

***Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion.* By David H. Brown. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003. Pp. 413, illustrations, photos, plates, notes, appendices, bibliography, index, ISBN 0226076105)**

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may offer supporting theories on curatorial concerns in object selection, historical interpretation, and the progressive ways to display in museums. Some theoretical perspectives are more transparent than others in the way the essays try to make their point in answering the question “why people collect.” Overall, the reflections made by the various contributors are noteworthy for those studying material culture and how people communicate with each other through collections.

Some criticism, however, is left on editorial oversight. In compiling the contributors’ biographical notices, the author Ngahuia Te Awekotuku is altogether forgotten, therefore, the reader does not know that he is a museum curator and professor for the “Centre for Maori and Pacific Development Research” at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. No effort was made to compile a referential bibliography as an index for consultation. This leads the reader to review individual texts and endnotes that are, at times, incompletely referenced. Because this book is part of a series, perhaps a future referential publication will be needed. For now, the book is an accessible and interesting read. It leaves a conference proceedings impression that is much appreciated because it offers a perspective glance at what is being discussed at curatorial meetings such as the Banff International Curatorial Institute(BICI). This book is a welcome addition to contemporary material culture and interpretive studies.

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Though primarily derived from the traditional religious practices of a complex of sociolinguistic groups now known as the Yoruba, orisha

worship in Cuba has certainly evolved in ways particular to the island since the trans-Atlantic separation. Early orisha practitioners in Cuba were, no doubt, faced with a variety of social challenges impacting the ways in which their traditions were to be reconstituted: the significance of Euro-Christian interrogations; their coexistence with other African religious practitioners; the sociocultural upheaval resulting from the trans-Atlantic slave trade; and the various changes within Cuba since its independence from Spain. Brown's ambitious study approaches these processes of change through an "inter or multidisciplinary" (x) approach that hones in on three principal cultural phenomena: ritual performance, visual creativity in the pageantry of religious life, and innovations in religious practice and theology as manifest particularly in the institutional structures and/or strictures of the religious system (8). Ultimately, the methodology focuses on an intersection of religious action, material culture, and theological discourse within Cuban orisha worship.

The study is divided into two subsections: "Institutional and ritual innovation" (chapters 1-3) and "Iconographic innovation" (chapters 4-5). The division, however, is not only organisational for the study reads as two separate studies in one and, though not wholly unrelated, they remain comparatively uneven in their treatment. Though the clarity of Brown's language and the copious references cited remain a constant throughout the study, the first section of the study is somewhat flawed on a few critical levels.

In this first section, which deals with the practical and theological innovations of the Cuban orisha tradition, Brown sets out chronicling the paramount shifts in Cuban orisha worship practice and thinking vis-à-vis their connection to historically influential devotees. On its own, the "spade work" is truly impressive; the author provides a rich narrative of those influential devotees in Cuba's history who have been largely responsible for the establishment of the institutional shifts particular to orisha devotion. The reader can garner a sense of how present-day devotional lineages and practice are closely aligned; authenticity of praxis is often sustained by reference to ritual precedent among prominent historical figures. I am of the opinion, however, that the second and third chapters of the study, which address institutional reform and connections to the discursive opposition

between the orisha practitioners and the Ifa cult,¹ are fraught with some questionable assumptions about the earlier religious sensibilities that would have shaped many of the changes in Cuban orisha worship.

Specifically, I believe that Brown attaches an inordinate value to the maxims of his informants regarding the transmission and details of the religious system(s); there is insufficient regard for the disjointed relationships that appear between the “facts” presented to him and the validity of the metaphysical adages called upon to buttress the discourse. What devotees purport is, of course, of great interest, regardless of whether or not religious discourse agrees with the religious action; however, it is the responsibility of scholars to observe and critically analyse, and not simply report. My own years of research among Cuba’s orisha community have convinced me that there is infinitely more to this than competing narratives.

Illustrating a single example, Brown’s lack of familiarity with the rites of the Ifa divination cult in Cuba has led to a rather specious analysis of their ceremonial cutlass and the social history surrounding the Cuban institution of a cognate ceremony undertaken by other orisha devotees (vide “pinaldo”, 408). It is here that the explanatory acumen of Brown’s informants and the symbolic language of ritual action are wholly at odds.² As the religious canons in Cuba surrounding the significance of the ceremonial cutlass shifted over time (and, in some cases, were purposefully realigned with a view to attaining greater sacropolitical ascendancy), the relatively stable ritual of the consecration ceremony in the Ifa cult was, in part, resignified from within and without by competing authorities. To be sure, the gradual loss of Yoruba linguistic expertise in Cuba allowed for religious innovations external to the sacred orature — often coming to write itself back into the “timeless” texts.

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1. For those familiar with Yoruba orisha practice yet unfamiliar with Cuban orisha tradition, it should be noted that, within the totality of the orisha religious complex on the island, there exists, to varying degrees, an institutional separation between orisha practitioners and those who are also Ifa diviners, as though the latter were *sui generis*, outside the collective of orisha worshippers. This latter distinction is one which has, at varying times in Cuba’s orisha history, been propagated by the Ifa priests at the expense of the authority of other orisha devotees, and vice versa. In short, it is the result of decades of political struggles for ascendancy within the larger religious milieu.
 2. Many of Brown’s informants are also Ifa priests who comment on the subject though this has not guaranteed a more exacting analysis.

