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Cuban Museums and Afro-Cuban Heritage Production in Socialist Cuba

In Cuba's Republican era, politicians and social scientists perceived Afro-Cuban religions as obstacles to Cuban social development. For most people Afro-Cuban religions represented a primitive, criminal underworld left over from slavery and the colonial society. Afro-Cuban religions, which were once associated with criminality, are today examples of Cuba's national heritage

Furthermore, I argue that by defining these practices as national heritage and exhibiting them in public museums, the state also created discursive space for creative interpretation by religious practitioners. A growing number of Afro-Cuban practitioners are using their homes as exhibition spaces, opening their private collections of religious objects to the Cuban public and international tourists.

Below I explore how Cuban museums have produced Afro-Cuban heritage and how private museum proprietors challenge the state's monopoly over the production of Afro-Cuban heritage.

Introduction

In Cuba Afro-Cuban[i] religions have become important symbols of Cuban heritage. Ironically one century ago, these same religions were scorned as sources of criminality, witchcraft and social degeneration

(Brown 2003a; Brown 2003b). The notion of transculturation[ii] remains central concepts for imagining Cuban national unity.[iii]

In state museums Afro-Cuban religions became synonymous with folklore and the narrative of Cuban transculturation and African slavery. For the state, religions became attractive as symbols of national unity, an allusion to the blending of African and European societies and the birth of the independent Cuban nation. In light of the state's treatment of Afro-Cuban religions, this process of integration, however, entailed many contradictions.

Fredy is a self-taught cultural promoter of Cuba's Lucumí (Yoruba) religious traditions. She is the custodian of an extraordinary collection of religious objects. Fredy's Palace of the Orishas (Palacio de los Orishas) is a private museum and memorial to her late husband. Palace of the Orishas is an "evocative transcript" (Humphrey 1994:26) and an unofficial heritage narrative that re-establishes Afro-Cuban religion as a marker of her personal identity and history.

The Ritual House as a Cultural Space

Religious artefacts and collections, in situ, have their own social histories and exhibitionary techniques, but they also share principles of display with the public museum.[iv] Consecrated religious objects are alive and in a spiritually charged environment in ritual houses, where Orishas

"eat" and devotees "feed" them. The deities, which are usually kept in porcelain soup tureens, protect the house and devotees, providing them peace and balance.

The First Room

The centrepiece of the main wall is a photo of Fredy meeting Fidel Castro in 1998. She had attended a national conference that the government sponsored about the relationship between state and religion in Cuba. The photo of Fredy and Fidel Castro is significant as it documents the government's recognition of Fredy as a religious leader.[v] In 2002, the photo hung above a framed copy of the National Prize of Community Work (Premio Nacional de Trabajo Comunitario), which she received from the government in 2001.[vi]

The Second Room

The second room is an altar for the Virgin of Caridad, the Catholic saint that Regla de Ocha believers worship as Ochun. The altar is an elevated, multi-tiered wooden structure, pale yellow with metallic gold details. There are two small shrines and one central shrine with carved details. The focal point of the altar is a statue of the Virgin of Caridad, which consists of a shrine adorned with cherubs and other religious icons. To the left is a statue of the Virgin of Regla and to the right is a statue of the Virgin of Mercedes. On the floor in front of the altar are vases, a large carpet, two gold-tone metal bells or (llamadora), and a

ceramic plate containing two cigars. In addition, there is an offering box and a pillow on the floor; one of the bells on top of the offering box is a small figure of Saint Lazarus. Finally, to the right of the altar, is a staff of Osun.

The Third Room

From wall to wall and from ceiling to floor, stunningly elaborate thrones for Changó, Ochún, and Yemayá remake the room into an irreproducible voice, a symphony of biographical objects that possess many stories. Fredy had attached a black and white photo of her husband to the throne of Obatalá but then moved it to its current place, thinking that it would look better on the throne of his saint, Ochún, which is the centrepiece of the third and final exhibition space. She explained that she had attached Rigo's photo in the centre of a fan (una abaníco) that she had covered with red feathers. They are "Plumas de Larito," she explained one day, "a bird that Rigo brought back from Africa in his pocket, as it was illegal to bring foreign animals into Cuba." These feathers are very rare, she explained. Today, people take dove (paloma) feathers and paint them red, instead of using the real ones. On several occasions during public events at the home, visitors had stolen her precious feathers right off of Ochún's throne, she lamented. Fredy has dedicated the house to his life and religious

legacy, making him ever present through images, text, and in her conversations.

