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**David Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. xx +413, \$38.00, pb. Johan Wedel, *Santería Healing: a Journey into the Afro-Cuban World of Divinities, Spirits and Sorcery* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), pp. xiv+209, \$55.00, hb.**

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The ethnography of Cuba has for long been a Cold War victim. Following the debacle over the expulsion from the island of Oscar Lewis and his team in the early 1970s with innuendos about his supposed collusion with the CIA, the Cuban government effectively shut the door on Western fieldworkers, and, as Cuban intellectuals today attest, the very word ‘anthropology’ became politically suspicious. In the 1970s and ’80s ethnographic studies of Cuban society and culture were conducted only by Cuban researchers under government monitoring. Indeed, the Marxist-Leninist overtones that one still encounters in the local literature are perhaps best interpreted as remnants of that period, when the scholarly task of understanding Cuban society and culture was inextricably linked with the political one of changing it. Similarly, the emphasis in Cuban scholarship on historical documentation and ‘folklorist’ data collection may be due partly to the strong influence of the Soviet school of ‘ethnology’, although the enduring influence of the pre-revolutionary master Fernando Ortiz, with his abiding interest in documenting processes of creole ‘transculturation’, may have also played its part. Studies in the Euro-American ethnographic tradition – emphasising holistic research based more on participant observation than ‘normative’ data collection – have only begun to be possible recently, with the island’s piecemeal openings to the West following the collapse of the USSR. Indeed, following pioneering studies by Daniel on rumba music and Rosenthal on political organisation, it may be fair to say that the ethnography of Cuba is still lacking a definitive monograph.

The field of Afro-Cuban religion, to which both books reviewed here belong, is the most likely to produce such a qualitative leap. With Cuban institutions such as the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional, the Centro de Antropología, the Fundación Fernando Ortiz and some university faculties now keen to co-opt funded Western researchers in the study of the more dazzling expressions of the ‘cultura nacional’, a new generation of Europeans and North Americans (many of them PhD students) were able to conduct fieldwork among religious practitioners from the mid-1990s onwards. As a result, the past five years have seen the publication of the first

English-speaking studies of Afro-Cuban religion on the island since the works of William Bascom in the 1940s and '50s. While none of them has the scope and depth of a definitive ethnography, these works, including the two reviewed here, are invaluable additions to a literature that had thus far consisted of accounts of the practice of Santería and other Afro-Cuban religions in the USA, often written by practitioners with a view to the New Age market.

Johan Wedel's *Santería Healing* is the first book-length monograph in English to provide a systematic ethnographic account of Santería practice in contemporary Cuba. Based on the author's doctoral fieldwork in Matanzas, a city well known for its Santería tradition, the book is focused on the medicinal aspects of cult practice. But in placing notions of affliction and healing within the broader context of Santería cosmology and ritual, the book also offers an overview of the main aspects of worship, including a description of the pantheon, accounts of divination and initiation rituals, the role of music and possession, as well as the relationship of Santería with other Afro-Cuban cults, including the 'darker' practices of sorcery. The central claim of the book is that while the remedies that Santería claims to offer may not necessarily 'cure' the sick (in a biomedical sense), they can contribute to 'healing'. Healing, here, is understood as a process that allows the experience of illness to be transformed for the better, by redefining the illness in terms of the sufferer's relationships to particular deities and to his or her social and physical surroundings more generally. Initiation ceremonies, argues Wedel, are particularly effective in this respect, since they place the sick neophyte in a series of relationships with deities (and, by extension, the physical and social features with which each deity is associated), that from then on provide the terms with which the sufferer may conceptualise his or her condition and its prospects. Adopting what he calls a 'phenomenological' approach, Wedel builds his case mainly on accounts given to him by a number of sufferers, showing how the experience of illness is formed through personal narratives about worship.

