

Interpreting the African Diaspora in the Americas

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Introduction

Since the seminal study of Melville Herskovitz in 1941 on how Africans retained their cultural heritage and developed a sense of community in the Americas, scholars have employed case studies to contribute to Herskovitz's thesis and findings.¹ These scholars have tended to explore the extent and manifestations of African survivals in the Americas. For example, William Bascom has examined how Yoruba speaking slaves expressed their religious beliefs and practices in the Spanish Caribbean. Meanwhile Franklin Knight and Margaret Crahan and others have focused on not only how rural slaves retained their identity, but also how certain socioeconomic and cultural factors fostered the transmission of specific elements of the Africans' culture to members of the host and dominate society in the Americas. In Latin America, Roger Bastide has explored how Africans on the plantations of Brazil kept much of their cultural identity at the height of the African slave trade and the institution of slavery. Mary Karasch has also examined the same process among urban slaves and freed blacks in Rio de Janeiro.² Studies focusing on the African diaspora in the United States have been led by Charles Joyner, Albert Raboteau, and Sterling Stuckey just to name a few. All three have explored how Africans during the colonial and Antebellum periods sought to recreate a feeling of community and retain their identity in the low land areas of rural South Carolina, as well as in some important southern and northern cities that held considerable African American populations. In doing so, these scholars have primarily discovered that the institution of slavery did not destroy the desire among members of the African diaspora in the Americas to attempt to employ

¹ Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Boston, 1968. First published in 1941.

² See William Bascom, *Shango in the New World*. Austin, 1972; Margaret E. Crahan and Franklin Knight, eds., *African and the Caribbean*. Baltimore, 1979; Roger Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil*. Translated by Helen Sebba. Baltimore, 1978; and Mary C. Karasch, *Slave Life in Rio de Janeiro 1808-1850*. Princeton, N.J., 1987.

elements of their culture in order to survive as either slaves of freed people.³

Earlier studies emphasized how African culture and identity continued relatively static over time. This lack of change was determined by duration of the slave trade that a specific American region experienced. If the length of time of the trade was short-term then the introduction of large numbers of Africans who shared the same ethnicity, language or place of origin could occur to that region. If a region experienced just the opposite, then it often received a more diverse African population. In addition, the subsequent termination of the slave trade of an American region prevented either the renewal or synthesis of African identity and culture. The participants involved in this process stopped arriving directly from Africa. Other studies have also pointed out how rural slavery created certain barriers in the Americas that Africans simply could not overcome. Some of these obstacles included the type of labor performed by the slaves, the commodity in which they produced, and slave-owner relations. In other words, the plantation complexes in some areas of the Americas were so insular in nature, and isolated from the outside world that these socioeconomic organizations did not offer Africans the time and the space to modify their culture and identity over the institution's longevity. What they brought with them from Africa was what they kept. But such was not the case in the urban centers of the Americas.

Examining the experiences of the African Diaspora in the urban centers of colonial Cuba during the nineteenth century can help us understand how and to what extent Africans and their Cuban-born children, freed and enslaved, were successful in reinventing a sense of cooperation and affinity based on a shared identity. This study can also help us gain insight into some of the social, political, and economic variables that existed in Cuba that allowed Africans and Afro-Cubans to revise their Africanness. It is note worthy that some of these elements existed in other urban centers of the Americas. Wherever they existed, they enabled Africans to successfully modify their concepts of community and identity. In addition, the success of Africans in this endeavor altered the culture and identity of the dominant members of American societies. Central to understanding this process is to underline the notion that Africans came to the Americas as immigrants. Although

³ See, Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community*. Urbana, IL, 1985; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religions: The Invisible Institution in the AnteBellum South*. New York, 1978; and Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*. New York, 1987.

violently forced to emigrate to America to work as laborers, once Africans arrived in the urban milieu, they responded to their new context in ways that were similar to most immigrants. In the urban areas, they grouped themselves according to ethnicity, language, or place of origins in order to establish benevolent societies. Besides offering members mutual aid during times of illness, or a funeral and burial at the time of death, these societies helped Africans negotiate with the civil authorities for the time and space to not only recreate their communities, but forge an identity that was neither African nor American in nature.