As a practitioner and custodian of sacred collections, Fredy is a rare authority on Afro-Cuban religions. The Cuban government, law enforcement agencies and criminal ethnologists, and other state authorities, however, had controlled public representations of Afro-Cuban religions and practitioners since the Republican era. And now under the revolutionary government, the state heritage authorities have become the new custodians of Afro-Cuban religions.

Criminal Heritage: Cuba's Republican Era

In the Republican era, police raided Afro-Cuban religious activities, rituals, and gatherings. In the eugenics-inspired studies of criminologists and sociologists, sacred Afro-Cuban objects became evidence of racial inferiority, criminality, atavism, and biological pathologies that endangered Cuban society.

Afro-Cuban religious objects passed from the police to social scientists, and eventually to collectors of curiosities as well. In the late 1940s, and the mid 1950s Afro-Cuban religious artefacts were part of exhibitions at Havana's Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum of Legal Medicine and the anthropological museum of the University of Havana. Today, these same objects are revered heritage items in several local history and national museums across Cuba.

From Race to Heritage: The Revolutionary Era

As I have argued elsewhere (Flikke 2006), the Revolutionary government's racial integration campaign was an important step for re-constructing the relation between Cuban heritage and race. Under state socialism, the emergent discourse on race and Cuban heritage have shaped future representations of Afro-Cuban religions in museums.[vii]

In the 1960s government implemented racial desegregation policies and introduced anti-racism laws. By 1962 Castro announced that they had eradicated racial discrimination. The government discouraged the use of ethnic identification markers, such as black or Afro-Cuban, religious practices and the expression of group identities through social institutions such as Afro-Cuban mutual aid societies. The government gave special attention to the study and promotion of Afro-Cuban religions as folklore and cultural performance (Brown 2003a; Daniel 1998; Hagedorn 2001; Moore 1997; Pedroso 2002).[viii]

Government-sponsored research of Afro-Cuban religious practices was abundant; the government's motive was, however, ambiguous. The following statement reflects the government's interest in Afro-Cuban religions:

> Religious sects of African origin will be continuously researched. Studies will be centered on those sects which have come into

> conflict with the Revolution. (Moore 1988: 100).

The Revolutionary government viewed Afro-Cuban religions as sources of "problems," such as criminality and other tendencies that required observation and control on "a national scale" (Moore 1988: 102). These sentiments are reminiscent of the description used by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in his study of the criminality of Afro-Cuban religions at the beginning of the twentieth century.

From Afro-Cubans to Afro-Cuban Culture

Detractors of the Revolutionary government's racial agenda have argued that the study of Afro-Cuban religions and brotherhoods began the "regime's struggle to stamp out Afro-Cuban religious fraternities" (Moore 1988:100). Religious leaders were often jailed and persecuted. At the same time, the government promoted Afro-Cuban religions under its new interpretation of national heritage.[ix] Under the socialist government, the persecution of Afro-Cuban religions lasted more than three decades, and these practices went underground as they had before.[x]

Thus the display of Afro-Cuban religions in Cuban museums 20 years later reveals the complex and contradictory nature of state heritage policies. The continued criminalization of the religions is absent from the state's heritage narrative about Afro-Cuban religions. When religious

practitioners tell their personal stories, however, these details are often in the foreground. What is at stake for ritual house owners is their authority to make meaning of Afro-Cuban heritage as their own social histories and secondly, their authority as practitioners or "possessive individuals" to interpret these practices as national traditions (Handler 1985:209).

A veteran tourism professional confided that, as recently as 1998, she was afraid to attend a religious consultation with a santero because she feared that a colleague or party member would see her. A malicious or ambitious person could use this information to create suspicion and doubt about her moral character. Such accusations could jeopardize a promising career and future opportunities. After the Pope visited Cuba in 1998, the atmosphere became somewhat less repressive for religious practitioners. "You didn't see people walking around with religious necklaces and dressed in all white like you do today," she said.[xi]

Revolutionary Heritage Policy

The Search for Meaningful Heritage Narratives[xii]

The 1979 Law for the Protection of Cultural Heritage[xiii] made "ethnographic and folkloric objects and documents" and "ethnographic objects and musical instruments" national cultural patrimony. Then in 1987 Resolution 2/87 (1987) declared national

heritage the collection of "African cult" objects and utensils that belonged to a well-known Ocha priest from the City of Havana. In other words the altar objects and other instruments that belonged to Fredy and her late husband also became heritage objects under this resolution.[xiv]

The resolution represents a significant analytical moment in the reinvention of Afro-Cuban religions and the production of Cuban heritage. The legislation produced a new heritage narrative and a new category of museum and heritage objects.

