
Claudia Rauhut (2012)

Santería und ihre Globalisierung in Kuba.

Tradition und Innovation in einer afrokubanischen Religion

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Grounded in wide-ranging bibliographic research and, above all, her own in-depth fieldwork carried out in Havana, Claudia Rauhut's book analyzes how, at a time when Santería is spreading out into the world, conceptions of the religion are disputed and remodelled by followers themselves, revealing how the construction of transnational networks has affected its discourses and practices, prompting both negotiations and conflicts.

In exploring this topic, Rauhut's compelling study adopts an innovative methodological approach: she aims to evaluate globalization processes from a micro perspective. The German anthropologist shows that processes of transnationalization are not necessarily the outcome of migratory processes. Santería can be understood as a religious form of transnationalization produced locally by religious leaders who, generally speaking, are unable to leave Cuba. By integrating foreigners through the periodic ritual obligations to their familias rituales they construct transnational networks that allow them to win prestige and participate

authoritatively in the global dialogues on the religion of the Orishas.

The book opens with the author's critical examination of some key concepts (secularization, religion) from which she develops the theoretical baseline for her approach. Debating the categories of diaspora and transnationalization, Rauhut explores the works of two renowned anthropologists that serve as her main theoretical inspiration: both J. Lorand Matory's thesis concerning the transnational genesis of the Yoruba (1999) and Stephan Palmié's notion of "a politics and poetics of Africanization" (2008) express analytic positions that incorporate the maxims of the 'discursive turn' and look to break with notions such as structure, values and essentials, evoked by the classic concept of culture.

The historical chapters begin with an analysis of the first studies on Santería which reveal, among other things, that the pioneer in this field of research, Fernando Ortiz, not only dialogued with scientists investigating 'African religiosity' in Brazil (Raimundo Nina Rodrigues,

Roger Bastide), but was also inspired by important works written by Africans living in what is today Nigeria (Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Rev. Samuel Johnson). In the highly enlightening Chapters 5 and 6, Rauhut utilizes a wealth of details to show how the Cuban revolution dealt with the forms of religiosity associated with the former slaves. In appropriating the notion of 'Afro-Cuban folklore' coined by Ortiz, the revolutionary leaders tended to treat Santería as a part of national culture (folklore). The change in religious policy at the start of the 1990s (the abandonment of scientific atheism in favour of the defence of secular principles) cleared the way for the globalization and revitalization of Afro-Cuban religious traditions.

Next, Rauhut focuses on the local and global processes behind the emergence of a transnational interest in the 'African side' of Cuba, which also stimulated tourism and provided an important source of foreign currency for the revolutionary government. With considerable skill, the author analyzes how, in this context shaped by tensions between forces encouraging the commercialization of Santería and the state control of the religion, local actors have emerged who have built transnational networks with the aim of spreading their vision of Santería and attracting 'clients,' many of them tourists. Mutual accusations, ranging from a lack of authenticity to the pursuit of merely economic interests in performing the rituals, inform the internal and transnational disputes where the issue of

tradition's purity becomes a fundamental discursive resource.

Amid the contemporary religious elite, Rauhut locates two discursive extremes concerning the Santería tradition. The first, disseminated by the Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba, asserts that the roots of Santería lie in the Caribbean island and that, given the cultural losses caused by the advance of Islam and Christianity in Africa, today it can be considered the most authentic form of the Yoruban tradition. Since this is the only organization to receive state recognition, it tends to act as an official regulatory body that connects the defence of Santería to the defence of national identity.

The other, minority pole, the *línea africana*, fervently works to combat any influence identified with Christianity. It can be divided into two currents: the first seeks to revive traditions that stem back to the very beginnings of Cuban colonization (*Lúkúmización*), while the second grounds its religious recognition in dialogue and more direct exchanges with Nigerian leaders (*Yorubización*). Rauhut's analysis reveals, however, that these discourses can change according to their interlocutors and the contexts.

For the purposes of the study, though, it does not matter whether the discourses coincide with practices or whether Santería objectively becomes 'more African' or not. The focus of the research is on investigating "when, how and by whom Africa and the Yoruba are evoked to legitimize certain

practices" (p. 187). Congruent with her theoretical perspective, the researcher argues that the search for roots and the systematic construction of transnational networks and bridges with Africa should also be understood as empirical practices, a dimension that – and this is an important critique made by the author – until now has been ignored by specialists (p. 197).

Rauhut does not deny that the tendencies towards Africanization have the potential to foreground the theme of race. However she opts not to tackle the question of colour and phenotypes in her work, thereby leaving unanswered some interesting questions, such as: to what point is ritual purity related—and by whom—to the colour/race of the priests? Is Africanness/Yorubanness always imagined colour-free? Even if the nationalist discourse on mestizo identity may have 'softened' the colonial ideology of white supremacy—something that would need to be demonstrated—for non-Cubans who enter into contact with Santería (Americans, Europeans, Nigerians), the black colour/race constitutes an important marker of difference often mobilized as a criterion for hierarchization.

Based on the vast empirical material surveyed, the author ends the book by returning to the theoretical debate on syncretism and, fully in line with her earlier positions, explores the reflections of Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (1994). Pursuing an approach that conceives discourses as social action, while simultaneously foregoing any attempt to

identify structuring factors in historical and cultural processes, Rauhut argues that our notion of syncretism needs to be reconsidered. Syncretism will only make sense as an analytic category when our analysis focuses on the interests, discourses and projects of religious followers, looking to study how these agents, in concrete contexts shaped by power relations, seek to extend or defend their religious frontiers.

In the final chapter, Rauhut summarizes the main theses of her valuable work, which not only brings studies of Santería back up to date, but also innovates in two important ways: firstly by providing an insight into the local disputes and discourses concerning the tradition, precisely at a time when Santería is gaining wider recognition beyond the Cuban context. And secondly, by revealing not only the many historical connections and exchanges, but also, above all, the impact of contemporary networks, Rauhut begins to fill a gap in studies of the Black Atlantic, which have neglected—as the author criticizes—the Cuban perspective in their analyses. Indeed the research findings prompt her to make a final and somewhat provocative suggestion: rather than seeing Cuba as part of the African diaspora, we could conceive the Caribbean island as a discursive centre generating Yoruban practices worldwide.

The book is recommended to specialists in Afro-Diasporic religions and to all those interested in the anthropology and history

of the populations transplanted from Africa to the New World.

Bibliography

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