The slave trade and Cuba's changing demographic patterns

One factor that encouraged Africans, and Afro-Cubans in Cuba, and Africans elsewhere in the Americas to recreate their communities and identities was the constant influx of slaves from Africa. As the plantation economy of Cuba expanded between 1790 and 1860, and which was sparked by the increases in the production of sugar, tobacco, and coffee, the demand for bozal slaves from Africa dramatically took off. For example, according to Alexander Von Humboldt some 256,000 slaves had arrived in Cuba by 1825.⁴ Census data for 1827 reported that the overall population of color on the island had swelled to 393,103. Of this figure 286,912 were slaves. This demographic characteristic signaled the beginning of a long process whereby Cuba's population was gradually becoming more African in nature. Between 1835 and 1840 Cuba received another 165,000 Africans. By the time the sugar industry had become industrialized in the 1860s, Cuban slave owners had imported 387,261 African slaves.⁵ Many Africans found themselves in the urban centers of Cuba such as Havana, Matanzas, and Santiago de Cuba.

The importation of Africans also changed the demographic landscape of Brazil, and South Carolina, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well as Louisiana. In order to cultivate rice, planters in the British colony of South Carolina introduced an average of 600 slaves annually to work their plantation between 1720 and 1726. As production increased so to did the importation of slaves. Between 1731 and 1738, planters secured an average of 2000 slaves each year. As a result, Africans in

⁴ Alexander Von Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba*. New York, 1956. Translated by J.S. Thrasher. 228.

⁵ See Augustin Cochin, *The Results of Slavery*. Boston, 1863. Translated by Mary Booth, 166; *Resumen del censo de poblacion de la isla de Cuba a fin del ano de 1841*. Havana, 1842, 19; Gwen Hall, *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies: A Comparison of Saint Dominique and Cuba*. Baltimore, 1971, 15.

South Carolina numbered nearly 40,000 by 1740.⁶ Sugar cultivation caused the demographic change in Brazil. Between 1550 and 1600, the slave population grew from 14,000 to 57,000.⁷ Much of their labor was responsible for producing between eight and nine metric tons of sugar. In Louisiana, the white population had dramatically increased by 1746. Nevertheless, the French settlements throughout the colony were considered overwhelmingly African, including the port city of New Orleans. After Louisiana became a part of Spanish America in 1763, the importation of Africans continued unabated. As a result, the slave population increased from 5,600 in 1766 to over 20,000 by the end of the eighteenth century.⁸

While the slave trade dramatically increased the African population, *coartacion*, or the right of the slaves to purchase their freedom, increased the freed Afro-Cuban population.⁹ In 1827 there were 106,191 freed blacks in Cuba. Fourteen years later that figure grew to 152,836. By 1850, Africans and Afro-Cubans had become numerically superior to whites. At this time there were 479,490 whites compared to 494,252 slaves and freed men and women on the island.¹⁰ Although the population of color would gradually lose its superiority by the end of the decade, one can conclude that the Africanization of Cuba's population, which had begun at the beginning of the century, undoubtedly affected the cultural development and identity of Cubans. Although the right of purchase one's self was never gained popularity among the plantocracy in the southern colonies and states of the U.S. it became a central characteristic of the slave society in Brazil, and other parts of Latin America. For example, in 1798 Brazil had a freed black population of 406,000 out of a total population of 3,250,000.¹¹ During the same period, Spanish Louisiana's freed black population grew from one hundred and sixty-five in 1770 to 1500 by 1795.¹² This does not mean that U.S. never had a noticeable freed black population; it did. *Coartacion*, however, was not the only factor responsible for creating it. Instead, slaves received their freedom from their masters for several reasons. They were

⁶ Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*. 14-15.

⁷ Arthur Ramos, *The Negro in Brazil*. Philadelphia, 1980. Translated by Richard Pattee. 3. First printed in 1939.

⁸ Gwen Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. Baton Rouge, 1992. 278.

⁹ See Hubert H.S. Aimes, "Coartacion: A Spanish Institution for the Advancement of Slaves into Freedom." *Yale Review*, XVII, February, 1909, 412-31.

¹⁰ Kenneth F. Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba, 1774-1789*. Gainesville, 1976. 4-6.

