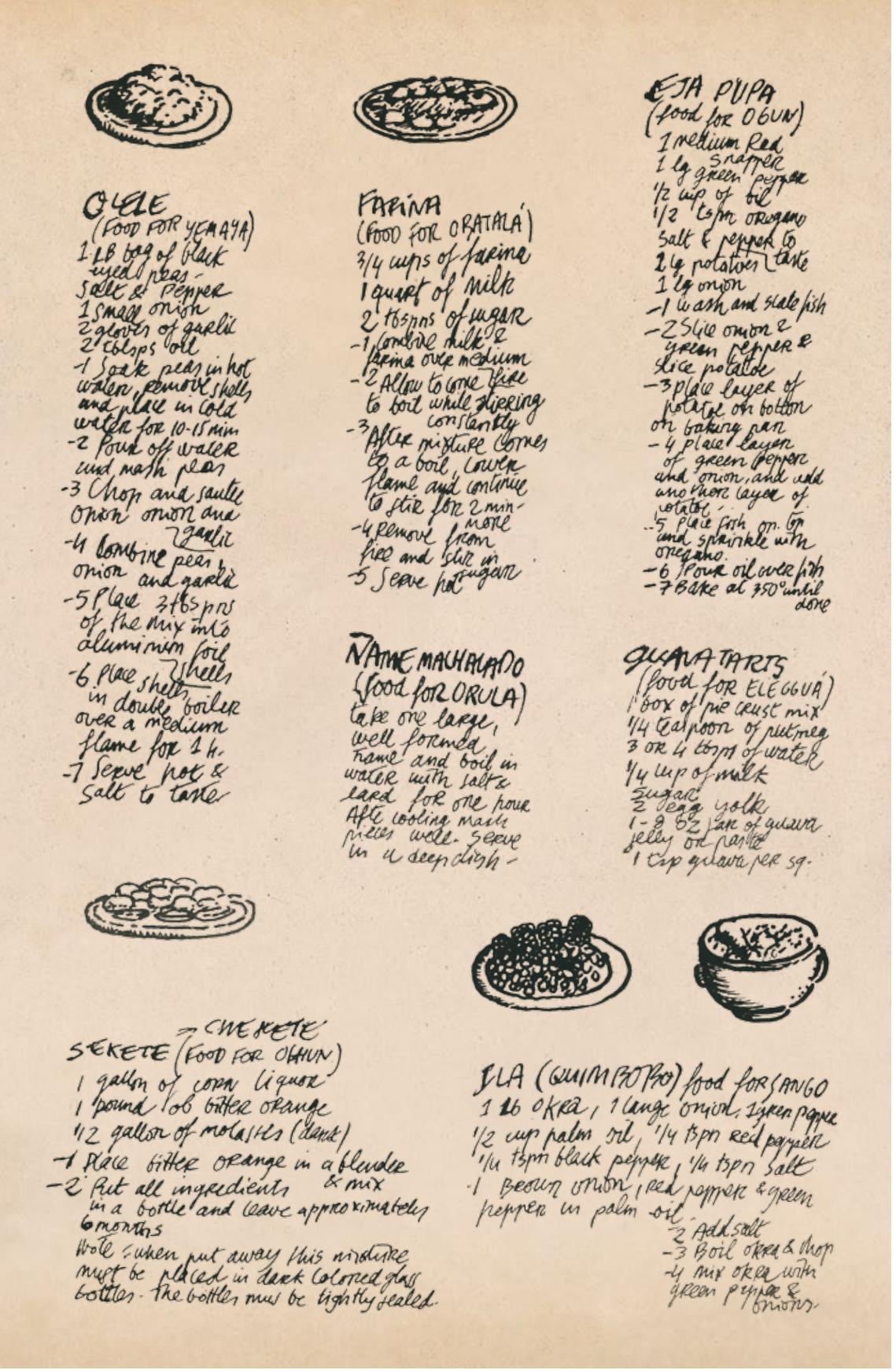

Drawings reproduced in the publication *Santa Comida / Holy Food*, El Museo del Barrio, New York, 1984. Preparatory drawings for the installation in Barcelona and Paris (p. 121).