Summary

The Revolutionary government coupled scepticism of Afro-Cuban religion with their promotion as national heritage. For some practitioners the appropriation of Afro-Cuban religions as national heritage usurped their political and social identity.

For Fredesvinda Rosell Rosell (Fredy), heritage and social life are indistinguishable. She exhibits her sacred Afro-Cuban objects which she calls her "personal patrimony," as family history and quotidian life.

Fredy's Palace of the Orishas illustrates how the government's exhibition of religious ethnology has created opportunities for individual creative interpretation. As a religious practitioner and an independent cultural promoter, Fredy exhibits her sacred objects to redefine religious

ethnology as the centre of her personal heritage, as well as the national heritage that the state has institutionalized. For many years, the government has tried to incorporate Fredy's house into its national museum network.

As Robin D. Moore notes, in "both a metaphorical and a tangible sense," cultural representations demonstrate "conflict over the interpretation of social experience and of one's relationship to that experience" (cf. Moore 1997:8). Similarly then, the collection and display of Afro-Cuban religious objects in state museums and independent exhibition spaces raise important questions about the interface between heritage production and social life, and their relevance as strategies of survival for individuals and states.[xv]

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ii Castellanos (1992), in "Notes on Afro-Cuban Religion and Cuban Linguistics," discusses the usage of Afro-Cuban and its various derivations. "Afro-Cuban," as a modifier of culture, language, and religion, notes Castellanos, "is merely a terminological convenience in order to distinguish certain sociocultural manifestations of African origin from others of different provenance" (Castellanos 1992:222). For Castellanos, the concept does not imply that there is an "autonomous," "exotic," Afro-Cuban "world" distinct or separate from Cuban culture (Castellanos 1992:222). In Castro, the Blacks, and Cuba (1988) Carlos Moore argues that despite the racial desegregation of Cuban society under Castro's socialist government, the marginalization of blacks continues, both as official and de facto policy. Moore argues that blacks have made insufficient gains in Cuban society: Blacks are underrepresented in positions of government, leadership, and decision-making.

ii Transculturation is process by which several cultures in close contact produce a new culture with polysemic elements. It can also be a euphemism for race mixing in its various manifestations, such as mestizaje and mulatization, just to name two.

iii In many parts of Latin America, blacks did not become "symbols of a glorious heritage" (Wade 1997:33).

iv Several people suggested that the largest difference between these two contexts is aché or spirit.

v Fredy had shown me the photo in March 1999, as we sat drinking coffee in her television room. She described how she received a phone call from the Cuban Communist Party, inviting her to attend the conference. The Party did not invite random individuals, only respected figures in the religious and local community.

viThe government website, Cubarte describes Fredy as a "cultural promoter who has displayed an intense labour of retrieving, preserving and spreading Yoruba cultural values. See "http://www.cubarte.cult.cu/eng/global/loader.php?cat=personalidades&cont=showitem.php&id=389

vii This goal reflected "the craving for a communal text, nostalgia for a central cultural myth, articulated in whatever medium, that will restore the past and bring about the utopia that everyone seeks," writes Roberto González Echevarría (Echevarría 1992:203). When it comes to the pursuit of racial equality, the differences between the Republican and Revolutionary eras were form not content, intent not

consequence. Despite the actions and will of Cuban governments, racial tensions and inequality have persisted. De la Fuente emphasizes the political and historical significances of racial identities as objects of assimilation and units for social, political, and bureaucratic management.

