OLIVIA MARIA GOMES DA CUNHA

EMPOWERED OBJECTS, POWERLESS SUBJECTS:
CITIZENSHIP, RELIGION, AND POLITICAL
REPRESENTATION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CUBA

Measures of Equality: Social Science, Citizenship, and Race in Cuba, 1902-1940. ALEJANDRA MARINA BRONFMAN. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xi + 234 pp. (Paper US\$ 19.95)

Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution, and National Identity. CHRISTINE AYORINDE. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. ix + 283 pp. (Cloth US\$ 59.95)

In the last ten years, research topics such as race and nation have been privileged areas for the historical and anthropological understanding of Caribbean and Latin American societies. Regarding Cuba in particular, social scientists have dedicated important scholarship to these issues by mapping conceptions of citizenship and political representation, while situating them within a broader debate on the making of the new postcolonial and republican society at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹ By pursuing different aims and following distinct approaches, Alejandra Bronfman and Christine Ayorinde have made contributions to this academic literature. Through divergent theoretical and methodological perspectives, both of their books explore alternative ways of interpreting the making of the nation founded upon a multiple and fluid rhetoric of race.

The commonalities between these two books involve their focus on the ways in which official discourses on citizenship and rights were manipulated by both political elites and civilian associations, the strategies that diverse groups and states used, and the discourses they activated in order to negotiate, grant, and debate equal access to cultural, religious, and political

1. Pérez 1986; Stubbs & Pérez Sarduy 1992; Helg 1995, 1997, 2000; Moore 1997; Castañeda Fuertes & Brock 1998; R. Scott 1998, 2002, 2004, 2005; de la Fuente 2001; Palmié 2002; Zeuske 2002; Zeuske & Scott 2002.

forms of representation. The making of the nation was the crucial issue and redemptive end toward which different politics based on religion, race/color, or national origin were aimed. In spite of the ubiquitousness of the themes of race and nation in different debates raised by legislators and political elites in Cuba in their attempts to reform and modernize the state, they did not come together in a unified or continuous discourse. Because the discourse shifted, those involved in it were able to reinterpret its uses and power in state practices concerning health, law, education, and political representation. Both of the books under review here, by focusing on the place of science and other forms of authoritative knowledge, address these changes over the course of the twentieth century. However, the two authors take on different temporal and analytical perspectives, making their work at once divergent and complementary, as a quick review of the use of historical chronology in the two analyses will show.

At first glance, Alejandra Bronfman's task, as she announces it in the introduction, seems as though it would be too large for a book of less than 300 pages. But by the end of the first chapter, readers will begin to perceive that the historicity present throughout her narrative is rather prescriptive or previously conceived, whether from a Cuban early twentieth-century nationalist viewpoint or simply from the somewhat ethnocentric racialist perspective that pervades some academic literature on Cuba. As ideas and notions under construction during the beginning of the century, "race" and "nation" in Bronfman's book, even in their more elaborate versions and prescriptive formats, are contingent and ambiguous concepts. They were produced as panacea to the contentions of what David Scott (1999) has called the "political present." Thus, there is no evidence of a teleological history of its manipulation and content. What Bronfman describes are contingent and historically based attempts to define the main values of a republican and modern state – as, for instance, the idea of equality based on law – through the manipulation of historical rhetoric and organic metaphors. Race-based rhetoric, in its diverse historical approaches, is probably the most persuasive, but not the sole manifestation.

The beginning of state-based institutionalization and public appropriation of the first scientific associations signaled the beginning of a new and modern polity in which science, as an authoritative body of knowledge and discourse of power, represented more than an auxiliary support for the engagements of the republican state. Circulating as a modern token of the modern state, scientific conceptions of race were pervasive in different state institutions, which promoted and implemented policies based on the idea of social defense. Bronfman shows us how initial attempts to produce science locally turned into national projects carried out by state institutions founded upon a liberal and reformist program. It was through a language inspired in organic conceptions of body, health, purity, and pollution that state institu-

tions such as anthropology museums, police bureaus, and medical and educational associations designed and envisioned the subject of their healing and organizing policies. Scientific tools were provided for the classification, identification, social reform, and healing of those considered the main subjects of the newly born and civilized nation. Bronfman offers an inspiring description of these first scientific engagements in the early Cuban Republic without getting lost in the perils and enchantment of official institutional histories that obscure the social practices of their agents. Bronfman goes further by inquiring how these scientific discursive apparatuses were received, used, neglected, and, mainly, reinterpreted by the same subjects of these state reformist policies. Looking at the relationship and dialogue between *sociedades* or civilian associations composed primarily of non-White veterans of the wars of independence, in their attempts to negotiate the meanings of a republic constructed as shown by, for example, Ada Ferrer (1998, 1999, 2001) and Fernando Martínez Heredia (2000, 2001), through ideas of political pact, gift, and acts of heroism, Bronfman unfolds the rhetorical game in which the differential nature, body, and origins of the Cuban population became the focus of interpretation and contention.