¹¹ Ramos, *The Negro in Brazil*. 6

¹² Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*. 278

manumitted for providing their masters with loyal work over the years. Others liberated their slaves upon their death, and stipulated their desire to free their slaves in their wills. While other slaves paid for their freedom with money they had saved from being rented out by their masters to other slave owners. This business transaction often occurred more frequently in the urban areas than in the countryside. Wherever Africans found themselves in the major towns and cities of the Americas, their chances of reinventing a sense of community and culture increased. This argument makes sense if one looks at the ethnicity of the majority of bozal slaves who arrived in Cuba, and in other urban localities of the Americas.

Rafael Lopez Valdes has discovered that between 1600 and 1800, 187,000 Africans brought to Cuba came from the Niger-Cross-Calabar Rivers nexus. This water system is located between the present states of Nigeria, and Cameroon. During the first half of the nineteenth century slave traders moved westward along the African coast in order to secure 220,000 Yoruba speakers and members of their subgroups. In addition, a substantial number of slaves also came from west-central Africa, particularly from the Portuguese colony of Angola, the former kingdom of Kongo, and slave entrepôts such as Benguela, Kwango, and Loango.¹³

Charles Joyner discovered a similar process operating in colonial South Carolina. In the slave markets of Charleston, “the most sought-after slaves were from Senegal-Gambia, and the Gold Coast, but a preponderance of Africans from the Congo-Angola region also entered the colony during the formative period of the 1730s.”¹⁴ Similar patterns may be discerned in Brazil. The largest number of Africans imported into Brazil came from Angola, the Congo, and Guinea. In fact Africans arrived in Brazil in three distinct waves. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, the first group included the Yoruba, Dahomans and Ashanti. The second group to arrive did so in the seventeenth century, and consisted of the nations Hausas, Tapas, Mandingos, and Fulahs. The final group to arrive came predominately from Angola, the Congo and Mozambique. They were sent to Brazil during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁵ Other slave societies in colonial Latin America experienced a similar process during the slave trade. Although the

¹³ Rafael Lopez Valdes, Seminar at the Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana “The Composition and Cultural Retention of the Afro-Cuban Population,” July 15, 1989. See Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830*. Madison, 1988, 216.

¹⁴ Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*. 14-15.

¹⁵ Ramos, *The Negro in Brazil*, 11-12.

majority of African slaves were brought to the Americas to cultivate cash crops for the international economy, many also found themselves in the towns and cities. There they provided members of the host society with important services and commodities. In addition, their constant arrival influenced the cultural fabric of those urban areas of the Americas. Their presence would strengthen urban African communities and help forge an identity particularly in places they composed the majority of the population. This demographic and cultural dynamic began in Africa. According to Jorge Castellanos and Isabel Castellanos, Africans in west, west central as well as south central Africa, interacted with each other within their regional localities before being recruited as slaves. Their relationship with people of different ethnic groups resulted in cultural sharing, synthesis, and adaptation. Once they arrived to Cuba, and the Americas in general, Africans would continue this process within the benevolent societies that many of them established.¹⁶

African material before arriving in Cuba

Some aspects of Cuba's culture and identity were formed among Africans before their arrival as slaves. In West Africa, particularly in the southwestern part of Cameroon, the Efik, Ekoi, and their subgroups, particularly males of distinction and honor, had established secret societies to not only govern their respective societies but also to pay homage to their masculine spiritual patron god, the leopard, who symbolized perfection, elegance, and strength. Even the Ibibios and Ibos of southwestern Nigeria, and the western neighbors of the Ekoi, had founded secret organizations dedicated to the leopard. They did so because they believed that humans equitably shared their physical environment with animals. They also honored certain animals because as living objects, these creatures could serve as temporary resting places for the spirits of the dead. This idea resurfaced in Cuba with the Ekoi and Efik who became known as the Abakua, according to the Spanish colonial authorities.¹⁷

The secret societies Africans created in Africa in order to practice specific cultural traditions were transferred to Cuba and elsewhere. In Cuba, Yoruba males established the Ogboni. As a religious and political institution it had served the king of the Oyo Empire as an advisory council. It also provided its members with honor and privileges. The

¹⁶ Jorge Castellanos and Isabela Castellanos, *Cultura afrocubana: Las religiones y las lenguas*. Vol. III of 3, Miami, 1992, 221.