SANTA COMIDA, New York, Miami, Barcelona, Paris, 1984–89
Linked to the colonial history of slave-trafficking, *Santa Comida* reflected on the relationships between the imposition of Christianity and the survival, in secret, of the Yoruba religion, taking the vast symbolic territory of offerings as its starting point. The different presentations brought about changes in the appearance of the project, the nucleus of which was made up of seven altars, each of which displayed elements connected to seven deities or *orishas* respectively.

Santa Comida. Miralda and John Mason

John Mason

The paths of kindred souls that are meant to meet, endeavor, and create together are traced in the bedrock of perdurable destiny. Antoni Miralda and I, John Mason, are two such souls.

In 1982, while preparing for the New World Festival of the Arts in Miami, Florida, Miralda discovered my book, *Onjẹ Fún Òrìṣà*[1] *(Food for the Gods)*, the first book written in English about the recipes and foods offered up to the òrìṣà/Yorùbá deities worshipped in West Africa, Cuba, and the United States. He was exploring, in a religious article store called a *botánica* that sold, along with my book, fresh and dried herbs for medicinal and spiritual purposes. Statues, candles, teas, oils, various Catholic icons, beads, soup tureens, and myriad items used in the worship of various African and spiritual religious practices (Lúkúmí, Candomblé, Vodun) were also sold. His appetite was whetted and his imagination fired. He had discovered his Rosetta Tome and its creator.

In the fall of 1984, the telephone rang at my home in Brooklyn, New York; Miralda had found me. We spoke briefly about his intriguing plans and I invited him to visit. The Catalan from Barcelona who came to my door proved to be my spiritual, mystical, distant relative. My mother's father, Pedro Miró, born in Guanabacoa, Cuba, in 1876 was also of Catalan ancestry. The linguistic, ancestral oracle predicted that our praise names, Miralda and Mason-Miró, if faithfully fulfilled, would inspire alertness that would spur us to contribute wonderful designs. Our paths were destined to cross.

I agreed to join Miralda, advising and instructing him in the use of culinary, cultural symbols, and philosophic language needed for creating the exhibit *Santa Comida /Holy Food*. I would write the exhibit catalog, contributing the anthropological and art historical overview. We sealed the deal in Miralda's Tribeca loft like true artistic hunters, with a ritual fish-dish of baked Red Snapper that is usually presented to the òrìṣà Ògún, deity of hunter-artists and witness to brotherhood pacts. We followed in the tradition of primordial hunters who were the first to eat fire-cooked food, thus changing the way human brains developed. Montse Guillén, master culinary magician and Miralda's partner, pluperfectly recreated the dish from the recipe in my book. That meal would foreshadow many familial meals and enlightening conversations to come.

Miralda had decided on building six arched triptych altars, approximately 12 ft × 4 ft × 1 ft 4 in., honoring the Yorùbá òrìṣà Ẹlẹgbá, Ògún, Obàtálá, Ṣàngó, Yẹmoja, Òṣún, and their Cuban and Brazilian Catholic masking counterparts: El Santo Niño de Atocha, El Diablo; John the Baptist, Saint George; la Virgen de las Mercedes, la Purísima Concepción; Santa Bárbara, Blackamoor; Nuestra Señora de Regla; Our Lady, Star of the Sea; Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre, the Lady of the Candlemas. I related to him that at all times Africans thoughtfully and actively resisted the cultural oppression of the whites. They resisted in the ways they prepared their food, the colors they chose to wear, the style of houses they built, the way they talked, the music they made, the songs they sang, the dances they danced, and the images of God they clung to and recreated. Africans did not compromise with the white man's images — they transformed them. Catholic statues and chromoliths were transformed into mask-costumes for the òrìṣà. Miralda would employ New World òrìṣà tactics of secrecy in plain sight. He would create his triptych shrines as portable òrìṣà masks that could dance about the house/gallery from window to room or from house/gallery to house/gallery as the dictates of New World visionary revolution dictated. The divine occupants of these mask-shrines would be crowned/initiated/invested with light bulb, nimbus-halos in specific colors empowered by alternating electric current and the vital energy of their favorite foods. The divine trios behind the masks were seemingly veiled by sixteen rays that allowed each to come into sight as the viewer moved right or left of center. Miralda would create alluring traps prompting the òrìṣà to come for a taste and be ensnared. His tactics not only acted as an incentive obliging the òrìṣà to materialize but caused them to also touch the artist and whisper in his ears. They revealed themselves to him and became his guides. If creation equals God as artist, then all artists are possessed by the godliness of their creations.