Following the seminal analysis of Stephan Palmié (2002), Bronfman identifies lacunae as well as problematic questions left unanswered in works on race and nation, formulated not only by specialists of newly born disciplines such as anthropology, but by the members of the societies themselves, in their attempts to legitimate their practices through the reformist idiom of hygiene and order. Israel Castellano, the early Fernando Ortiz of *Los negros brujos* (1906), and others envisioned reforming and civilizing as a political project aiming to eradicate all forms of “barbarism,” although their differences are highlighted by Bronfman. Designed as an ambiguous notion, a corollary of specific forms of antisocial behavior associated with poor and non-White practitioners of African-derived religions, barbarism was not only a target of state violence but the very image of the “uneducated Cuban” as seen by other non-White groups. As Bronfman states, “‘culture’ and ‘civilization’ often came to stand for ‘color’ as a means of exclusion” (p. 11). By using rich archival sources, Bronfman provides an insightful reading of some of the meanings given to *barbarous* when she accompanies the circulation of goods seized by police and related specialists – forensic anthropologists – as magical tools used in ritual, human sacrifice, and malignant plots manipulated by *brujos*, *Nañigos*, and criminals. By combining readings on the history of Western anthropological history in the late nineteenth century with knowledge of the literature of social history on early Republican Cuba, Bronfman reveals a fine sensibility in demonstrating how the circulation of these powerful and magical objects through specialists and their alleged connections to witchcraft, along with their interpretations of their purposes and ritual uses, expose the limits of the egalitarian creed. As Fernando Guerra,

member of the *Sociedad de Protección Mética y Recreo del Culto Africano Lucumi*, asserted in a letter to the president of the republic in which the accusation of *brujería* appears related to a new wave of criminal events in 1913 in association with practitioners of African-derived religions, “freedom of religion” and respect “for the laws of republic” were observed in their meetings in which the ultimate aim was “to console our suffering on this earth” (cited on Bronfman’s pp. 94–95). As an open, visible, and dangerous “obstacle” to the modernization of the state and homogenization of the nation, and due to their potential power to increase social and cultural mixtures (condemned by Ortiz, for instance), diverse African-derived practices epitomized the perils and impossibility of true social equality. The debate about the objects gathered from real people – the practitioners, believers, and those who attended the rituals in which they were displayed and used – reveals the key role of the specialists and the police institutions in producing a corpus of knowledge articulated to a moral representation of their existence and uses.

The discursive, police, expert, and elite mobilization around the place and the meaning of cultural and religious practices considered incongruous with the modern and civilizing republic that emerges in the first decade of the twentieth century, along with a wider debate concerning the extension of rights and the social meaning of citizenship, as described by Bronfman, raises important questions about an ongoing discussion of the social appropriations of the idea of “nation” in contemporary Cuba. If the “war against fetishism” was somehow won by a process of domestication of its iconic objects – through scientifically recognized procedures such as classification, labeling, and translation – in the course of the institutionalization of social science and folklore societies, the ambiguous debate about the rights of its users for ends not controlled by the state and its specialists continued to be the subject of convoluted interpretations. It is the understanding of these interpretations, as well as their discursive manipulation, and an analysis of the groups and state politics that made the existence of variants of African-derived religion possible in Cuba under a socialist state after 1959 and their place in the construction of national identity, that are the focus of Christine Ayorinde’s book, *Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution, and National Identity*.

In Ayorinde’s book, intellectual elite and official interpretations of “Afro-Cuban religions” along with practitioners’ voices are taken as both ethnographic material and analytical tools for understanding the place of religious practices in different constructions of national identity. At the same time, under the vague label of “practitioners” we find not simply *babalawos* and the initiated, but also members of the Communist Party, Catholic and spiritualist practitioners, intellectuals, local leaders, and many other ordinary Cubans in their rather exclusivistic relationship with these cults and heterodox religious practices. At same time, this is a not a book on the almost hegemonic Regla de Ocha or Santería practices in academic and popular

literature. Narratives on definition, history, and origin of the variety of cults harbored under the “Afro-Cuban” label and in specialized literature coined as syncretism are analyzed and interpreted as different attempts to address the place of race and nation in everyday personal and religious experience. Given the scarcity of ethnographic works on contemporary Cuba, Ayorinde’s book contributes to a more nuanced view about a topic that surpasses the boundaries of religiosity and territory that has been transformed into a powerful commodity in multiple realms of the transnational market, both through state propaganda and religious groups.

