

## Introduction

This book examines an area which, for the most part has been touched on only incidentally by other studies—that is, the multiple and contradictory ways in which Afro-Cuban culture and, within it, the Afro-Cuban religions, can be used to express *cubanidad/cubanía* (Cubanness). The question of Afro-Cuban religion, Cuban identity, and the 1959 Revolution has to date attracted less attention than similar sociopolitical issues in Brazil, for example. There are several reasons for this, some connected with ideology. Existing studies of Afro-Cuban religions and general work on the social and political effects of the Cuban Revolution fall into two main camps: those done in Cuba by Cubans, and those done by outsiders.

Research by Cubans into Afro-Cuban forms after 1959 was stimulated by the move to form a truly revolutionary culture from that of the popular masses. However, early studies were constrained by the need to reflect this agenda and concentrated on the more “aesthetic” features of these forms—which could then be used to fashion the national culture—on negative aspects, such as the alienating effect of religious practices on both individuals and society. In the context of a Marxist-Leninist revolution, these practices were associated with behavioral patterns the leadership was keen to eliminate.

Research in the early years of the Revolution recycled certain assumptions about the cultural and sociological role of *santería*, which included regarding the practice as a “black problem” associated with marginality, relegating it to the past, and allocating it the position of a subculture. Because the leadership believed that the practices would die out because of social changes, until the 1990s there was, as Fernández Robaina (1994) has observed, very little written on Afro-Cuban religions that reflected their dynamism and relevance in Cuban society.

There is a fairly extensive corpus on the impact of the Revolution on religion, but much of this focuses on the Christian religions, which reflects

the writers' interests rather than the religions' relative importance in Cuban society. Much of the research by non-Cubans emanates from the United States and is often highly critical of the Revolution. Some general studies of Cuba mention Afro-Cuban religious practices, but are often superficial and commit annoying terminology errors. In any case, the few references to the practices present conflicting views: some see them as having been more favorably treated by the revolutionary government than Christianity, others as less so.

In recent years, studies based on fieldwork in Cuba (by, e.g., Hagedorn and Mason) have appeared in the English-speaking world. Although they are primarily ethnographical, they also provide some sociohistorical context. Works on Afro-Cuban religiosity in Havana by French researchers (Argyriadis and Dianteill) also do this.

Since the 1990s, more studies have appeared in Cuba itself. One which in some respects represents a watershed is Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui's *Los orishas en Cuba* (1990), not so much for its scholarship—it is a listing of *orishas* and their characteristics—as for its making public the growing interest in the cults. Tomás Fernández Robaina's contribution to research on all aspects of Afro-Cuban culture, including his bibliographies, is invaluable. His only published work to date on Afro-Cuban religions is *Hablen paleros y santeros* (1994), which offers testimonies from practitioners of the *regla de ocha* and *palo monte* (discussed in chapter 1). These personal narratives refer to some of the revolutionary constraints on practice. The work of Lázara Menéndez is extremely useful, in particular her four-volume *Estudios afrocubanos: Selección de lecturas* (1990). It reprints scarce articles published in the 1960s and the 1970s in ethnographic journals, some of which relate to the debate on Afro-Cuban religion and culture as folklore. Even more important, volumes three and four gather, for the first time in Cuba, rare religious texts written by practitioners. She has also written two important articles: "¿Un cake para Obatalá?" and "La Santería que yo conozco" (both published in 1995). The latter offers a cogent analysis of how research after the Revolution recycled certain assumptions about the cultural and sociological role of *santería*.

Research into the related issue of race has been sanctioned only since 1993 as, in the interests of national unity, to look at it as separate from class was seen as divisive by the Castro government. There are currently research projects in progress at the Centro de Antropología (Centre of Anthropology), and early findings were published in the journal *Temas* in 1995. Non-Cubans studying the impact of the Revolution on race fall into

different camps: those who support (in varying degrees) the official view that there is no race problem in Cuba or that it is less acute than in the United States; and those who believe that there is ongoing underrepresentation of blacks in positions of power and overrepresentation among the poorer sectors of society.