Miralda searched for and exposed the anima, the true inner self, and the aura colors that reflect archetypal ideals of conduct, of the òrìṣà and suggested by their foods. Ẹlẹgbá, Owner of the Cosmic Power of Vitality (red and black); Ògún, Blacksmith Architect of Civilization (green and

1. The author wishes to respect the original spelling of the names of African deities and peoples. (E. N.)

black); Obàtálá, Aged Creator Ruler (white); Şàngó, Warrior Ruler of Òyó (Yorùbá) (red and white); Yęmoja, First Mother of the World (blue and white); Òşun, Charming Chief of Women (yellow). He understood that the important connection between eating and belonging to prestigious societies is ritually underscored for òrìşà devotees in Yorùbáland, Brazil, Cuba, and the United States. The Yorùbá use food as a means of prompting the memory of important, life-enhancing proverbs and philosophic values. So inspired and lettered, Miralda entered El Museo del Barrio.

We looked at the main gallery, easily 30 feet wide by 60 feet long, with different eyes. The industrial ceiling, some 20 feet high, with its unsightly, insulation-wrapped steam and water pipes and utilitarian lighting jarred Miralda's and my sense of esthetics. But, seemingly unfazed, he suggested covering the entire ceiling with paper streamers like the *barracãos* (ritual dance spaces) of Brazil and some altar rooms in Cuba. I saw only the daunting dimensions of the room and the amount of labor required. Hundreds of feet of paper streamers in each of six colors, plenty of adhesive, a rolling scaffold, two determined workers, and in a few days the ceiling was transformed into a light-filtering, ciliary rainbow. Miralda taught me a valuable lesson about not allowing a surmountable obstacle to turn you from fulfilling your dreams. I looked on as he, like an artist evangelist, bringer of good news, touched other souls and they embraced his vision. Miralda wanted collective, viewer participation. I watched as modest, intense Keith Farington, following Miralda's designs, channeled the untiring ardor and precision of Ògún's cutting knife into the construction of the six triptychs. The young artist Manny Vega was also touched, and painted a picture of a Şàngó dance wand with an offered plate of food and glass of wine on the wall outside the main gallery. The gift was incorporated. Miralda's reach exceeded his grasp and in so doing made me realize the way to perfection and the recognition of a kindred spirit. He bent the room to his vision and will. The shape and size of the gallery windows dictated the shape and size of the triptych altars. The number also demanded that five altars would be in their window niches and one would be displayed with elaboration on the gallery's raised-floor stage.

Each òrìşà has, and uses, its own special cloth. Billowing, flowing fabric used in the exhibit is a reminder of the presence and movements of ancestral spirits and memories of Miralda's birthplace of Terrassa (Barcelona), Spain, an old textile manufacturing town founded during the time of the Roman emperor Vespasian (69–79 CE). Miralda rethought ideas, reviewed visions, revolutionized the novel, and reshaped artifacts as he did with plain red cloth, and white, stacked, upturned china plates as cigar-holding mouth, and eyes, shaped into an 8 ft wide by 10 ft tall cloth Òrìşà Ęlęgbá, alms-begging, eternally hungry watcher of the roads. Steel knives, forks, and spoons in the shape of Ęlęgbá's bèlèké (protruding head-blade) were added in Miami, Barcelona, and Paris.

The "novel" use of real, fresh and dried meats, and vegetables, to frame the triptych altars really alarmed the museum's understanding director, but Miralda held firm; the food stayed. The gallery faintly smelled of the market with a strong dash of dried codfish. But it was when Òrìşà Obàtálá's triptych's turn on center stage came that nature got out of hand. Following the Yorùbá creation tale, which credits Obàtálá with forming mankind from the clay of the earth, Miralda created a clay figure rising out of a mound of rice dotted by live snails. It was beautiful except that no one told the snails not to move. In a few days, they had spread across the floor, up the walls and throughout the gallery. The director was not amused although we were.