Although Ayorinde’s introduction gives us an insightful description of her personal background and initial steps, defined as her “personal Atlantic circle,” to obtain information in exploring a potential research topic on Cuba, we don’t actually get a sense of this engagement until much later. She begins by narrating a somewhat “official” history of the recognition of Afro-religion in Cuba as reflected in specialized literature, and it is only in the fourth chapter, entitled “The Revolution, 1959-1990,” that Ayorinde reconsiders the very chronology of transformation of Afro-Cuban religions through contacts with her informants and interviewees. However, even though the material she works with suggests that the Revolution – as a “critical event” (Das 1995) – cannot be thought of as a watershed of radical transformation toward the social representation that these cults and their practitioners always had in Cuba, the historical framework offered functions more as prefigured “context” than as a potential historical construction underlying her informants’ narrative. “Before I began my own fieldwork in Cuba,” she writes, “I had assumed that the revolutionary regime had made it difficult for Cubans to continue practicing any religion. When I carried out the interviews, from 1995 to 1998, there had begun to be a greater tolerance” (p. 127). In addition to her own discovery of the possibility of reinterpreting an official chronology, in this same passage, she suggests a more nuanced interpretation offered by an informant, “a *babalawo* and anthropologist from Matanzas, Israel Moliner” (p. 127). Following the period 1959-1965, when “there was no apparent opposition to popular religiosity,” during the 1970s the state began to combat all forms of religiosity through legislation that virtually prohibited the organization of public meetings. As in the beginning of the century, law was the privileged focus of revolutionary practice and polity. There was no explicit formal prohibition on attending religious meetings or public admission of religious identity. Nevertheless, in everyday relationships, mainly in political activities promoted by the state, any religious affiliation was seen with suspicion. It was just the need to survive, first under the restrictions of the state revolutionary order and, after the 1990s, the increasing economic deprivation of the so-called “special period” that justified the reappearance of what practitioners and intellectuals have called practices and relationships in the religious market and state institutions oriented by a *doble*

moral (p. 133), a kind of dubious and contradictory set of relations and discourses directed by divergent ethical values. Sometimes in making reference to practices of “manipulation” and “co-option,” Ayorinde loses the opportunity to ask her informants how they interpret the idea of “double moral” as an intellectual interpretation and tool for the transformation of religious practices and their questionable relationship with the state, marked by different prescriptions of morality (Wirtz 2004). By the end, “consumerism” and “socialism” are credited as causes for this moral entanglement and, at same time, for the current religious revival.

Ayorinde’s book includes a rich description of religious associations, the trends in rituals, and the impact of the phenomenon of Yoruba orthodoxy in contemporary Cuba. One of its most important insights lies in showing that despite the presence of the state apparatus in different “phases” of the post-revolutionary period, Afro-Cuban derived religions not only survived, were transformed, and merged (mainly those practices identified as *Santería*) into a diverse transnational religious network, but also became an important item of the many popular and official representations of “national identity.” In the concluding chapter, Ayorinde addresses this question in highlighting the meanings and uses of the idea of “African” and “tradition” by state institutions and practitioners. “*Santería* is national in the sense of its having spread as a result of internal population movements to areas not historically linked with this tradition” (p. 204). Nevertheless, if a “double consciousness” governs contemporary social relations toward these practices, which “values” appear related to their national representations and the growth of their acceptance? How do the practitioners themselves explain them? The challenging question that arises from reading Ayorinde’s book is how to overcome semi-official explanations of the contemporary “vitality of Afro-Cuban practices” (p. 203) without reproducing a biased chronology of twentieth-century Cuba in which relative “opening” is substituted by ambiguous policies of state manipulation.