As such, religious authority (or those equally inventive challenges to such designs) could be sustained in creative and uniquely Cuban ways. Ultimately, the support garnered for political programmes through the appropriation of more convenient readings of sacred authority led to more disparate trajectories of meanings being mapped onto the iconic knives. (Yes, there are now two of them). And yet, at the heart of this amazing volatility of competing interests between the Ifa diviners and the larger orisha milieu, there remains the enduring ritual of the Ifa ceremony in question — a near snapshot of emic testimonies from nineteenth century Yorubaland³ — which is overlooked in Brown's study.⁴ Ultimately, any transparency that might be achieved here is as dependent upon archival research into nineteenth century orisha worship and contemporary fieldwork in Yorubaland as it is on the commendable fieldwork that Brown has undertaken in Cuba.

Brown pays tribute (9) to Comaroff's work on religious change in South Africa (1985), emphasising the notion that "signs are never transparent and innovations are always partial... [S]ubversive bricolages always perpetuate as they change" (25, 120). There is, however, little attention paid to that "partialness" of change to which Comaroff refers; this study avoids any sense of orisha worship at the time of the trans-Atlantic separation.⁵ The reader is left wondering what is ultimately continuous in the symbolic repertoires and metaphysical discourses of Cuban orisha worship and, by extension, what has undergone large-scale change over the course of the past two centuries.⁶ Moreover, the conspicuous absence in this study of: John Peel's work on Yoruba religious change (particularly 1990; 2000); documentation produced by various Christian missions; the journals of early exploration into the Yoruba hinterland; and firsthand experience

3. Cf., Johnson 1899 (26-28) and Marcuzzi (forthcoming).

4. To be sure, his informants offer little or no insight into its symbolic significance beyond the current polemic.

5. This is not to suggest, in any way, that this is a "trouble-free" task; however, a variety of more recent monographs offer different, though comprehensive, insights into this very subject (e.g., McKenzie 1997; Peel 2000).

6. The exception being that the second portion of the study effectively unpackages many European elements of the religion's regal symbolism.

among orisha practitioners in Yorubaland today⁷ diminish the strength of the analyses realized here.

The second part of the study, titled "Iconographic innovation" (chapter 4), examines sacred orisha art, and is resonant with Brown's own dissertation work (1989). Readers, take note. It is here that the study "comes into its own". Drawing upon compelling historical data and a wide variety of salient images, Brown fluently guides the reader through the myriad ways in which the European repertoires of kingship and social ascendancy are intermingled, applied, and appropriated into the pageant-laden material culture of Cuba's orisha tradition. Here, the author has boldly shifted away from the more fashionable, exclusive focus on African continuities of orisha worship in the Americas which have too often overlooked the genuine synergism of Cuba's sacred traditions. The images used in this study — many of which were produced by Brown himself — are as well chosen as is the author's language, and always appropriately situated to amplify the important descriptive points made in the text. Mention should be made of the numerous drawings the author has produced: in particular, the visual "transcriptions" of the ritual space are meticulous in their detail and valuable for their paradigmatic quality. In my opinion, this study does provide important historical information — an attention to comprehensive and detailed fieldwork is evident — and, for this, the author should be highly commended! Brown's study must be included among a small and more recent collection of studies that counter the plethora of less-than-erudite publications on orisha worship in Cuba. The second section of this text is, without question, truly worthy of scholarly attention due to its analytical acumen (as is the author's dissertation [1989] on the same subject). The first section, however, is valuable for wholly different reasons. Here, the author's discourse is largely modeled on a sacro-political "victimization" of the orisha devotees to the benefit of the Ifa cult, bolstering an endemic political

7. Brown runs into some trouble with his assertions about contemporary practices in Yorubaland such as: the "invention" of orisha in Cuba (e.g., *Ambita*, 12); orisha initiation practices in Yorubaland (vide "head and foot", 402); and those Yoruba-creole etymologies central to his analysis (e.g., *oriate*, 150). They are but a few of the miscalculations that infuse the historical propositions of this text.

schism within the Cuban orisha community.⁸ He takes various authors to task for their role as advocates of an Ifa-centric religious authority (e.g., 149-151) with little awareness of his own “big” narrative (Bruner 1986), which is indeed the inverse of this position. The text is, in the end, rather ungracious to the larger community of Ifa diviners both in its tone and its ‘factual’ offerings, embodying the tenor of a larger religious divide. Nonetheless, there is a great deal to be gleaned from what has informed the study’s underlying tone. For this reason, combined with the strength of the second section, this study constitutes a significant contribution to the historiography of Cuba’s orisha worship.

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8. Much of this taken from informants such as Ernesto Pichardo (e.g., 156-7, 303-304) who, by all indications, is an unabashed advocate of such politicized historical readings.