



Religion, Race and National Identity Formation in Cuba

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Religion

African-derived religious practices such as Santería, palo monte and others have guided the daily lives of many Cubans. Today, their centrality to the expression of *cubanía* (Cuban-ness) is finally being acknowledged even by the revolutionary leadership. Whereas African-derived cultural elements have been made to fit a broader nationalist agenda at various times in Cuba's history, the religious element has a long history of being marginalized and consigned to the position of a subculture. Nevertheless, many white Cubans participate in the Afro-Cuban religions.

Afro-Cuban religions are now emerging from their marginal position within the wider society, but, despite their current representations, their role as escape mechanisms, and forms of cultural marronage for those of African descent cannot be ignored.

Africa in America

In the Americas and elsewhere, the number of people who worship the orishas-Yoruba gods and goddesses-of West African religion, currently outnumber the people who belong to several of the 'world religions' including Judaism.¹ In spite of this, there has been a long-standing struggle to grant African-derived religious practices the status of religions that are relevant in modern society rather than be throwbacks to a pre-modern era.²

In his book, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), Melville Herskovits, an American anthropologist examined the

retention of specific African traits or 'survivals' within contemporary societies. Slavery and racist oppression in the United States were believed to have eradicated whatever African culture had survived the Middle Passage. However, it was clear that Africa was still very present in other areas of the diaspora, particularly Cuba, Brazil and Haiti.³ Herskovits devised an acculturative continuum on which Africa was construed as a baseline for assessing African 'survivals' within a particular society. Variations in the retention of African traits were explained in terms of the timing and extent of European 'acculturative pressure'. The underlying assumption was that the more contact there was with a superior civilization (e.g. European), the more likely it was that 'primitive cultures' (e.g. African) were hurtling along the path to extinction.

Herskovits' work was later criticized for its mechanistic and ethnocentric implications. In fact, Fernando Ortiz, a Cuban criminologist and ethnographer formulated his theory of transculturation (*transculturación*) as a response to Herskovits' assumption of the ultimate triumph of the dominant culture (e.g. Western), due to the inevitable adaptation of other cultures. *Transculturación* described the process by which two cultures—Hispanic and African—in Cuba mutually influenced each other to create an entirely new entity that contains elements from each group. Ortiz believed that syncretism (the combination of different forms of belief and practice) represented the same process in religion.⁴

From an African to a National Religion

In the 19th century, the independence struggle prompted José Martí and others to confront the issue of Cuban identity. Up until that point, many Creole whites believed that they were the only ones that could be considered Cuban. However, the majority of those fighting in the Liberation Army were Afro-Cubans. It was clear that ending Spanish rule could only be achieved with the help of Afro-Cubans. Thus, leaders of the revolutionary movements began to articulate an inclusive definition of nationality in their plans for a Cuba Libre.

Although Spanish colonialism had been shaken off, at the end of the 19th century, Cuba experienced political, cultural and economic domination by the United States (U.S.). For this reason, anti-US sentiments prompted attempts to incorporate Afro-Cuban culture into a concept of national culture and identity in the 1920s and 1930s. This movement which was largely led by white intellectuals with a few notable exceptions such as the poet Nicolás Guillén, followed a common pattern whereby nation-states ideologically incorporated popular culture into national culture, while at the same time, their policies excluded supposedly backward and superstitious groups in the name of secularization and rationalization.⁵ The result was that Afro-Cuban cultural forms referenced a national expression but also an African heritage which was assumed to be distinct from that of the majority and which had been excluded from 'Cuban culture' as conceived by its middle-class society.⁶

After 1959, revolutionary cultural policy continued the project of using Afro-Cuban forms to create a national culture that was started by the *afrocubanismo* movement. The revolutionary policy represented the ultimate assertion of national identity and sovereignty which is why it had a popular appeal. In the early days of the revolution, amid the political experimentation and cultural exuberance, there were even attempts to find a place in the national psyche for the previously marginalized Afro-Cuban religions. However, by the mid-1960s, the religious dimension of Cuba's African inheritance was once again marginalized. All religions were viewed as irrational forms of knowledge and compensation for a deficient social reality, a reality that would no longer exist with the success of the revolution. Religion represented an obstacle to progress.

This reality gave rise to a contradiction between a desire to value Cuba's African heritage and the need to deny the open functioning of the ritual component. There were government-supported attempts to divorce the Afro-Cuban practices from their religious meaning and use their 'aesthetic' features to fashion the national culture. However, the African component was important, not only for its undeniable centrality, but also because, according to Miguel Barnet a well-known writer, 'African cultural activity is by nature revolutionary'.⁷ Further, Afro-Cuban cultural elements were transformed into folklore and a number of institutions were founded, including the National Folklore Troupe ("*Conjunto Folklórico Nacional*") and the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore ("*Centro de*

Estudios Folklóricos” which became the “*Instituto de Etnología y Folklore*”). These cultural forms would eventually survive, not as living cultures but as cultural monuments. This justified displaying ritual objects in museums.

