S. Palmié

Making sense of Santería: three books on Afro-Cuban religion

In: New West Indian Guide/ Nieuwe West-Indische Gids 70 (1996), no: 3/4, Leiden, 291-300

This PDF-file was downloaded from http://www.kitlv-journals.nl
Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories. GEORGE BRANDON. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993. x + 206 pp. (Cloth US$ 31.50)

Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora. JOSEPH M. MURPHY. Boston: Beacon, 1994. xiii + 263 pp. (Cloth US$ 25.00)

Walking with the Night: The Afro-Cuban World of Santería. RAUL CANIZARES. Rochester VT: Destiny Books, 1993. xii + 148 pp. (Paper US$ 12.95)

Since 1959, the steady exodus from revolutionary Cuba has led to the gradual emergence of an Afro-Cuban religious diaspora in the United States. While this phenomenon has attracted scholarly attention for some time, the literature has grown particularly rapidly in recent years. It is, perhaps, not entirely fortuitous that a spate of current academic publications on the subject coincided with a scramble by the popular media to exploit its exotic potential in the context of the 1993 U.S. Supreme Court case on animal sacrifice. Clearly, what has come to be called an Afro-Cuban “cultic renaissance” in exile holds promise both for sensationalist journalism and certain kinds of theoretical projects. Partly articulating with older, but politically reinvigorated debates about the relations between African and African-American cultures, partly addressing fundamental questions about conventional models of cultural boundedness and coherence, and, finally, calling into question both popular and academic notions of “modernity” (and its inevitable counterpart “tradition”), the
problems posed by the emergence of an Afro-Cuban religious diaspora in
the United States present a timely challenge.

Although all three volumes under review here speak to these issues in
one way or another, George Brandon’s *Santeria from Africa to the New
World* is most explicit in foregrounding their significance for a theory of
what he calls the “organization of cultural difference in multicultural,
multiethnic, and multiracial societies” (p. 7). For Brandon, such a theory
must be historical in scope, and it is to history that he turns in attempting
to chart the complex processes of fusion and fragmentation that went into
the making of Afro-Cuban religious culture. Brandon has synthesized a
large number of not always easily accessible publications into a coherent,
and at times fresh and illuminating account. Like some of his predecessors,
Brandon links the emergence of Yoruba-influenced religious practices in
Cuba to the construction of new social frameworks, such as the *cabildos
de nación* (voluntary associations of Africans based on ideologies of
ethnic commonality). Yet he does not accept standard views about the
quasi-automatic “tenacity” of traditions so implanted. Instead Brandon
plausibly hypothesizes about a process whereby the mechanisms carrying
religious knowledge forward in time were repeatedly re-located to new
organizational forms – for instance when the end of the slave trade and
increasing legal restriction undermined the viability of the *cabildos*. Like-
wise, he succeeds in problematizing commonsense assumptions about the
transplantation of Afro-Cuban religion to the United States, indicating
how this transition – given fuller knowledge of the historical particulars –
might be decomposed into a plurality of processes unfolding on both so-
cial and ideological planes, and involving change and differentiation
within the symbolic realm as well (pp. 104-20).

Brandon’s occasional inability to ground his interpretations in the kind
of evidence a rigorous historicism would demand may be excusable, given
his dependence on published accounts and the pioneering character of his
own research into the most recent developments. More problematic, how-
ever, is the manner in which he presents his argument about a basic thread
of cultural continuity running from pre-colonial Yorubaland to the rural
baracoons and urban black barrios of nineteenth-century Cuba, and, final-
ly, to Union City, East Harlem, the Bronx, and Miami. Brandon’s criticism
of the misplaced concreteness of an earlier anthropological discourse on
“culture contact” and “syncretism” is well taken. Nevertheless, he seems
reluctant to part with some of its basic premises and heuristic tools – such
as the assumption of the existence of a unitary pre-colonial “Yoruba
religion” (something on which we have practically no valid historical in-
formation, and which contemporary ethnographic evidence makes im-
probable), and its counterpart, as similarly monolithic ideal-typical Catholic “conquest culture” in colonial Cuba (which, upon closer inspection, turns about to be a similar mirage).