While I was conducting research in Cuba (1995–98, with return visits in 2000 and 2003), the opening-up (*apertura*) on the part of the government made investigation into contemporary religious practice less difficult than it might have been some years earlier. For the period since 1959, few reports or statistics on the Afro-Cuban cult groups are available. As an official at the Oficina para la Atención a los Asuntos Religiosos (Office for Religious Affairs) of the Communist Party explained, this is partly due to the uninstitutionalized nature of the practices. But there is doubtless information held by the Ministerio del Interior (MININT, Ministry of the Interior) and the other departments that may become available at some point. A certain amount of official material, including published and unpublished research carried out by the Departamento de Estudios Sociorreligiosos (Department of Socioreligious Studies, DESR), is available in the public domain. I also sampled the main daily newspapers dating from 1959 on and a number of journals published at key junctures.

My interviews and conversations with Cubans were undoubtedly my richest source. Interviewees included practitioners (both cultic group leaders and group members) of Afro-Cuban religions in several religious houses in Havana and Matanzas. Some were or had been integrated into the Revolution and were still employed or retired. Some had even been *militantes* and *dirigentes* of the Communist Party. Others had never been or were no longer integrated into the Revolution and made their living from the practice of their religion. I interviewed practitioners from different ethnic backgrounds and of varying degrees of involvement in the practice. Some were movers and shakers in the post-*apertura* religious debate; others were attracted to the practices for cultural reasons, as a way of rediscovering and celebrating their African heritage. Some had only recently been initiated; others had been practicing for fifty years or more.

The other main group of interviewees included both religious and atheist commentators on Afro-Cuban religions and culture, including academics, journalists, party officials, and members of governmental and nongovernmental research institutions. Some of them had, in the 1970s and the 1980s, upheld the scientific atheist view that the Afro-Cuban religions were dying out, but, since *apertura* in the 1990s, many were at the fore-

front of moves to give *santería* greater recognition as a central component of the national culture. In order to gain some perspective and points of comparison, I also interviewed a selection of eminent practitioners of *santería* in the United States, in Miami and New York City, African American and Cuban American.

In Cuba I participated in religious events during the annual festivals in honor of Saint Barbara/Changó and Saint Lazarus/Babalú Ayé. The latter involved a pilgrimage to El Rincón on 16 December—an experience I would not repeat, as I was almost crushed to death in the basilica—where I experienced firsthand one of the biggest gatherings of the Cuban religious calendar. I also attended a number of *santería* ceremonies and rituals.

While this study includes all the Afro-Cuban religious forms, it focuses on *santería*, also known as the *regla de ocha*-Ifá, which derives from the Yoruba *orisha* cults of West Africa. I chose this focus for a number of reasons, most important, my Yoruba background and bias. I would also argue that it dominates the Afro-Cuban religious spectrum and is probably the most widely practiced of the Afro-Cuban forms. On a practical note, both *palo monte* and Abakuá tend to be more closed to outsiders. In the case of the latter, women are not permitted to join the secret society. Even noninitiates are rarely excluded from any *santería* ritual, except the *asiento*, the initiation of a new priest or priestess. Furthermore, the growing recognition of the transnational nature of *orisha* worship makes it possible to pinpoint the particularities of the Cuban situation and examine them within a global context. In Nigeria, the United States, and elsewhere, *orisha* worship has sometimes been seen as, at best, a “traditional” religion that many believe has no place in the modern world and, at worst, a menace to society.

Chapter 1 makes the connection between Afro-Cuban religious forms and their African origins, but also examines other factors that have facilitated the generation of the complex Creole forms which exist today. These Creole forms reflect not just the encounter with European culture and the Roman Catholic Church but also exchanges between cultural and religious practices originating within different African ethnic groups.