In the rear section of the gallery, Miralda created a contemplation room that was dark and empty except for the red and chrome, double-headed (two cassettes could play at the same time) cowry-encrusted ghettoblaster boombox sitting on two Pepsi-Cola cans. There was also a 20-ft-tall image of a Şàngó ax, strobe light projected, emblazoned on the wall over the boombox that was repeatedly playing the sounds of torrential rainstorms and thunderclaps.

The culminating ceremony of the exhibit took place on February 5, 1985. Food and music are two hallmarks of Africans' religious statement. It is not considered proper to display God's food in abundance without inviting those present to break bread with us and share the bounty. Miralda said that this act of hospitality captured his heart: "I was overwhelmed by the devotees' sense of humanity. Everybody was invited to eat the food of the gods, initiate and uninitiate alike." The event was held in the gallery, a trio of òrìşà priestesses hired to sing *a cappella* songs of praise. My wife Valerie brought a gallon of black-eyed pea batter, an electric frying pan, and cooked àkàrà (fried bean paste fritters) for the guests. Was it the òrìşà or the tasty fritters that possessed the guests? At the close of the event, when I asked my wife where my àkàrà were, she replied, visibly flustered, "Those crazy fools were sticking plastic forks into the hot frying pan trying to get the last of the fritters. That's where your àkàrà went!" The affected epicures suggested our next chapter.

After the February 5, 1985 El Museo del Barrio closing of *Santa Comida/Holy Food*, Miralda added a seventh sojourner, Òrìşà Babalúaiyé, Dread Mystery, covered in palm fibers (purple), and his Saint Lazarus mask and sent him to the Miami Dade Art Gallery. In Miami, on March 14, 1985, the now cape-wearing saints went marching into the gallery and stood in a line with Babalúaiyé bringing up the rear. He stayed with the divine group and continued on to Barcelona and Paris. I believe Miralda included him because Babalúaiyé's diseased, sore-covered body, which was healed only to later die and rot, represents the ultimate cautionary tale of cynical reformation. People are like the most wonderfully prepared food that rots, becomes excellent excrement, manure, night soil, and is fed upon by flies, maggots, and dung beetles, resurrection messengers of Babalúaiyé. The Yorùbá grant each person or thing the right to exist. The essential nature of a thing, no matter its state of transformation, is the precondition of its beauty.

This same consideration of worth reminds me of the day in the office of Robert Sindelir, Director of Galleries and Visual Art Programs at Miami Dade Community College. Miralda was introducing me to him as not only the exhibit consultant but as one of the presenters in the upcoming symposium "*Santa Comida*: Transcultural Survivals." Dr. Sindelir's reaction and questions about my background and qualifications to be on the same panel with such august "white" scholars as Dr. Mercedes Cros Sandoval, anthropologist, and the renowned Dr. Robert Farris Thompson, professor of African and Afro-American Art History frankly surprised me and amused Miralda. He, Robert Thompson, and I knew quite well my scholarly qualifications. The symposium was held on April 8, 1985 at Miami Dade Community College South Campus, Leonard A. Usina Hall. Dr. Sindelir was quite excited and had planned a special dinner after the symposium to celebrate the honored guest, Professor Robert Farris Thompson. Bob, my friend for close to twenty years at that time, was deservedly quite a scholar celebrity. The legendary Cuban ethnographer Lydia Cabrera had come to hear our presentations. I was scheduled to present first, Dr. Sandoval was second, and Bob would present last. This is when Dr. Sindelir's best laid plans went awry. Bob informed him that he had to go first because there was a plane at the airport waiting to fly him back to Yale University. The special dinner, to Dr. Sindelir's chagrin, didn't convince Bob to stay. Bob presented the seven glass slides that he had and gave a nice talk about "food" from the art historical point of view, a subject that was not his forte. As he made for the exit, I began my presentation. By the time I got to the fourth slide Bob had taken a seat near the back of the room, pulled out his note pad and began to take notes. He didn't leave until I had finished my presentation, some eighty slides later, after paying me a wonderful compliment on my research. Dr. Sandoval gave a great presentation; the symposium was a rousing success, and I, in this new light, became the "hero" of the special dinner. Miralda and I were both amused and gratified. It seems the ex-academy traditional scholar proved the equal to his colleagues and carried the day.