Ironically, it is precisely this typological device which allows him to use analogies deriving from sociolinguistics to periodize the processes nowadays associated with the term “creolization.” The result is more typology and of a questionable sort. Brandon’s deductive elaboration of purely abstract categories such as “HFY” (mystical healing oriented spiritists involved in folk Catholicism who practice some aspects of Yoruba-derived religions) or “PCFY” (presumably practitioners of Palo Monte who are also folk Catholics, and have adopted some elements of Yoruba-derived traditions) hardly adds to an understanding of how variations in cultural form become salient in social practice. Moreover, once projected into the past, these constructs lead him to flatten historical processes into ever more complicated diagrammatic schemata referring to logically permutations in social perceptions of cultural form. The fact that Brandon (or anyone, for that matter) cannot marshal adequate data to support such exercises in deductive reasoning is only part of the problem. For his enterprise also rests on a good dose of “bad history.” In dealing with what he calls “phase II, Pre-Santería and Early Santería,” Brandon wraps up a highly implausible “period” lasting from 1492, when Columbus had barely set foot on Cuba, to 1870, when entirely unexplicated changes allegedly ushered in “phase III, Santería.” As with Brandon’s positing of a (seemingly trans-historical) African “Old Religion,” one wonders how the carving out of an historical unit of analysis which spans several centuries – and obviously downplays the dramatic economic and social transformations Cuba underwent at the turn of the nineteenth century – could further his declared analytical goals. Just as one cannot help but feel that a good many of the outmoded anthropological conceptions the author rightly attacks are strawmen, so do such conceptions of history ultimately leave one puzzled.

This is all the more regrettable because the dissertation which Brandon reworked into this book was, at the time of its submission (1983), a valid and novel contribution to the anthropology of Afro-Cuban religion. It may, indeed, have been the first attempt to combine an historical account of the evolution of Afro-Cuban religion with an ethnography of its current practice in the urban United States. Yet in the published text Brandon chose to downplay his ethnographic contribution, while enlarging upon what – with few exceptions – amounts to a reinterpretation of the published historiographical literature. This was probably not wise, for unless the announced second volume – this time of ethnographic scope – includes a great deal of fresh research, it is likely that the publication of other
ethnographic oriented dissertations from the 1980s will discourage the publication of what was, in 1983, a useful corpus of primary data.

If, for Brandon – who at times literally collapses culture into ethnicity – difference is articulated at the shifting boundaries between (presumably socially localizable) “traditions,” the target of Joseph Murphy’s *Working the Spirit* is not the socially “other,” but wholly other. While conceding that “cultural heritage or social history” must play a part in discussions of African-American religious cultures, such concerns – Murphy argues – are contingent upon the metaphysical premises of inquiry: they may be bracketed once we look at religion not as a social fact, but as a transcendent one. This has a number of interesting consequences – among them the possibility of unabashedly raising the issue of “essence.” Despite the obvious dissimilarities between different African-American religions, Murphy feels confident that we can speak of a “diasporan spirituality” which is distinctive not only for historical reasons, but also because its essence lies in a particular attitude towards what Murphy calls “the spirit,” and glosses as “a real and irreducible force uplifting communities throughout the African diaspora” (p. 3).

By defining his agenda in such terms, Murphy places himself within a tradition of comparative religious research that posits the mutually translatable of religious idioms on the grounds of the assumption of a common object of reference. Hence his focus on “spirituality” as a mode of human-divine interrelation that may ramify into specificity, but cannot be reduced to it. For Murphy, empathy, grounded in a “sense” of the sacred as universal and *sui generis*, can transcend the accidents of history and cultural difference. Once paved in this manner, the way ahead is clear: African-American religions can be shown to constitute a “family of traditions” not just because a hemispheric perspective reveals commonalities in historical determination, but also because “gaps of theological explanation among the different diasporan traditions” (p. 8) can be overcome by recourse to the translational master key of Christianity. In stringing five African-American religious traditions – Vodun, Candomblé, Santerfa, Revival Zion, and North American Black Christianity – along this ecumenical thread, Murphy takes his departure from a basically Durkheimian vocabulary which he submits to a soteriological twist. In a rather remarkable passage he tells us that