What the rich sources raised by Bronfman and Ayorinde seem to indicate is that any attempts to understand the meanings of republican rights in Cuba – such as equality or religious freedom – deserve cautious attention from the researcher. Whether inquiring about social concepts such as “race” and “nation,” or apparently less problematic ones such as “belief,” “religion,” and “society,” one needs to observe the multiplicity of meanings at stake in their use as the object of inquiry. *History*, for instance, and all its derivative terms, through a local language or otherwise, are as much a social construction as are “race,” “nation,” “citizen,” or any number of other concepts. As the latter appear to be attached to specific constructions of time, lived experience, and historicity, one may inquire about the provisional, local, and personal meanings of what historiography has identified as a social context. To which society are these representations inevitably linked?

In their attempts to intervene in the debate on the making of the nation and the extension of civil rights to non-Whites, members of societies have shown, in Bronfman's analysis, that they were interested in interpretations within a broader discussion of the boundaries and criteria of inclusion of this society. In the same fashion, by defending the right of the *Sociedad Lucumi* to maintain its own religious practices, its representatives alluded to "suffering" as a legitimate feeling that could be variously expressed. By referring to the right to cultivate their "ancestors," some of Ayorinde's informants seem to allude to the existence of a diverse history of Afro-Cubans that does not coincide with the acceptance of the existence of a unique and (trans)culturally formed Cuban society.

REFERENCES

- CASTAÑEDA FUERTES, DIGNA & LISA BROCK, 1998. *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- DAS, VEENA, 1995. *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- FERRER, ADA, 1998. The Silence of Patriots: Race and Nationalism in Martí's Cuba. In Jeffrey Belnap & Raúl Fernández (eds.), *José Martí's "Our America": From National to Hemispheric Cultural Studies*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, pp. 228-49.
- , 1999. *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- , 2001. Raza, región y género en la Cuba rebelde: Quintín Bandera y la cuestión del liderazgo político. In Fernando Martínez Heredia, Orlando García & Rebecca J. Scott (eds.), *Espacios, silencios y los sentidos de la libertad: Cuba entre 1878 y 1912*. Havana: Ediciones Unión, pp. 141-62.
- FUENTE, ALEJANDRO DE LA, 2001. *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- HELG, ALINE, 1995. *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- , 1997. Race and Black Mobilization in Colonial and Early Independent Cuba: A Comparative Perspective. *Ethnohistory* 44:53-75.
- , 2000. Black Men, Racial Stereotyping, and Violence in the U.S. South and Cuba at the Turn of the Century. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42:576-604.
- MARTÍNEZ HEREDIA, FERNANDO, 2000. Nacionalizando la nación: Reformulación de la hegemonía en la segunda república cubana. In Ana Vera Estrada (ed.), *Pensamiento y tradiciones populares: Estudios de identidad cultural cubana y latinoamericana*. Havana: Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Cultura Juan Marinello, pp. 29-50.

—, 2001. El problemático nacionalismo de la Primera República. *Temas* 24-25:34-44.

MOORE, ROBIN, 1997. *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

ORTIZ, FERNANDO, 1906. *Los negros brujos (apuntes para un estudio de etnología criminal)*. Madrid: Editorial America.

PALMIÉ, STEPHAN, 2002. *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

PÉREZ, LOUIS A., JR., 1986. Politics, Peasants, and People of Color: The 1912 "Race War" in Cuba Reconsidered. *Hispanic American Historical Review* 66:509-39.

SCOTT, DAVID, 1999. *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

SCOTT, REBECCA J., 1998. Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Cuba: A View from the Sugar District of Cienfuegos, 1886-1909. *Hispanic American Historical Review* 78:687-728.

—, 2004. The Provincial Archive as a Place of Memory: The Role of Former Slaves in the Cuban War of Independence (1895-98). *History Workshop Journal* 58:149-66.

—, 2005. *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

—, THOMAS C. HOLT & FREDERICK COOPER, 2000. *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

STUBBS, JEAN & PEDRO PÉREZ SARDUY, 1992. *Afrocuba: An Anthology of Cuban Writing on Race, Politics and Culture*. London: Ocean Press.

WIRTZ, KRISTINA, 2004. Santería in Cuban National Consciousness: A Religious Case of the Doble Moral. *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 9:409-38.

ZEUSKE, MICHAEL, 2002. Hidden Markers, Open Secrets: On Naming, Race-Marking, and Race-Making in Cuba. *New West Indian Guide* 76:211-42.

— & REBECCA SCOTT, 2002. Property in Writing, Property on the Ground: Pigs, Horses, and Citizenship in the Aftermath of Slavery, Cuba, 1880-1909. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44:669-99.

OLÍVIA MARIA GOMES DA CUNHA
Department of Cultural Anthropology
Federal University of Rio de Janeiro
22251-070 Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
<olivia-cunha@uol.com.br>