African slaves in the West Indies, who were given cheap, reject, salt codfish that was not acceptable to the discerning Mediterranean populations, transformed it into a wonderful culinary staple. The best fish was always sold in Spain. Salt cod, slaves, sugar, tobacco, cotton, and molasses became commercially linked. In West Africa, slaves could be purchased with cured cod, and to this day there is still a West African market for salt cod and stockfish. Codfish (*bacalao*) weighted cloths were hung in both the Miami and Paris *Santa Comida* exhibits. Miralda's *botánica* memories found an outlet for his collection of *botánica* memorabilia, as the reconfigured Miami, Barcelona, and Paris exhibits attested. Miralda learned what shrine-constructing òrìşà devotees know, that the "exhibit" space determines the type and number of artistic elements that can be used fittingly. In Barcelona and Paris, he added to the *botánica* display, with its soup tureens, assortment of spiritual figurines, incense, money baths, good luck sprays, and love potions, the collection of unpainted plaster saints that he had purchased from a factory, which was closing down, in Olot (Catalonia). He painted the faces and hands of the statues black. Circa June 1985, the cloth Ęlęgbá situated himself on the main stairs in Barcelona's Palau Robert where his begging paid off, and then moved, in 1989, with cowrie shells, stacked plates mouth and eyes, to a long table in Paris' expo *Magiciens de la terre* at the Centre Pompidou. In Barcelona, a long table was also used to display religious photos, record albums, book covers, incense, and spiritual bath envelopes. Şàngó's ax projection and sound pieces remained in Barcelona and Paris. In Palau Robert, the ax projection was topped by a statue of the black Madonna, patron saint of Catalonia, Our Lady of Montserrat, *La Moreneta* (the little dark skinned one). A Brazilian song to Yęmoja and a Cuban song, *Angelitos negros* (Little Black Angels) replaced the sounds of rain and thunder. The multicolored paper streamer ceiling was reshaped and made narrower in Paris with a crowd of centrally

placed, stringed ìlẹ̀kẹ̀ (beads), representing the òrìṣà, hanging down.

1984 to 1992 were years of overlapping creations by Miralda and company. 1984 found Miralda and Montse working on the opening of *El Internacional*, a Spanish restaurant and New York's first tapas bar located in the Tribeca area of the city. With the success of the àkàrà at the culminating ceremony of *Santa Comida*, I suggested to my wife Valerie that we see if Montse would be interested in serving àkàrà at their new restaurant. She and Miralda had tasted it in Bahía, Brazil, where it is called àkàràjẹ (àkàrà to eat). Montse opened the gallon jar of batter, tasted it and told me to bring her five more gallons. We were in business. By the time Montse and Miralda had left *El Internacional* we were delivering ninety gallons of àkàrà per month.

The period from the spring of 1985 to the fall of 1986 was a whirl of àkàrà, new, wonderful sights, and tastes. My weekly deliveries of àkàrà batter to Montse always ended in Miralda's little second floor office with him showing me the latest drawings he had for the *Honeymoon Project* and giving me updates on the movements of *Santa Comida*. The best part of many of my visits was the mandatory sampling, for my "professional" opinion, of some pastry wonder prepared by the always amiable, master pastry chef, Antonio Buendía. He would always address me as the professor. Those samplings always took place at the *Columbus Trophy Bar*, constructed by Keith Farington, builder of the òrìṣà triptychs. The *Columbus Trophy Bar* with its hanging cod, hams, peppers, braided breads, sausages, and assortment of liquors and *porrones* (long-spout glass carafes) reminded me of the hanging displays of medicinal and magical goods in *botánica*. The *tortilla de patatas* (Spanish potato omelette) tapas was exactly the same dish that my aunt, Graciela Miró, would prepare for our lunch all throughout my youth.