diasporan liturgies are seen by their practitioners as both works for the spirit and of the spirit. The reciprocity between communities and spirit is expressed in physical work as the community works through words, music, and movement to make the spirit present. The spirit in turn works through the physical work of the congregation, filling human actions with
its power. Diasporan ceremonies are thus services for the spirit, actions of sacrifice and praise to please the spirit. And they are services of the spirit, actions undertaken by the spirit to inspire the congregation. Thus the reciprocity of Diasporan spirituality is affirmed: service to the spirit is service to the community; and service to the community is service to the spirit. Service is revealed to be the central value of communal life. Service shows the spirit, in ceremony, but also whenever one member serves another (p. 7).

If this is circular reasoning for those who prefer to see religion as a symbolic medium – albeit a uniquely powerful one – for making statements about something else (say, in the present instance, certain definitions of “community” with all their implications of hierarchy, inequality, exclusion, mystification of power-relations, and so forth), those inclined to follow Murphy’s path see the beauty of truth affirmed.

Murphy has little to say about – for example – the complex strategies of marginalizing women in contemporary Vodun, the manner in which Santeros have long linked ideologies of reciprocity to an idiom of pecuniary transactions, or the way in which – as Eugene Genovese suggested long ago, and Jean Comaroff has shown more recently in an African case – the appropriation of Christianity (even if in a “spirit of resistance”) re-inscribed the categories of oppression in sacralized form not only upon the community, but also upon the individual bodies of the faithful. But he does have some to say – if obliquely – about how the truth of “Diasporan ceremonial spirituality” relates to the larger contexts of social action within which, and against which, it reveals itself to the “community” and (presumably) the religiously sensitive outside observer. This is where things, at times, go seriously wrong in what is otherwise a fairly balanced, occasionally insightful, and certainly – as the back-cover blurb tells us – “user-friendly” account. It is surely true that all diasporan religions define a sort of alternative public sphere – which is fundamentally structured by (though, indeed, not reducible to) the realities of social exclusion. Yet the conclusion that they must therefore provide a “haven in a heartless world” is not only counterfactual, but misleading insofar as it neglects that people phase in and out of differently structured “provinces of meaning” with much more ease than our suppositions about their “finitude” suggest.

To take just one example, it is simply wrong to suggest that Cubans – subjected as they are in the United States to forms of racial othering both more unspecific and more rigid than those salient to their own cultural context – would, upon entering the sacred social realm of the ilé or casa de santo (cult group), “leave behind these external, if not oppressive,
markers of identity and reaffirm one family, one house in the spirit” (p. 88).
It does take some leaps of faith to count a good part of Miami’s Cuban-
American population among “some of the most oppressed people on
earth” (p. 88) – which one is led to conclude from Murphy’s failure to
specify that he may be talking about the time of slavery. But apart from
that, I would suggest that he ask his sources not only why, for example,
bátá-drummers tend to be black (even by Cuban standards), but also why
they enjoy a reputation (much gossiped about among their phenotypically
“more legitimate” religious “family members”) as socially deviant, and
good for little else than, yes, “working the spirit.”

Despite all good intentions, if taken as contribution to the comparative
ethnography of African-American religious (a purpose which Murphy’s
book will undoubtedly serve, given the paucity of adequate undergradu-
ate reading), Working the Spirit is a troubling book. For its romantic-
ization of an oppressed African-American religious “Other” more in tune
with “God’s very truth” than with the disenchanted majoritarian rational-
ist may well block the view toward more “realistic” assessments of its
subject matter. Murphy frames his book within an evocation of “our black
ancestors” and a praise of the American Black Church for having re-
discovered a spirituality not only congruent with the perennial “mission of
Protestant Christianity,” but also “fully consistent with their biblical
ancestors.” As this suggests, a vision of the authentically divine may pave
the way to truths transcending both mundane conceptions of history and
politics. And this, ironically, is where Murphy’s implicit adversity to “mod-
ernist” rationalism converges with certain postmodern sensibilities more
inclined to authorize “occult documents” than “documents of the oc-
cult.” A good deal more might be said about this peculiar elective affinity
between those who eschew modernist paradigms of “sense-making,” and
those who abandon them. But perhaps the real value of Murphy’s con-
tribution lies precisely in this: having demonstrated the extent to which a
theological interpretation of African-American religions can generate in-
sights – while also showing where those of us who do not share this
vision will have to continue to plod along.

