

The Student Researcher: A Phi Alpha Theta Publication

Volume 2 Volume 2, Issue 1 (2016) *The Student
Researcher: A Phi Alpha Theta Publication*

Article 5

2017

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Recommended Citation

Shipp, Ella (2017) "The Study of Afro-Cuban Religions," *The Student Researcher: A Phi Alpha Theta Publication*: Vol. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_researcher/vol2/iss1/5

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The Study of Afro-Cuban Religions

Ella Shipp

The scholarship of Afro-Cuban syncretic religions such as Santería/La Regla de Ocha and Palo Montewas powerfully affected by the disruption of the Cuban Revolution. Unlike other disciplines whose growth and maturation have progressed naturally since the development of modern scholarship in the 1900s, the study of Cuban orisha-based religion derived from the traditions of the Lucumí and Yoruba has only recently come into its own. During the 1800s and 1900s, there were some accounts of slave religion in novels, travel accounts, and some encyclopedic works by US and European authors. These accounts were mostly negative and strongly biased against slaves, ex-slaves, and their religion. However, Cuban scholars such as Fernando Ortiz Fernández also began to study Cuban culture and in particular Afro-Cuban contribution to culture and religion.

Ortiz cofounded the Sociedad de Estudios Afrocubanos (Society of Afro-Cuban Studies) and the journal *Estudios Afrocubanos (Afro-Cuban Studies)*. His work, Los Negros Brujos was published in 1906, but he wrote and taught until his death in Havana in 1969.¹ Ironically, this early work was actually a condemnation of African religious practices, but later he came to understand them better and became one of the foremost scholars of Afro-Cuban religion at the time. One of his most famous students is the author Miguel Barnet. Famous authors and poets such as Alejo Carpentier, Cirilo Villaverde, and Nicolás Guillén also discuss the religious practices of the slaves and ex-slaves in their works. Many of the scholars of the Afro-Cuban movement were white or mestizo but were committed to making Cuba a mestizo nation and to celebrating African culture. The mixing they promoted was very different from the segregation and anti-miscegenation in the United States at the time, and which US government and business interests were trying to promote in their interference in Cuba.

¹ Fernando Ortiz, *Hampa Afro-Americana: Los Negros Brujos* (Madrid: Editorial-América, 1906)

Another major scholar who worked primarily in the pre-revolutionary period, particularly in the 1950s, was Lydia Cabrera. She worked with Fernando Ortiz and, taking an anthropological perspective, was the first to fully transcribe and analyze Afro-Cuban religious tradition. Her book, El Monte: Igbo-Finda. Ewe Orisha. VititiNfinda, is perhaps the most influential work in Afro-Cuban studies and became a bible of Santería. Effectively, she performed the vital role of recording and collating previously oral and mutable rituals. It is a work of sociology and anthropology; she simply transcribes and categorizes rituals and religious terms without passing judgement.² It is not a historical work, and it does not analyze the religion, but it performs the crucial role of recording the religion in a less biased fashion than European and US scholars of the time. As a sympathetic Cuban, Cabrera had access to the secret rituals and could describe them accurately. This stands in contrast to the biased hearsay written by outsiders, which preceded her work. Even though she continued to research after the Revolution, for unclear reasons she left for Miami in 1960 and never returned to Cuba.

This book is still heavily cited, and scholars still debate her legacy. For example, in 2003, Erwin Diantelli and Martha Swearingen wrote an article responding to claims that in recording Santería rituals, she developed and shaped the religion rather than simply transcribing it.³ They defend her accuracy, but also accept that since Santería is mutable, her action of putting oral rituals into a book influenced the religion's current form.⁴ From the article, it is clear scholars of Afro-Cuban religion see Cabrera as one of the most important founders of their field, and that a subset of the field is devoted to analyzing her legacy and her writings. A full understanding of

² Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte: Igbo-Finda. Ewe Orisha. VititiNfinda (Notas sobre las religiones, la magia, las supersticiones y el folklore de los negros criollos y el pueblo de Cuba)* (Miami: New House Publishers, 1975) (originally published in 1954).

³ Erwin Diantelli and Martha Swearingen, "From Hierography to Ethnography and Back: Lydia Cabrera's Texts and the Written Tradition in Afro-Cuban Religions," *The Journal of American Folklore* 116 (2003): 273.

⁴ Diantelli and Swearingen, "From Hierography to Ethnography and Back."

how Santería was practiced by slaves and the influence of those conditions on ex-slaves and their descendants and on the religion itself did not occur for several decades because the cultural movement of Afrocubanismo came before the development of modern, peer-reviewed historical scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century.