Within the context of a Marxist-Leninist revolution, all religions were associated with behavioural patterns the leadership wanted to eliminate. Nevertheless, religious practices that did not require regular church attendance were easier to hide from official scrutiny. Afro-Cuban religions had a long history of concealment and some practitioners successfully managed to accommodate a double identity as a believer and revolutionist. This may be one reason why researchers at the Departamento de Estudios Sociorreligiosos made the surprising discovery, in the early 1990s, that the social and economic transformations of the Revolution appeared to have unintentionally stimulated growth of Afro-Cuban religions. In contrast to other Christian denominations, membership in Afro-Cuban religions actually increased after 1959. Researchers attributed this growth to the ending of discrimination against these religions and the revaluing of related cultural forms.⁸

In the early 1990s, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe compelled the Cuban government to consider its own form of liberalization in response to worsening economic conditions. Therefore, in 1992, religious practitioners were allowed to become members of the Communist Party. Since then there has been a visible increase in all religious practices. While some people believe that this

reflect the diminishing capacity of the Revolution to satisfy material needs and also a sense of disorientation resulting from modifications to revolutionary ideology, it also indicates the importance to many Cubans of religiosity, primarily outside of organized religions. Despite assertions made by Pope John Paul II—during his visit in 1998—that the true Cuban tradition is Christian, there are clearly many more followers of the relatively un-institutionalized African-derived religions.

Outside links, previously only available to the Christian denominations, have become increasingly important for *santeros* and *babalawos*. They have elevated the status of *santería* within Cuban society. The exile community in the U.S. consults Cuban-based religious specialists, as do *santeros* in many parts of Latin America and elsewhere. This change in status is due to changes of official policies and the spread of *santería* within and outside of Cuba. It has led to a power struggle as practitioners, researchers, and government officials attempt to harness the religion to their own agendas.

In Cuba today, cultural nationalists regard *mestizaje* and religious syncretism as a creative and dynamic process of exchange that has nourished the national identity. However, until quite recently, the Afro-Cuban practices were very much linked with the African heritage in the Cuban environment and with blackness. There is still a debate as to whether they are essentially “black” or “African” religions. The recent religious revival has created concern about the exploration of transnational ethno-religious links.

Indeed, some *santeros* and *babalawos* seek legitimacy by identifying the practices more closely with their African origins. Although revolutionary leaders made a point of supporting black movements elsewhere and recalled the roots of many Cubans when expressing solidarity with emerging African nations, it is regarded as divisive and threatening to the concept of a raceless nation for individual Afro-Cubans to identify with blacks elsewhere.

While Afro-Cubans have been among the most ardent supporters of the Revolution, the insistence on unanimity left little room for a Black consciousness movement like that which emerged in the U.S. and English-speaking Caribbean during the 1960s and 1970s.⁹ Affirmation of hybridity (i.e. a blend of two diverse cultures), *mestizaje* and the transculturation model silenced those who wished to proclaim a separate black identity.

Of course, it has been argued that the predominantly Afro-Cuban participation in Cuba's independence struggle united the White Creole and Black cultures into a single Cuban culture. This was presumably the ideal behind Martí's famous statement: 'Cuban is more than black, more than mulatto, more than white'. Nevertheless, it can also be argued that both cultures continued as separate strands due to large numbers of Afro-Cubans being cut off from access to economic and political power. Nowadays, the growing emergence in Cuba of movements such as rap, Rastafarianism and the Nation of Islam, which propose a pan-African ethnic identification, suggests that there is a need for such identification among a sector of the Afro-Cuban popu-

lation. This identification is a reaction to situations of economic deprivation and the growing competition for resources which has unleashed more overt racism on the island. At the same time, however, many Afro-Cubans uphold Martí's integrationist agenda and the ideology of a raceless *cubanía* as an alternative to U.S.-style segregation or what the Afro-Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén termed '*el camino de Harlem*'.¹⁰ General Antonio Maceo, a hero of the independence wars, famously declared: "Ask for nothing as a Black but for everything as a Cuban" (*'Nada pedir como negro, y todo como cubano'*). In the 1930s, Gustavo Urrutia, an Afro-Cuban intellectual, stated that, 'the black man of the Americas feels more a patriot than a black'.¹¹ Even as they confronted the issue of ongoing racial inequality, many Afro-Cubans would not advocate attempting to impose models on Cuba that are more appropriate to the racial and cultural context of U.S. society.

Race and Culture

In Cuba, as in other parts of Latin America, biological and cultural *mestizaje* are indicators of national identity. The discourse has expressed a positive attitude towards racial mixing for over a century. However, an analysis of social conditions in Cuba indicated that, what is termed 'a raceless utopia', has yet to appear.¹² Racial classifications are undoubtedly more fluid and negotiable than in the U.S. However, the official discourse of pretending that racial difference do not exist, continue to privilege whiteness. Alvarado Ramos highlighted 'the continued pres-

ence of race in the social consciousness of values which pertain to the “white culture”.¹³ The alleged color blindness limits monitoring of equality of opportunity. It is claimed that *mestizaje* makes it difficult to distinguish between racial groups and thus impedes research into race.¹⁴