¹⁷ Robert F. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*. New York, 1984, 228. Also see Jorge Castellanos and Isabela Castellanos, *Cultura afrocubana*. III, 210-212.

Ogboni met to discuss current events. It meted out justice to enforce the laws of Yorubaland. Ogboni priests guarded the secret beliefs and rituals that they employed to venerate, propitiate, and “control the sanctions of the earth as a spirit.” The belief that the earth and their deceased ancestors were the “sources of moral law,” became the basis of its religious and political characteristics.¹⁸ In the nineteenth century, the Ogboni reemerged in Cuba within the Lucumi community, or Yoruba speakers of Havana. In fact, Yoruba speakers living elsewhere throughout the island also felt its authority, according to José L. Franco.¹⁹ There are other examples in the Americas where Africans employed political and religious models that they had been familiar with in Africa. They often did so within their maroon societies in Spanish America or their palenques in Brazil.

The cultural material Africans brought to Cuba in order to recreate a sense community based on a shared identity or “Africanness,” was also nurtured and modified by their experiences with Europeans in the Old World. For example, arriving in Spain as early as the beginning of the fifteenth century, there, Africans were able to gain a degree of religious autonomy and space in such urban areas as Seville, Malaga and Cadiz. At this time, Africans as well as Spaniards were required to group themselves into associations called *cofradías*.²⁰ These racially segregated confraternities were affiliated with a specific Catholic church. Africans found these associations advantageous for several reasons. As mentioned above, they were already familiar with these sociopolitical and religious structures in Africa. But as immigrants in Spain, these organizations could also assist them to manage their collective sense of alienation caused by their forced move from Africa. More importantly, Africans in Spain may have employed the *cofradías* because such institutions were ideal “bases for the organization and reorganization of social groups to meet the demands of a changing world.” In addition, *cofradías* became attractive to Africans because they were established on the tenets of “voluntary participation and the commonality of interests of their members” particularly “their interests in survival in the midst of

¹⁸ Peter Morton-Williams, “The Yoruba Ogboni Cult in Oyo,” *Africa*, XXX, 1960, 363-365.

¹⁹ See José L. Franco, *La conspiración de Aponte de 1812*. Havana, 1963.

²⁰ See Fernando Ortiz Fernández, “Los cabildos afrocubanos,” *Revista Bimestre Cubana*, XVI (1921): 5-32. Also see, Carmen Victoria Montejo Arrechea, *Sociedades de instrucción y recreo de pardos and morenos que existieron en Cuba colonial*. Veracruz, 1993.

complexities and the strangeness of the urban area.”²¹ This type of confraternity became important among Africans in Portugal and later Brazil during the colonial era. Roger Bastide, Mary Karasch, Patricia Mulvey, and A. J. R. Russell-Wood have all traced the origins of these institutions. They have also examined the roles these organizations played in the daily lives of their members. In Brazil they were always attached to a parish church. They also served a racially segregated constituency. Their research has resulted in a consensus among them regarding the *cofradías* in Brazil. They concur that “the colored brotherhoods of Brazil provided a cushion against a competitive, white-dominated society, not only for the black brought from Africa as a slave, but also for blacks and mulattos born in Brazil be they slaves or freedmen.”²²

Archival data in Cuba suggests that *cofradías* appeared as early as the last quarter century of the sixteenth century in urban Cuba. But by the start of the nineteenth century, another type of confraternity or benevolent society called *cabildos*, had become the popular of the two institutions.²³ Why were Africans more attractive to the latter organization than the former? *Cabildos* were not affiliated with or located inside a specific Catholic Church. Instead, its members were allowed to use their leaders’ own homes as their headquarters or meeting places. This spatial distance from church representatives permitted *cabildos* to enjoy much religious and socioeconomic autonomy than the *cofradías*. The *cabildos* enabled Africans to resist the attempts of the colonial government and the Catholic Church to make Africans jettison their identity, and adopt the elements of European culture. By 1820, members of the gradually expanding Afro-Cuban population, both slave and freed established numerous *cabildos* based on shared languages, nationalities, or ethnicities. Nevertheless, in other parts of colonial Latin America, including Brazil, the *cofradías* remained the central socio-religious, economic, and political institutions for Africans.