Chapters 2 and 3, which look at the colonial and republican periods, are intended to locate the 1959 Revolution within its historical context in order to demonstrate that, although it marked a new departure, it inserted itself into a set of conditions and responses to circumstances that were peculiarly Cuban. During the colonial period, Africans were able to preserve and re-create some of their traditions within legally constituted institutions called *cabildos de nación*, which were organized along ethnic

lines. This was tolerated by the authorities less for humanitarian reasons than as an attempt to preempt a pan-African rebellion against slavery.

With abolition and moves toward independence from Spain in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it became expedient to assimilate the Africans. The concept of racial fraternity, most eloquently articulated by Cuban patriot José Martí, was used to unite all Cubans, black and white, in the struggle for independence.

Despite the reformulations of *cubanía* to include those previously excluded—Africans and their descendants—with the coming of the republic, what Palmié (2002) calls “the self-conscious modernization of the Cuban state” (28) was threatened by cultural and biological legacies of the slavery past. As Pérez (1999) has noted, North American cultural forms increasingly became markers of “Cubanness.” There was oscillation between the suppression and the political functionalization of Afro-Cuban practices. An extreme example of the former tendency was the anti-*brujería* (witchcraft) scares of the early decades of the twentieth century, when Afro-Cuban religious practices were associated with criminality. However, in the 1920s, in the face of growing discontent with U.S. political and economic domination, selected elements of Afro-Cuban culture were made “respectable” and used as an “antidote to Wall Street” (Alejo Carpentier, cited in Kutzinski 1993: 141). Yet few doubted that, as Afro-Cubans progressed within society, their cultural and religious forms would survive only as folklore.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine how the 1959 Revolution’s response to Afro-Cuban religions has changed. As part of its modernization project, the Revolution launched an ideological campaign to uproot old patterns of conduct and to create a new, rational person. The revolutionary leadership went much farther than previous regimes in acknowledging the centrality of Cuba’s African heritage.

By the mid- to late-1960s, however, a conflict had arisen between the desire to recognize the African roots of Cuban culture and a commitment to the atheist state. Long-standing prejudices toward Afro-Cuban religions were still reflected in scholarship and official attitudes. Membership was linked with unemployment, criminality, a low level of integration into society, and manifestations of social pathology. Despite attempts by the government to create a more representative Cubanness, aesthetic patterns often excluded blacks in their determination of what was pleasing or universally relevant.

By the late 1980s, diminishing economic and ideological support from

eastern Europe compelled the Cuban government to rethink aspects of the revolutionary project. This paved the way for its own form of liberalization (*apertura*). Both the failure to satisfy material needs and modifications of revolutionary ideology have created a sense of disorientation among Cubans as well as a return to old methods and habits. In an environment that no longer discourages religious practice, African-derived religions are for the first time emerging from a position of marginality. Yet this brings with it other threats, such as commercialization and power struggles over the control of an increasingly valuable cultural resource.

What has emerged is a situation that is highly complex and often paradoxical. It may surprise some outside the country that religiosity, largely though not exclusively in popular rather than orthodox forms, is central to Cubanness. In addition, as other Cubanists (e.g., Kapcia, Pérez, and Stubbs) have noted, there are many *cubanías* and these define groups that may differ in quite fundamental ways: Miami exiles and revolutionary Cubans, blacks and whites. Afro-Cubans and their cultural forms can still be located both inside and outside of *cubanidad*, and blackness can either be subsumed under a rhetoric of *mestizaje* or used as a discriminatory factor.

Some of the questions concerning the nature of Afro-Cuban practices and the Cuban religious spectrum are important in terms of the current debate on diaspora religion and culture. Nevertheless, while in other parts of the Americas, *orisha* worship can reflect a negotiation between an African and a New World identity, in my experience, both practitioners and scholars for the most part recognize it as an essentially Cuban form.