Crossing the Water: A Photographic Path to the Afro-Cuban Spirit World (review)

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Crossing the Water: A Photographic Path to the Afro-Cuban Spirit World (review)

Abstract
This book is one that speaks to the true believers in its readership as well as to academically based students interested in Afro-Cuban religion. Note that it does not attempt to analyze or interpret in the fashion of Mercedes Cros Sandoval's World-view, the Orishas and Santería (2006), or historicize Afro-Cuban religious thought in the manner of Stephan Palmié's Wizards and Scientists (2002). Nor does it attempt to connect the practice with political and ideological developments, as does Christine Ayorinde's Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution, and National Identity (2004).

Disciplines
Latin American Languages and Societies | Other Religion

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Crossing the Water: A Photographic Path to the Afro-Cuban Spirit World (review)

Eugenio Matibag

The Americas, Volume 65, Number 2, October 2008, pp. 248-249 (Review)

Published by Cambridge University Press

DOI: 10.1353/tam.0.0065

For additional information about this article
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school (established by Cecilio Báez), that sought to blame the war on the policies of Marshal Francisco Solano López, squaring off against a “reivindicacionista” school (associated with Manuel Dominguez and Juan E. O’Leary) that sought to defend those policies. Alicia Fernández and Alberto de Pino Menck (Biblioteca Nacional, Montevideo) offered a power-point presentation on recent investigations into the photography of the Paraguayan War. This was followed by Jennifer French (Williams College), who analyzed the contradictory textualization of the conflict as developed in one twentieth-century Paraguayan novel, Teresa Lamas’s Tradiciones del hogar. Filmmaker Denis Wright (Rio de Janeiro) screened his still-unfinished documentary film Guerra do Paraguai. A Guerra Esquecida (currently undergoing final revision). This was followed by a panel discussion in which all participants had the opportunity to discuss other relevant aspects and interpretations of Paraguayan history; topics formally covered in the panel included the war writings of Juan Bautista Alberdi, the publication of a Spanish translation of the articles of the late Paraguayanist Harris Gaylord Warren, the impact of the war on the Paraguayan yerba mate trade, the recent decision of Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner to rename an Argentine army battalion in honor of Francisco Solano López, and, in a particularly well-received presentation by Bridget Chesterton (Buffalo State University), the development of a non-elite nationalist discourse in Paraguay during the 1932-35 Chaco War. The Universidad de Montevideo plans to publish the various conference presentations as part of a special number of its Humanidades magazine or as a separate book. Work has already started on a second conference on Paraguayan history to be held in Montevideo in 2010.

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THOMAS WHIGHAM

BOOKS IN BRIEF


This book is one that speaks to the true believers in its readership as well as to academically based students interested in Afro-Cuban religion. Note that it does not attempt to analyze or interpret in the fashion of Mercedes Cros Sandoval’s Worldview, the Orishas and Santería (2006), or historicize Afro-Cuban religious thought in the manner of Stephan Palmié’s Wizards and Scientists (2002). Nor does it attempt to connect the practice with political and ideological developments, as does Christine Ayorinde’s Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution, and National Identity (2004).

But Garoutte and Wambaugh’s photojournalistic breakthrough brings us, the viewing readers, up close and personal to the rituals performed by the padrino.
Santiago as a leader of a family of practitioners in Santiago de Cuba. A great part of the book’s contribution lies in its revelation of the workings of the Congo-Bantu-based Palo Monte religion, with its practice of capturing and handling the spirits of the dead. Equally interesting are the references to Santiago’s practices of Allan Kardec-inspired espiritismo, with its emphasis on the spiritual masses and communications with the dead. It also offers a fresh new look at the dance-and-music-filled worship of the orishas that is the syncretic religion of Regla de Ocha, commonly known as Santería.

What this book does deliver is a colorfully intimate portraiture of religious practice on the part of its authors, both of them acting as participant-observers, who, having visited the house of their teacher and guide on multiple occasions during five visits to Cuba, provide detailed descriptions of altar settings, sacrificial ceremonies, possessions, and the spirit-holding cauldrons called ngangas or prendas. Over 150 illustrations in this “photographic path of the Afro-Cuban spirit world” make a visually engrossing experience for the reader and a source of data for the researcher. And above all, it provides, from its emic perspective, a close look at the quotidian practice of Santiago, a true priest of these “crossed” religions and guide through their liturgies, rites, and arcane practices.

Yet for some readers for whom seeing is not necessarily believing, the texts and photos of Garoutte and Wambaugh’s book may recall a passage in Manuel Cofiño’s Afro-Cuban novel, Cuando la sangre se parece al fuego (When Blood Looks like Fire [1977]), which refers to its protagonist as a former true believer who realizes, after his conversion to the official ideology, that once “He lived in a world of gods. Surrounded by misery, blood and dreams... In the change of one time for another. He lived in the world of saints, kings and warriors, gluttons and dancers, lechers and virgins, good and bad” (p. 21).

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With 28 well-written and concise chapters, this volume is an accessible and welcome contribution to the general field of Latin American Studies. Under the editorial command of Thomas H. Holloway, chapters range in time from the late Pleistocene to contemporary period. Geographically, it addresses a fairly vast series of topics that concern the hemisphere as a whole, at times, focusing on specific areas.

Three chapters by Tom D. Dillehay, John Monaghan, and Andrew R. Wyatt along with Jeffrey Quilter are all devoted strictly to pre-contact peoples and civilizations.