Or fight back! For this is what Raul Canizares sets out to do in the third
volume under review here. His is, in many ways, the “pagan” answer to
Murphy’s Christian pastoralism. Like many others “insiders,” Canizares is
fed up with the fact that academically or otherwise “empowered” out-
siders enjoy almost unlimited liberty to inscribe what suits their fancy upon
what he claims as his religion. “After a careful review of the literature and
present scholarship on Santería,” he tells us,
I’ve reached the conclusion that the perspective of the high-level initiate – the priests and priestesses, as well as the high priest of the religion – has not been adequately portrayed and is not accessible to the English-speaking community. As one born into the tradition, I possess unique tools to aid my scholarly research. The union of experience with academic discipline – of the -emic with the -etic – will serve us well in exploring hitherto uncharted aspects of the fascinating religion of Santería (p. 8).

The result is a book curiously hovering on the edge of historically distinct discursive formations, and bridging – not always successfully – three equally distinct genres: the academic monograph, the “eyewitness account,” and the *manual de santería* (the latter being one of what can be considered two distinct types of Afro-Cuban “insider” writing: the *libreta*, a handwritten or typed notebook containing ritual and theological information for the writer’s own religious use; and the *manual*, a published tract directed at the layperson and containing, characteristically, an exposition of the “true nature of santería,” schematic descriptions of the major deities and their attributes, a few myths, superficial accounts of divination procedures, and some “magical” recipes for home use).

Canizares is not the first practitioner to attempt such a synthesis. Neither are the results of his labors as successful a mixture of “[s]cholarship and personal narrative” as William Heim claims in the book’s foreword (p. xii). More often than not, he offers a fairly unmediated juxtaposition, rather than a blend of textual strategies. And as we follow Heim’s suggestion and “accompany Raul Canizares on a brief walk with the night” (p. xii), we are repeatedly jolted from conventionally “academic” chapters into rambling personal anecdotes, *manual*-style lists of deities, or instructions for preparing herbal baths.

This, however, is not to deny the potential value of Canizares’s contribution for rethinking some of the methodological tenets of current Santería studies. What is striking about the position Canizares arrogates for himself is that it reverses the epistemological premises on which most “outsiders” predicate their inquiries. Like Murphy, whose measuring rod for comparing Atlantic spiritualities is not wholly accessible to those who lack a “sense of the religious,” Canizares operates from a position that defies traditional social science standards of rational explication. In contrast to Murphy, however, his is the perspective of an insider looking out. Hence it is only fitting that he would, for example, judge the adequacy of existing accounts not by the disciplinary yardsticks of methodological rigor and theoretical cogency, but by the standards of a system of esoteric knowledge which, by its very nature, cannot be revealed to (or acquired
by) those lacking the initiatory requisites. Like his predecessor Ernesto Pichardo (consistently misspelled as “Pritchardo” by Canizares), to whom some of the more interesting parts of this book are heavily indebted, Canizares thus points to a genuine problem in the sociology of Afro-Cuban religious knowledge relating to thorny questions concerning the distribution of “culture” within sociologically classifiable units.