In the early 1900s, as the United States extended its power over a newly and ostensibly independent Cuba via the Platt Amendment, which made it a virtual colony, travelers and scholars from the US began to be curious about the people and customs of Cuba. Forbes Lindsay's work, Cuba and Her People of Today, written in 1911, is representative of this writing and describes many aspects of Cuban life in a positive fashion, but is biased against ex-slaves. He sees slaves as lazy and backwards and states, "Roman Catholicism and African demon worship have become grotesquely mixed in the ceremonies of the negro secret societies."⁵ This and other similar works form the beginnings of English-language study of Afro-Cuban religions by white US and European scholars but fall victim to the racism of the time. Even in 1946, Erna Fergusson titled a chapter in her book describing the Cuban people "Two Cubas," dividing it into "Primitive Cuba" and sophisticated "Cuba."⁶ They had a loud voice and the means to travel and they influenced white perceptions of Cuban religion, but they were not the only ones writing in the US, Europe, and other Caribbean nations.

As a counterpoint, anthropologists and cultural figures involved in the Harlem Renaissance and the Négritude movement examined the African experience, including religious traditions in the Caribbean. Most figures in the Harlem Renaissance focused on creating new art and on the African-American experience but Zora Neale Hurston, one of the first anthropologists, made connections between African traditions in the US and in the Caribbean,

⁵ Forbes Lindsay, *Cuba and Her People of Today* (Boston: L.C. Page & Company, 1911), 108.

⁶ Erna Fergusson, *Cuba* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), 260-301.

particularly with Haitian Vodun, in her book Tell My Horse. Poets, scholars, and other prominent black figures from Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa led the Négritude movement, which was international in its mission of advancing black culture and pride in black identity. Although it was focused on the French-speaking world, the work done by leaders such as Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, and Léon Damas on African/West African identity formed an example for Afro-Cubanismo.

Cuba had only freed its slaves in 1886, the penultimate country in the Western hemisphere before Brazil, and gained its independence in 1898, so not only was scholarship just beginning, but the former slave religion was not far removed from slavery itself. However, just as Cuban scholars were beginning to study Afro-Cuban religion in a more thorough fashion, the Cuban Revolution broke out, separating Cubans and US citizens from each other and pressuring Cuban academics to follow revolutionary dogma. It is not that studying Santería and Lucumí religion was precisely forbidden, although the atheist nature of the Communist regime inhibited the practice of all religions in Cuba, but Communist beliefs changed it. Ever since the revolution, and particularly immediately after, there has been a focus on the unity of Cuban identity. Officially, race does not matter in Cuba. Some aspects of orisha worship, such as the Virgin of Cobre, have become pan-Cuban symbols, while others were less emphasized for a time. Afro-Cuban religion continued to be normalized in Cuban culture, but there was less formal study for several decades.

Since this period was a transformative period for serious scholarship in the United States, this separation had serious effects aside from the disruption to Cuban scholarship. US scholars could not travel to Cuba to study and Cubans had little access to US work. This did loosen up over time, however. The 1990s mark the beginning of modern scholarship of Afro-

Cuban religion, which has continued to widen and mature since then. Towards the end of the period of Soviet aid, during the Special Period, and after, during the rule of Raúl Castro, many of the strictures of Communism have been loosened in Cuba. In the 1990s, revolutionary fervor was weakening throughout society, people's standards of life were lowering rather than rising, and more people were fleeing to the US. The government wanted to avoid a popular uprising such as in many other Communist governments. Therefore, whether in the economic sphere or in academics, people were allowed to open up businesses, hold new jobs, and practice their religious and cultural practices.

Cuban unity and post-racial ideology are still promoted, but now rather than Lucumí and Yoruba-derived religious traditions being seen as slave religions and lower-class popular traditions to be despised, they are seen as being a key part of Cuban identity. Most Cubans are either of primarily African ancestry or of mixed race, and even if they consider themselves Catholic, they still partake in the occasional Santería or Palo Monte rite. While this attitude of unity somewhat inhibits study of the African nature of these religions, it is positive for society as a whole because these religions are valued rather than despised by the upper class Cubans who would have previously looked down upon Santería. The government has the power to drive Santería underground but no longer has the will to do so.

Although in the past twenty years, Cubans have been freer to produce scholarship and there has been much more interaction between Cubans and Americans, the study of Afro-Cuban religion is still in an early stage of development. There are many new fields being explored and many debates taking place over different issues. As the field has boomed and matured, scholars have begun to study all aspects of the religion in a more scholarly fashion, rather than being influenced by nationalism or cultural prejudices.

One major debate is over the Virgin of El Cobre, widely seen as the patron saint of Cuba. This religious tradition is officially promoted as Catholic but has strong Yoruba elements. Olga PortuondoZúñiga, a Cuban scholar, wrote an important work about this saint in the 1990s, discussing the fusion of African and European beliefs to form a tradition that all Cubans can rally behind.⁷ While mentioning the historical importance of the Virgin of El Cobre to the slaves, PortuondoZúñiga focuses on the unifying nature of the story. There are several versions of the story of the apparition of the Virgin of El Cobre, and she tells one of the best known and most unifying, which describes three fisherman, one of primarily indigenous descent, one of African descent, and one of European descent, who see the Virgin Mary in the sea as they are on their boat. These three fishermen represent the main ethnicities found in Cuba. This is in keeping with revolutionary ideals of the Cuban melting pot.