²¹ James N. Kerri, “Studying Voluntary Associations as Adaptive Mechanism: A Review of Anthropological Perspectives,” *Current Anthropology*, XVII, March 1976, 23-24.

²² Quoted in A.J.R. Russell-Wood, *The Black Man in Slavery and Freedom in Colonial Brazil*, New York, 1982, 129. Also see, Roger Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil*, 1978, Mary Karasch, *Slave Life in Rio de Janeiro*, 1987, and Patricia A. Mulvey, “Black Brothers and Sisters: Membership in the Black Lay Brotherhoods of Colonial Brazil,” *Luso-Brazilian Review*, XVII, 1980, 253-279.

²³ C.M. Pérez, “La condición social de los negros en La Habana durante el Siglo XVI,” in Biblioteca Nacional de José Martí, Manuscript Division, nos. 477a, 477.

The Cuban context

During the first half of the nineteenth century, numerous African ethnic groups established their own respective cabildos. The cabildos of the Congas, for instance, represented persons from an extensive area of west-central Africa. They came to Cuba from a territory that comprised the southern part of Camaroon, Gabon, Congo, and Zaire. These Africans had a significant influence on the Afro-Cuban community since a large proportion of all cabildos contained these African immigrants.²⁴

There were other cabildos representing the language group of the Ibo. The Spanish referred to them as the Carabali. They originally were recruited from around theregion and the estuaries of the Niger-Cross- and Calabar Rivers.²⁵

Other cabildos were composed of immigrants from adjacent regions of Africa. For example, the Minas came from the Bight of Benin, and included the Ashanti, Fanti, Musona, and Ewe, just to name a few. The Lucumi cabildos were predominately Yoruba in composition. The Mandinga had members from the Fula, and Mandinga. They inhabited the Fulbe and Malinke areas of West Africa. This region included the territory of the Senegambia around the Pongo River, north of present-day Guinea-Bissau. It was within these organizations that Africans crafted the cultural elements that shaped their communities and identities.²⁶

The establishment of benevolent societies based on some type of criteria by Africans, both slave and freed, occurred everywhere throughout the Americas. In Charleston, South Carolina, African Americans grouped themselves according to phenotype. Light-skinned African Americans founded the Brown Fellowship, while “dark-men of the city” of Charleston organized the Humane Brotherhood.²⁷ In Caracas, Venezuela, Africans from the Congo grouped themselves into *cofradías*. The examples are endless.²⁸

²⁴ Castellanos and Castellanos, *Cultura afrocubanos*, 129. Miller, *Way of Death*, 216.

²⁵ Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Escribanías de Gobierno, legajo 404, no.13.

²⁶ Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Escribanías de Gobierno, legajo 893, no.4. Also see, Gwen Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 319-320.

²⁷ Robert L. Harris Jr., “Charleston’s Free Afro-American Elite: The Brown Fellowship Society and the Humane Brotherhood,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, LXXXII, 1981, 289-310.

²⁸ Juan Pablo Sojo, “Cofradías etnoafricanas,” *Cultura Universitaria*, I, 1947, 97-103. Also see, George Reid Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800-1900*. Madison, 1980, chapters 8-9, Frederick P. Bowser, *The African Slave in Colonial Peru, 1524-1650*. Stanford CA, 1974, chapter 9.

Religious beliefs

The African cabildos gave Cuba its popular religious beliefs and practices. Their autonomy and space in urban Cuba encouraged the hybridization of beliefs, and rituals from West, West-Central, and South-Central Africa with Catholicism. Palo monte and Santería emerged from this process. Although these two religious systems are distinct cosmologies, their appearances were based on a body of shared beliefs that contained several doctrines. All Africans believed in the existence of one supreme deity who created the universe and all living objects in it. Secondly, they believed in a hierarchy of less-powerful gods who had the ability to influence or alter the natural environment and the ecological forces of the planet. These gods, situated below the supreme god, were either the children of the supreme god, or powerful ancestors, including the kings and queens of that group or nation. Africans venerated these ancestors hoping that they could assist the devotee with a difficult task or problem. In order to ensure that their ancestors remained helpful, and active members of their society, Africans provided all deceased members with a proper funeral and burial.

