked about, but only to a point, within this social circle, as far as I could tell in the two years I spent with them, at least.

Romberg mentions that she asked one of her informants in Puerto Rico why she “did not sell fabric dolls used in *trabajos malos*

at her botanica” (142–43); the informant answered, “I have a clean cuadro” (a clean set of guides). This detail would seem to suggest that fabric dolls are associated with *trabajos malos* in Puerto Rico. Romberg’s store owner (143) told her that her *cuadro* would not allow her to sell anything that could be used for harm. This is problematic, given the concept of “preparation” of objects, which appears to be pervasive and mostly positive, in the vocabulary of the group I came to know. Anything can be *prepara’o*, for any reason.

Of the women I interviewed, one of the three had received a suggestion from an older African-Puerto Rican *espiritista* to stuff one of her twin dolls with herbs in the abdomen and with saints’ symbols in the head, arms, and legs to enable it to protect the home and the family. I asked whether this preparation would attract a spirit to the doll, which would then protect the home. The answer was no, that the preparation itself might provide protective energy to the home, similar to the use of mirrors in Feng Shui. Spirits were not necessarily involved—but Rita added that she does ask the statues of saints in her house to

“keep an eye on the house” while she is gone.

African and African-American art historian Robert Farris Thompson (1983, 117–131) provides an illustrated annotation of Kongo *minkisi* containers—charms composed of medicines that embody and direct protective spirits. The medicines are concealed within vessels that vary greatly but do include wooden images and statuettes. The inhabiting spirit may be believed to be an ancestor, coming back to assist the owner. Thompson’s photographs (plates 75 and 76) serve to demonstrate the importance of the cords and ribbons that, he claims, emphasize the protective forces bound within. Thompson states that “Kongo-Cubans of the nineteenth century made *minkisi*-figurines to mystically attack slaveholders” (125) and cites Lydia Cabrera’s description of “Magic doll-like figurines about 50 centimeters high, carved in wood...with magic substance inserted in a small cavity” in Cuba (125, citing Cabrera 1948, 248–49).

Although this group’s beliefs are shaped by Spiritismo, in large part, and by exposure to the traditions of African-Cuban *babalamos* and

santeras at the Bronx *casa de santo* which they visit, Rita and others do recognize the African roots of some of their spiritual traditions, as well. I wondered whether the sashes that most of these New York dolls wore around their waists—whether or not they were stuffed or prepared in any way at all—might still echo, structurally, the cords and ribbons formerly used to bind spirits into the Kongo-derived and creolized African, Haitian, and Afro-Cuban *minkisi* figures that Thompson discusses. When I shared Thompson’s book, *Flash of the Spirit*, with Rita, she expressed interest, and said she knew the recipe an older African-Puerto Rican *espiritista* had shared with her, for preparing her doll by stuffing it, was an African tradition.

Raquel Romberg’s work seemed to suggest that fabric dolls can have some negative associations in Puerto Rico. While Jacinta acknowledged that dolls could be put to negative use, like one’s *cuadro* (spirit guides) or one’s *facultades* (spiritual gifts), most in this group regard dolls as neutral in themselves, as any other man-made or natural object would be. Just like a rock, a bracelet, a statue, or a



Similar spirit dolls (dressed in the colors of the *Iwa*) at a Haitian *Bwa Kay Iman* celebration in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, in August 2013. Photo by Eileen Condon. Courtesy of the author.

candle, a doll may be subjected to negative or positive intentions and preparations for good or evil. Overall, the uses and meanings of the *muñecas* owned within this group seem to be positive, empowering, guide-related, and ancestor-oriented.

I was thrilled to discover in Santería scholar David Brown's work two photographs of *muñecas* (plates 21 and 22), one which he had seen during fieldwork in Havana in 1999, held by an older Cuban woman in a church procession on the feast of the Virgin of Regla or Yemayá. During the procession, Brown reports, the women and men dressed in blue and white, and the women carried female dolls similarly dressed (238, note on 359). Brown observes that the doll is likely to represent an ancestor who honored Yemayá rather than just the saint herself. Though as recent scholarship on creolized/syncretized traditions has observed—creolized expressions tend to “defy” etic categories and resist outside analyses (Baron and Cara 2003, 4)—I think David Brown is onto something that applies in New York as well: that a doll dressed as a saint does not necessarily represent the saint, at least not directly. “The dead come before the saint,” as the saying goes.

Just before revising this piece for *Voices*, I was delighted to see and to be able to photograph, a display of a number of dolls dressed in the colors of the *lwa*, at a Haitian celebration of *Bwa Kay Iman* in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, in August 2013. *Bwa Kay Iman* is the anniversary of the slave social gathering that began the Haitian Revolution in 1791. A participant in the celebration set up the dolls facing outward in a circle upon a red cloth, upon the stump of a large tree in the park, at lakeside, off to the side of the altars set up for the day's celebration. As with the dolls in Cuban and Puerto Rican settings here in New York, these dolls had mass-produced plastic bodies, but their costumes were homemade.

Citing the work of the Cubanist Fernando Ortíz (1920), Brown reported that such dolls were called “Anaquillés” in Cuba in colonial times (Brown 359, citing Ortíz [1920] 1960, p. 40, his fig. 9). Brown also documents the use of *muñecas* in Cuba at toques and in Cuban New Jersey in the late 1980s, as

parts of a “hybrid Palo Monte” throne assembled for an October 4th celebration in 1987. Following folklorist William Bascom's observations about the concealment functions of the saints' skirts and mantles (1950, 65), Brown points out that the skirts of the *muñeca* at a 1989 toque in Cuba concealed the *sopera* (the vessel used to contain the Orisha's stones, shells, and emblems) (Brown 238, 246, 359). Brown argues that skirts and mantles achieve more meanings than just concealment, however.

In conclusion, *muñecas*, or spirit dolls, have an intriguing history and a complex present involvement in Caribbean-American spiritual practices, in their many new homes in New York and beyond, which should be further studied. They are a bit spooky, at times, even to their owners and their makers. Sometimes they move around when you are not looking, it seems, or when you are out of the house. And they seem to have ways of making their wishes known. These dolls can inspire fear in an exciting and a lovable way. Like the ghosts of the beloved dead, they are a part of the family. For these women, and for visitors like me to their homes, *muñecas* signify the culture that is theirs, through their ethnic and spiritual heritages. The dolls also point toward the existence of God and the saints—Catholic and African, the ancestors, the afterlife, and a world unseen. They stand for the value of protecting family and home from harm. They remind their owners that their spirit guides, their deceased loved ones, and even more distant ancestors surround them in daily life. The dolls call up their owners' affectionate and respectful memories of parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends—people who have moved on but who still communicate their traditions and their loving, protective care, symbolically as well as literally, through the dolls. ▼

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The author thanks friends “Rita,” “Jacinta,” and “Maria” for granting personal interviews (two taped, one taken by notes, October 2006, at locations in Dutchess and Orange Counties, New York) and sharing their traditions between 2004 and 2007. Names have been changed by informants' requests. The original AFS paper, and this reworked article, are presented with the informants' permission on the condition of anonymity.

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