In contrast to both Brandon and Murphy, Canizares does not worry excessively about how to represent the fundamental heterogeneity and polymorphous character of Afro-Cuban religious thought and practice. Rather than imposing ideal-typical “orientations” upon the evidence, or sweeping “variation” under a Durkheimian carpet, Canizares sees no need to contain the volatility and composite nature of Afro-Cuban religion by disciplinary measures. Instead, he focuses on questions of discursive authority, and thus on the effects of an unequal distribution of religious knowledge among “insiders” upon the research endeavors of “outsiders.” Canizares distinguishes a variety of stages of involvement in Santería that correlate not only with differential rights of access to esoteric knowledge, but are thought to correspond with different modes of experiencing ritual life, and, ultimately, with changing perspectives on “the religion” itself. The fundamental division runs along an initiatory faultline sundering “interested observers,” “clients,” or those who have undergone minor rites establishing affiliation with a priest or cult group from initiates who ritually acquired the right of access to priestly knowledge. Even among the latter, however, the ability to utter “truths” about Santería is notionally contingent upon a dialectic between the gradual acquisition of esoteric knowledge and the growth of experience in enacting such knowledge as sacred competence. Indeed, the distinction between practical ritual knowledge (possessed to a greater or lesser degree by all initiates) and “deep” theological knowledge does not demarcate a boundary between “Santería proper” and corrupted variants. It is merely a criterion by means of which claims to positions of authority become negotiable among the priesthood.

For Canizares, this is where the problem starts. Suffering from a constitutional incapacity not only to gain access to esoteric matters, but to sever superficial information from deep knowledge, anthropologists and other observers have unwittingly reified impressions of Santería that do not accord with the views of what he calls “high-level initiates” (among whom, one imagines, he counts himself). Yet the real problem lies not just in a Simmelian correlation between esoterism and social closure, and Canizares by no means goes far enough in exploring the epistemological
implications his own religion has for the anthropological study of
notionally unaccessible – i.e. unknowable – bodies of knowledge. The
question appears not so much one of essential truth or falsehood, but of
levels of generalization. The quest for a unitary “religion” tends to result
in oversystematized images of sometimes poorly integrated bodies of belief
and practices, and a thoroughly oversocialized conception of believers
and practitioners as well. It is, thus, hardly surprising that most writers on
Santería (including myself) have tended to base their constructions of
Afro-Cuban religion not so much on what the proverbial run-of-the-mill
practitioner does or says, but on the statements of more or less select groups
of self-conscious “guardians of traditions” capable and willing to offer
ready-made solutions to our quest for systematic unity. The issue here is
not only biased reporting, but discursive politics. For it would be simply
naive to presume that practitioners of Afro-Cuban religion have remained
innocent of the ways in which public ascriptions of authenticated “other-
ness” can be activated as symbolic capital in a society as obsessed with
the political significance of cultural difference as “multicultural” America.

This ties in with another issue which has yet to be adequately addressed
in the literature on Afro-Cuban religion. It is not just that the majority
of published texts present artificially homogenized accounts of “what
Santeros believe or do.” Who these Santeros are is even less apparent.
Focusing on what people do or think as Santeros (and qua being San-
teros), we downplay the fact that most – if not all – of them do not spend
much of their waking lives falling in trance, sacrificing animals, consulting
divination, or engaging in other forms of intriguingly strange and utterly
“different” cogitation and behavior. The point here is not that Santeros
are “essentially no different from you or me,” or that – to refer back to an
older and not unproblematic sociological vocabulary – their “role sets”
or “status configurations” are not necessarily any less complex and
differentially determined than those of their Episcopalian, Baptist, or
Pentecostal next-door neighbors in Hialeah or Union City. It is that we
simply do not know anything about what their lives are all about once
they exit the kinds of social situations we define as ethnographically
relevant, or change the topic from mythology to baseball. More than any-
thing else, this reduction of their identity to that of performers of difference
has hampered any serious attempt to understand how, when, and to what
extent the beliefs and practices of Afro-Cuban religions contextually
intersect with, inform, conflict with, or – who knows? – simply turn out to
be irrelevant to the individual or collective action and projects of their practitioners. This certainly says a good deal about the ethnography that went into the making of the recent literature on Santería. But it also says something about the challenge this subject still holds.

STEPHAN PALMIÉ
Amerika-Institut
University of Munich
Munich, Germany