Along with ancestor worship, African believed that they could use certain flora and fauna to influence the world in which they lived. They employed plants and animals in their rituals knowing that they could increase their power as they encountered an expansive and dynamic environment.²⁹ African diasporic scholars agree that these were the central religious tenets that most Africans shared before and after they left as slaves for the Americas. Again, in Cuba these beliefs became the basis for Palo monte and Santería. Meanwhile, practitioners of Vodun in Haiti, and Macamba or Candomble in Brazil, also accepted these universal tenets.

People from the Congo practiced Palo monte. But some anthropologists have discovered that some Yoruba elements have been incorporated into this religion. Devotees of Palo monte venerated a host of spirits and ancestors who occupied Cuba's mountains. They believe that the "mountain was the engineer of life." Besides this characteristic, members of Palo monte know that certain palo, or roots and herbs, can be used to defend themselves from the sorcery of an enemy. Another element of this religion is spirit possession. This often occurred during the post-initiation celebrations when an adherent honored and gave thanks to the deities and ancestors who had attended the initiation. This

²⁹ See Geoffrey Parrinder, *Religion in Africa*. New York, 1969.

last element of Palo monte resembles a crucial one found among Yoruba speakers who developed Santería.³⁰

For Yoruba speakers, Santería synthesizes African and Iberian Catholic religious beliefs and rituals. Yet Congo elements are found in Santería. Its members believe in the existence of evil spirits and demons, the veneration of numerous saints; and they view the spirit world as fully involved with the day-to-day life of mankind. Santería means the worship of a group of saints or orishas. This characteristic highlights an important connection with Palo monte.³¹

The fundamental characteristics of both religious systems were the outcome of the process of synthesis and appropriation begun by Africans in Africa. As more and more Yoruba speakers came to Cuba, and made contact with non-Yoruba people within the urban milieu their religion continued to evolve. Syncretism occurred on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean because Africans generally believe that religious systems different from their own were structures that could enrich rather displace their own metaphysical framework. Some Afro-Cubans saw Catholicism in this fashion owing in part to how that religion was practice on the island. Catholicism offered Africans the opportunity to venerate saints with the use of rites, images, devotions, relics, indulgences, and other external attributes. The saints answered the prayers and offerings from their followers who sought their assistance and guidance. This convergence of Catholicism with Yoruba beliefs prompted some blacks to accept it. White Cubans, for similar reasons became interested in Santería.

Transmission of African culture and identity to white Cubans

White Cubans were not only attracted to Santería, but also a religion and lifestyle brought to Cuba by the Apapa from Calabar. One of the first Apapa-based benevolent societies, called the cabildo Abakua, was established in 1836 in the town of Regla across the bay from Havana. The Apapa of the Abakua believed that a palm tree embodied their supreme god, Abasi. Their baptismal ritual also made the devotee invincible from the evils of the physical world and from death.³²

³⁰ Lydia Cabrera, *El monte*, La Habana, 1954, 13-15, and 33; Castellanos and Castellanos, *Cultura afrocubanos*, 130, George Brandon, *Santeria from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories*, Bloomington, IN, 1993, 147-148.

³¹ Carlos Echanove, "La santería cubana," *Boletín Actus del Folklore*, I, January 1961, 22, Miguel Barnet, "La religión de los Yorubas y sus dios," *Boletín Actus del Folklore*, I, January 1961, 10, Brandon, *Santería*, 18.

³² Lydia Cabrera, *La sociedad secreta Abakua*, Miami, 1970, 17-18

In 1857, the first white Cuban Abakua society was created. It spawned not only other white Abakua societies, but interracial ones as well. Whites who joined were members of Cuba's privileged classes, including soldiers and government officials. The Abakua became popular among both blacks and whites because after their initiation they did not have to disavow their own orishas and Catholic saints.³³ The existence of white Abakua societies is suggestive of the degree of cultural synthesis that occurred in Cuba during the nineteenth century. Adherents of Palo monte, Santería, Catholicism, and Abakua exchanged deities, ancestors, saints, beliefs, and rituals. They incorporated those that proved attractive and successful into their own beliefs structures. This transformative feature of all of Cuba's popular religions assisted in allowing not only Africans and their descendants from sustaining their communities and identities, but white Cubans too.