From an ethnographic point of view, the weaknesses of Wedel's book are those of a pioneering work conducted by a young scholar (the book is rather evidently based on the author's doctoral dissertation). Valuable though it is, his attempt to embed sufferers' narratives of illness within a comprehensive account of Santería worship does not quite work. His overview of Santería practice is spread too thinly, failing to provide a sufficiently integrated context for the repetitive narratives of his informants, which often appear anecdotal. Wedel's account is at its most sophisticated when sufferers' narratives are countered by the critical commentaries of people who see Santería as 'exploitation', thus placing Santería healing in the contrasting context of the socio-economic difficulties Cubans have been facing in the post-Soviet era. In fact, his theoretical attempt to make sense of Santería 'healing' can be seen as an attempt to 'defend' it, and particularly to fend off Western misconceptions of Santería as a 'primitive' equivalent to Western medicine. The strategy is fair, and well-established in the field of medical anthropology. Nevertheless, the distinction between 'healing' and 'curing' is not sufficiently powerful to expose the radically different assumptions that underlie Santería and biomedicine. For, as it stands in the book, the point about healing does not amount to much more than the claim that Santería makes sufferers feel better about their illness by providing them with a fanciful aetiology, involving spirits and the like. More analytical work would be needed to distinguish Santería from what medics like to call 'quack' medicine.

Unlike Wedel's work, David Brown's *Santería Enthroned* is not intended as an ethnographic monograph in the classical anthropological sense. The objective here is not so much to give a sense of practitioners' experience of worship, but rather to provide a scholarly account of the history and contemporary practice of Santería, based on twenty years' fieldwork among practitioners in the USA as well as Cuba. With his background in American Studies, Brown draws on the methods of performance studies, art history, folklore studies, as well as anthropology, to produce the most comprehensive account of Santería to date.

The book is divided into two parts. The first consists of three chapters that document, respectively, the transition of worship from West Africa to slavery in Cuba in the nineteenth century, the gradual formalisation of distinct ritual protocols during the course of the twentieth century (also within Ifá, the male diviner cult associated with Santería), and the complex processes – political as well as intellectual – through which contemporary Santería cosmology has been forged. Brown has something to say on just about every aspect of what is an extraordinarily complicated story of transformation. But the emphasis is on the role of particular authoritative initiates who, veering for influence and prestige, have been able to develop distinct versions of 'authenticity' by painting ritual and cosmological innovations onto putatively 'traditional' canvasses, such as the practices of ritual ancestors, influences of 'Africa', and the authority of the deities themselves, as revealed through divination.

In the second part, the focus narrows onto the imagery of Santería worship, illustrating the argument about the role of innovation in the field of ritual iconography. With effective use of visual illustrations, Brown shows how central tropes of Santería cosmology and ritual (the contrast between regal and warrior deities, the hierarchical structure of divine power, the dialectic of secrecy and revelation in worship, notions of initiation as the 'birth of a king', etc.) are rendered in aesthetic forms that amalgamate a complex historical trajectory of 'cultural borrowings'. Anchored in a close description of the *día del medio* – the ceremonial display of neophytes and their enthroned deities during initiation – this is a highly nuanced account of a 'creole aesthetic' that creates meaning by fusing the tropes of West African myth with the baroque lavishness of a European past.

Brown's tome is a definitive work of scholarship and should become a standard reference for anyone interested in the diaspora of West African religion. While the guiding argument about the invented character of tradition is well rehearsed in anthropology, what makes this book so impressive is the subtlety and richness with which this process is described for Santería. Indeed, having taken my review copy to Cuba on a recent fieldtrip, it became apparent that the book is bound to offer a recursive example of the feedback loops Brown so fascinatingly describes, whereby academic accounts of the religion are utilised by practitioners themselves as sources of knowledge and authority. Initiates pored over the book's photographs of famous ancestors, getting me to translate passages, which were then discussed and criticised. Since it was from their own ranks that this information was drawn in the first place, it seems to me imperative – as it does to them – that the book be made available in Spanish at a price appropriate for a Cuban audience.

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