The discourse of racelessness has also long been used to discourage Afro-Cubans from organizing politically. There is a tendency to underplay the role of racial discrimination in perpetuating disadvantages among Afro-Cubans. The victim is blamed for his/her failure to get ahead because of low self-esteem and psychological complexes which raise barriers to advancement. Even today, there are people who claim that race has not held Afro-Cubans back, but rather the behavioral patterns that have been passed down over generations have discouraged young people from taking advantage of opportunities for study and work. Yet, an Afro-Cuban journalist, Gisela Arandía, rightly suggests a need to move on from blaming colonialist and capitalist systems for racial inequality. Further, she suggests that we look at why, in a system that offers free access to education, the number of black Cubans who get a university education has fallen since the early years of the Revolution.¹⁵

In the Americas and the Caribbean, “European” or “Western” paradigms have constantly been countered by cosmologies and world views with their origins in Africa and among the descendants of Africans. These cultural solutions to situations of disempowerment provided self-esteem, social solidarity and a nucleus for seeking political solutions to the regime of

slavery and oppression. As the Cuban writer Miguel Barnet observed: “What was in the minds of those black and mulatto men who fought for our nation, the *mambises*? The *regla de ocha*, the *regla de palo monte*, in some yes, in others no... but there was a consciousness of an incipient nation and our way of seeing the world, of interpreting the world that is not only based on occidental rationalism. It is also based on... perhaps a more intuitive rationalism which has to do with the African religiosity.”¹⁶ It is interesting that, in contrast to Brazil, the revolutionary Cuban regime did not initially attempt to divorce Afro-Cuban religions from their original political context but instead used their history as centers of resistance to slavery, colonialism and the Catholic Church to harness selected parts of them to the revolutionary project.

Nevertheless, after 1959, cultural diversity in Cuba was proscribed within certain parameters by the emphasis on unanimity. As Rogelio Martínez Furé observed, ‘Sometimes in America there is a tendency to think that there is only one so-called national culture. There are many national cultures that have different origins and occupy different positions within the socio-economic structure of American countries’.¹⁷ Tomas Fernández Robaina observed that: ‘I believe that the day may come when one can speak of Cuban culture as a whole, but we are very far from that because there are still many prejudiced minds that do not value the contributions of the African heritage in the same way they do others’¹⁸ While this is undoubtedly true, today, perhaps more than at any other period in Cuban history,

there is a growing awareness that inclusion within the nation does not require homogenization. Many Cubans are rediscovering and proclaiming their African

roots and the practice of Afro-Cuban religions can undoubtedly be an important part of this process.

NOTES

- 1- See McKenzie, Peter. *Hail Orisha: a Phenomenology of a West African Religion in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Leiden: Brill, viii; Raúl Cañazares, *Walking with the Night: the Afro-Cuban World of Santería*, Rochester VT: Destiny Books, 1993, pages 121-6.
- 2- See Palmié, Stephan. *Wizards and scientists: explorations in Afro-Cuban modernity and tradition*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, p. 62 for a discussion of how non-western, subaltern 'tradition' and western 'modernity' are both facets of a single, complex historical formation.
- 3- See the work of African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, 1939, which suggested that American blacks had been stripped of their social heritage. Recent research is important in contesting this view; see Michael Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998; Douglas B. Chambers, 'He is an African but speaks plain', in *The African Diaspora*, ed. Alusine Jalloh and Stephen E. Maizlish, College Station: Texas A&M, 1996, pages 100-133.
- 4- See Ortiz, Fernando. *Cuban counterpoint*, New York: Vintage, 1970 [1940].
- 5- See García Canclini, Néstor. *Hybrid cultures: strategies for entering and leaving modernity*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1995.
- 6- Moore, Robin, *Nationalizing Blackness: afrocubanismo and artistic revolution in Havana, 1920-1940*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997.
- 7- *La fuente viva*, Havana: Editorial de Letras Cubanas, 1983, page 146.
- 8- Argüelles, Anibal & Ileana Hodge Limonta, *Los llamados cultos sincréticos y el espiritismo: Estudio monográfico sobre su significación social en la sociedad cubana contemporánea*. Havana: Editorial Academia, 1991.
- 9- In the US, the period of the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X marked a shift in the Civil Rights movement from a desire for integration to a wish to be different and separate.
- 10- 'Ideales de una raza', *Diario de la Marina*, 5 May 1929.
- 11- *Diario de la Marina*, 9 February 1930.
- 12- Kutzinski, Vera. *Sugar's secrets: race and the erotics of Cuban nationalism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993.
- 13- Alvarado Ramos, Juan Antonio. "Relaciones raciales en Cuba. Notas de investigación." *Temas* 7, 1996, pages 37-43.
- 14- Caño Secade, María del Carmen. "Relaciones raciales, proceso de ajuste y política social." *Temas*, 7, 1996, pages 58-65.
- 15- 'Controversia: Entendemos la marginalidad?' *Temas* 27, 2001, page 80
- 16- Interview with the author, Havana, 23 January 2003.
- 17- Interview with the author, Havana, 29 January 2003.
- 18- Interview with the author, Havana, 19 January 2003.