María Elena Díaz, who is from the US, responded in 2000 with an important historical work focusing on the slaves of El Cobre, which argues for the African nature of the faith as opposed to a neat and unitary Catholic narrative.⁸ In addition to responding to PortuondoZúñiga, Díaz's book is important both for the history of Santería and related faiths and as an exploration of slave faith. In the past, Santería studies have usually been sociological or anthropological in nature and focused on the present, but in recent years, scholars such as Díaz have begun to explore the historical slave religious practices and how they have affected Cubans and modern practices. Santería has transformed from an African slave faith into a syncretic faith commonly practiced among all Cubans, to varying degrees.

⁷ Olga PortuondoZúñiga, *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre: Símbolo de Cubanía* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 1995).

⁸ María Elena Díaz, *The Virgin, The King, and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre: Negotiating Freedom in Colonial Cuba 1670-1780* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

The field of Afro-Cuban religious historical studies was effectively halted in its growth until the relaxing of the Cuban revolutionary state and Cuban-American relations in the 1990s and 2000s. The field has quickly matured, and there are many articles being written in multiple fields, but it is still very new and even some basic aspects are only beginning to be explored. With slavery studies in the US, in the early 1900s, historians began to seriously study slavery but still had misconceptions, and pro-Southern revisionist historians were prominent, but then in the 1960s and after, black and younger historians pushed back with revisionist ideas, and scholarship has improved ever since. With Afro-Cuban religion, study is still in a medium stage where scholarship is good and covers a wide range of topics but is still relatively new after only a couple decades of peer reviewed academic scholarship. An example of the kind of useful article common in other fields but new to Santería studies is an article by the Cuban scholars Daisy Rubiera Castillo and Aníbal Argüelles Mederos from 2007 about the role of the masculine and the feminine in Regla Conga and Palo Monte. This article analyzes the roles of male and female orishas often associated with Catholic saints, the roles performed by male and female practitioners, and masculine and feminine aspects to various parts of the faith.⁹

In response to the sudden popularity of the field and its remaining rough edges, the prominent scholar Stephan Palmie wrote a book called *The Cooking of History: How Not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion*, which aims to correct misconceptions about Afro-Cuban religion and argues against certain strains of thought, principally by US scholars.¹⁰ He feels that the result of non-Hispanic Americans' "otherness" has been to inadvertently romanticize and exoticize Santería rather than approaching it rationally like other subjects. Americans, whether scholars or

⁹ Daisy Rubiera Castillo, Aníbal Argüelles Mederos, "Lo femenino y lo masculino en La Regla Conga o Palo Monte," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 26 (2007): 151-157.

¹⁰ Stephan Palmie, *The Cooking of History: How Not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

potential tourists, are curious about Santería but since Cuba has been closed off to them for so long, they don't know very much about it and have a hard time putting aside biases. As with Haiti and Vodun, even when Americans have good intentions they still are frequently influenced by long held biases about syncretic religion. The fact that Palmie felt a need to write this book shows both that the field has developed a lot in the past 10 years but also that it still has a lot further to develop.

If the study of slavery in the US is still far from being exhausted and is still full of disagreement even after over half a century of study, the study of Afro-Cuban religion is even more open. It had barely begun in earnest after being dogged by racism, in the 1950s before the shock of the Cuban Revolution, which forestalled most scholarship until the 1990s. In the past twenty years, modern scholarship of Afro-Cuban religion has begun in earnest but it is still new. The field began in sociology and anthropology, with little examination of the past and the role of African religion until recently, such as by Henry Lovejoy or Díaz.¹¹ This is surprising, considering how slavery only ended in the late 1800s and many Cubans of African descent lived in poverty and primitive conditions for nearly half a century after that..

Slavery and Afro-Cuban religion are inextricable but there has been less study of the historical aspects until recently. Anthropological and sociological scholarship is excellent, and scholars in those disciplines were pioneers in scholarship of Cuban West African religions, but for a while history lagged behind. Approximately the same process has occurred with scholarship of Haitian Vodun and Brazilian Candomble. Everything is becoming more open now and this field will continue to develop in Cuba and in the US in Spanish and in English. It has been held back by the Cuban Revolution and by misconceptions and biases about African polytheistic

¹¹ Henry Lovejoy, "Old Oyo Influences on the Transformation of Lucumí Identity in Colonial Cuba" (PhD diss., UCLA, 2012).

religion and its role in the Caribbean but biases are decreasing and the breadth of scholarship is increasing. In the next few decades, some areas of study are likely to become relatively settled while new aspects will be explored, but as other disciplines have shown, scholarship is always being improved and new documents interpreted or discovered. Historiography of Cuban religion is in an exciting and relatively early stage and will only continue to expand as the world of scholarship becomes more connected and more study is done.

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