In contrast to this ideal, in daily life, black, mulatto, and white (negro, mulato and blanco) exist in tension with more nuanced categories, such as "advanced" mulatto, "wheat colour," blue-black, and jabao, which describes a person with Africanized features and white skin (mulato adelantado, trigueño, jabao, negro-azul). One encounters, as well, the distinctions between light, dark, and "Indian" mulatto features (claro and indio) and, of course, "dark" (moreno) as a euphemism for black. Despite the nuances of racial identification in contemporary Cuba, the notion of the Afro-Cuban remains ambiguous and at times controversial.

viii According to Moore, instead of attacking the "system of white supremacy in modern Cuba," in 1959, the government focused on eradicating racial segregation (Moore 1988:21). Moore writes:

Castro's speeches reconfirmed two permanent features of his approach to race relations: a commitment to an integrationist stance steeped in white liberal paternalism and a firm refusal to allow the racial question to escape that framework. In other words, it was out of the question for Blacks themselves to define the content of their own oppression, or define the terms of their ethnic emancipation. (Moore 1988:28)

Castro's "guarantee that Blacks would be 'more respectful than ever' betrayed a form of white racial bigotry that would plague Cuba's domestic and foreign policies thereafter" (Moore 1988:25). Thus, this approach to race in Revolutionary Cuba concludes with Moore's statement: "Castro's exclusive emphasis on the goal of racial integration was entirely consistent with the Latin model of race relations" (Moore 1988:21). By this, Moore meant that the government treated Cuba's "humble ones," such as blacks and the poor, with "benevolent paternalism," which I will expand on below (Moore 1988: 53). Moore argues that vague racial policies lead to a further marginalization of "Black Cuba" (cf. Moore 1988).

ix Intellectual Walterio Carbonell criticized government leaders for avoiding to state their views on Afro-Cuban religions. Refusing to acknowledge that these practices were the "marrow of Cuban popular culture," Carbonell reportedly argued, "could only open the doors to reactionary and racist cultural policies within the new revolutionary setting" (Moore 1988:99).According to Moore, Carbonell stated:

I have said that these religious organizations have played a politically and culturally progressive role in the forging of our nationality. This statement may surprise many, because up till now the contrary thesis has prevailed, that is that black religions are a manifestation of savagery. That was precisely the view upheld by the ideologues of Spanish colonialism and their progenitor, the reactionary bourgeoisie … As a matter of fact, the silence of certain revolutionary writers concerning the political and cultural role of these cults of African origin is becoming highly suspect. (Carbonell in Moore 1988:99)

x The Pope's visit to Cuba and his reception by Castro and the Cuban people placed religion more in the spotlight.

xi Moreover, after the fall of communism, which exacerbated economic hardship

and social insecurity during the 1990s, Cuban scholars noted an increase in all religious practice and particularly of Afro-Cuban religions. At the time of my research in 2000 and 2001, markers of Afro-Cuban religious practice were more visible in daily life.

xii Today, the government employs heritage as a central value of Cuban nationalism. At the end of the 1970s, heritage legislation and state cultural agencies elaborated national programs to implement the state's political values in the cultural sectors. The 1970s was an important decade for the centralization of cultural production and intellectual life in Cuba.

xiii Chapter 1 Article 1 (e) and (j) of Decree 118 (1977).

xiv The objects had belonged to the late Arcadio Calvo Espinosa, a resident of the municipality of Guanabacoa in the City of Havana. Arcadio Calvo was the patriarch of a "famous, well-to-do Ocha house" that predated the Revolution and the Cultural Heritage Laws that recognized this genre of objects as heritage items in the late 1970s and 1980s after the proliferation of municipal museums Brown, David

2003a Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.. These objects constitute the core of the collection of religious ethnology at the Municipal Museum of Guanabacoa.

xv Implications: Although the integration of social and cultural programming has yielded significant achievements, the emergent contest between the state, the primary heritage "exhibitor," and individuals, the "exhibited," draws attention to the complex and precarious practices of cultural production under state socialism.

The classification of sacred objects from Afro-Cuban religions was the product of Cuban cultural policy, a nationalistic reinterpretation of history based on José Martí's ideas of a racially democratic nation. These policies of appropriation and inclusiveness constructed the imagined community that remains, at best an ideal, in Cuba and throughout the world. These socio-cultural policies, I argue, have institutionalized Afro-Cuban religions as a shared or national heritage.

As the products of official state policies, museums represent the government's attempt to control the foundation of post-Revolutionary Cuban identity, which, in the socialist government's logic, centres not on class and racial affinities, rather on a sense of belonging to an imagined community that the government defines as Cuba.