Why did this occur in Cuba? Politically, the colonial officials realized that in order to prevent slaves and freed blacks from rebelling or conspiring to overthrow the system, they needed to offer Afro-Cubans space and autonomy to maintain their culture, and identity. For example, both the *Bandos de gobernaciones y policía* of 1792 and 1842 afforded Africans and Afro-Cubans the right to practice and enjoy certain elements of their culture. Both laws sanctioned the right of blacks to establish their cabildos. Afro-Cubans meet in order to participate in several activities. The laws of 1792 and 1842 allowed Africans "from Guinea" to provide the deceased members of their cabildo with a proper funeral and burial. Secondly, Afro-Cubans gathered inside of their cabildos to dance and play their music according to their traditions. Called "tumbas" these parties occurred on holidays often marked on the Judeo-Christian calendar. Afro-Cubans could practice their religious beliefs as long as they did not fuse them with Catholicism. Finally, the laws of 1792 and 1842 gave the cabildos the right to elect their own officers, often entitled kings and queens, so they could represent their groups' interests in front of the colonial authorities.³⁴ It is unsurprising that Africans, slave and freed, retained, synthesized and expressed some of the culture materials they brought with them from Africa. It is also interesting to note that the cultural space enjoyed by Africans led to the

³³ Cabrera, *El monte*, 196-197, Castellanos and Castellanos, 211.

³⁴ See Ortiz Fernández, "Los cabildos afrocubanos," 19 for the articles of the Bando de buen gobierno y policía de 1792. Also consult the *Bando de gobernación y policía de la isla de Cuba por el escmo Sr. don Gerónimo Valdés, presidente, gobernador y capitán general*, La Habana, 1842 for the complete articles governing the cabildos de naciones de afrocubanos.

emergence of political movements based on a “consciousness of kind.” These cabildo-led movements sought to abolish slavery and end Spanish authority on the island on several occasions during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The inter-cultural hybridization that occurred among blacks and whites in Cuba was also “part of a wider New World or American complex.” Edward Brathwaite has called this complex “creolization,” while Timothy Breen uses the term “cultural conversations.” Both terms refer to the “continuing series of reciprocal relations between human individuals and groups, involving borrowing and resistance, conflict and cooperation, modification and invention.”³⁵ Both writers claim that these processes often occurred in rural areas on American plantations. The result of these relationships was the “forging [of a] distinctly different but nonetheless interdependent New World cultures.” It is my contention that black-white Cuban cultural borrowing, synthesis, and invention took place predominately in the urban context, and had long-term effects on Cuba’s culture and identity during the last half of the nineteenth century. Politically, it would encourage some whites to assist Afro-Cubans in their endeavors to abolish slavery and destroy Spanish colonialism in the early 1880s. After the Ten Year’s War, 1868-1878, colonial officials on the island began to view the process of creolization, or the cultural conversations that were taking place between Afro-Cubans and whites as being completely dominated and informed by Africans and Afro-Cubans alone. Be that as it may, officials in Cuba sought to suppress the cabildos by the end of the century on the grounds that they had become a threat to the island’s security, modernization, and relationship with Spain. They were unsuccessful, and the cabildos remained venues where both blacks and whites continued to borrow, modify, and invent after Cuba gained its independence from Spain in 1902.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to demonstrate how Africans employed their benevolent organizations to develop African communities and identities in nineteenth century Cuba. In addition, certain variables existed in the urban centers of the island that created a dynamic and conducive environment that provided Africans and Afro-Cubans with the opportunity to lay the foundation for the island’s syncretic culture and identity. Cultural antecedents in Africa and Spain, along with the slave

³⁵ Edward Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820*, Oxford, 1971, xiii, 297-299, 301-303. Stephan Palmie, ed., *Slave Cultures and the Cultures of Slave*, Knoxville, 1995, xx-xxi.

trade, brought Africans to Cuba who already were involved in modifying their own cultural materials that would inform their communities and identities in Cuba. Cuba's demographic pattern, the nature of Catholicism, and colonial law together enabled Africans to engage themselves in the cultural conversations with other Africans as well as whites, particularly in the urban areas of the island. Where the same conditions existed in the Americas, the experiences of other members of the African diaspora resembled those of Afro-Cubans. There the size of the African population relative to the European one, African religious beliefs, practices, language, and ethnicity influenced the sense of community Africans felt, and their identity in the Americas.