During an early visit to *El Internacional*, Miralda gave me the grand tour. Wow! The "Dalmatian façade" and sidewalk, implanted with coke cans, shouted that you were in for something new. Elements of his *Miami Projects*, *Santa Comida*, and *Coke & Miss Information*, etc. looked out at you from every corner of the art-restaurant-installation. National flags and bygone celebrities' photos were encased like archaeological curiosities in a resin floor and under Plexiglas. Yẹmọja in her guise as the Bahian mermaid, La Sirena, greeted diners in the *Marina Room* with a floor vault displaying the preserved bodies of four of her "acceptable" codfish children. With her wealth of pearls, she holds court in her hundred-gallon aquarium domain. Beside her vital, water world, Miralda had created a display case on the second floor of the restaurant for his collection of soup tureens that the òrìṣà could use to store their sacred stones and other treasures.

El Internacional served as the first meeting place for the *Honeymooners*, the Statue of Liberty aka Santa Luz de America and Mirador de Colón (Christopher Columbus monument) aka El Conquistador. The July 17, 1985 crowning ceremony celebrated the placement of a 12-meter-wide, 1,130 kilo, life-sized replica of the Statue of Liberty crown on the roof of *El Internacional*. Miralda dressed the crown, the façade of *El Internacional*, and its sidewalk, with two immense panels of red cloth that tied his two homes, Barcelona and New York City, together. As one approached, the sight of the radiating spikes of the crown represented the sanctification of *El Internacional* as a guiding, pilgrimage site and the recognition, for me, of the eternal, spiritual connection between Yẹmọja, Libertas, Stella Maris, Columbia, Native American Women, African Women, and Lady Liberty. The proposed, mock saber and spear-pointing shotgun wedding represented the European invasion and rape of the Americas that brought missionaries, mercenaries, malaria, syphilis, chattel slavery, genocide, and a power and economic imbalance that still exists today. 1492 was the crucial date for major food crop distribution, territorial appropriation, and the economic reshuffling of national wealth that continues in evolving forms between the Old and New Worlds.

The actual, officially published wedding registry of international gifts for the "engaged" pair became a series of celebrations that hid the pent up tears of rage at the waste that denied the sick, poor, destitute, and abused. The spectacle, dressed in the tailored cloths of many nations, neatly hid Miralda's sense of revolt, political critique, breaking down, and outing of national prejudices, gender prejudices, ethnic prejudices, and the economic schemes of favoritism that they breed.

Did the happy couple sail into the sunset? I don't know about Christopher Columbus and Santa Luz/Lady Liberty, but Miralda and Montse flew to Miami and opened, in 1996, a wonderful restaurant, *Bigfish Mayaimi*, right on the Miami River. The honeymoon gift, *Gondola Shoe* was giving the patrons river rides when not standing on the dock with removable heel attached. Miralda's La Sirena mermaid, laden with pearls, still greeted diners from her watery domain. Henry Drewal's and my exhibition, *Beads, Body, and Soul: Art and Light in the Yorùbá World* was opening at the Miami Art Museum in June of 1999 so I had nine days (June 22–30) to visit with my adopted family. Montse's paella and ceviche made me want to relocate to Miami. As usual Miralda and I talked about the whereabouts of *Santa Comida* and plans for future projects.

From 2012 to 2013, *Santa Comida* was exhibited in Barcelona and included in *Critical Episodes (1957–2011)* as part of the MACBA Collection. Miralda created a *botánica* temple where the seven òrìṣà triptychs were hung, shoulder to shoulder, against the gallery wall with Ògún, Obàtálá, Òṣun raised higher and Ẹlẹgbá, Yẹmọja, Ṣàngó and Babalúaiyé a shelf down. Soup tureens commanded the entire first shelf from end to end of the triptychs. Catholic saints' and American, spiritual and folk-hero saints' statues manned each end of the altar line. Shelves of spiritual baths, lucky oils, incense, and candles were placed on each end next to Ẹlẹgbá and Babalúaiyé, as well as sequinned, two liter, Vodun Coke bottles. The large cloth Ẹlẹgbá wasn't present, but an offering shelf was built on an adjacent wall, and people gave. Blue paper streamers, covering and beautifying the ceiling, added the finishing touch. On December 22, 2012, a bàtá drumming ensemble, with singers, performed sacred òrìṣà music while people danced in the gallery. The circle was completed.