Abelardo Larduet Luaces

Hacia una historia de la Santería Santiaguera y otras consideraciones. Santiago de Cuba: Editorial del Caribe, 2014. 295 pp. (Paper n.p.)

Abelardo Larduet Luaces's wide-ranging study of the origins and recent history of Santería and related folk religious practices in his natal city of Santiago de Cuba presents a refreshingly grounded approach to the field Cuban scholars designate as "popular religion." The heart of the book is his meticulously researched oral history of the way western-Cuban lineages of Ocha and Palo were introduced and established in this eastern Cuban city, the antipode of Havana. In tracing individual contributions within the broader religious context, his central questions are when, how, and why religious practices that originated in western Cuba took hold in this eastern city. His principal goal is to show the historical agency of religious practitioners.

In a preface directed "To the Reader," Larduet invokes the text's two principal interlocutors: his mentor, Cuban historian Joel James Figarola, and North American art historian David H. Brown. Citing James's notion of "Cuba profunda" and Brown's work on Santería in Havana and Matanzas,¹ he laments that Cuba's younger generations—even religious initiates—know nothing of "the true origins of their roots, nor why these religions of African substrate exist" because these aspects of Cuba's African legacy are ignored in school curricula, and too much of the public writes them off as "backward black things" (p. 22).

The Cuban academy's approach to studying autochthonous religion—key to nation-building folklore for a century now—has tended toward the taxonomic and normative, giving little print attention to grounded ethnographic accounts or to updating the classic historiography of Fernando Ortiz in ways that could nuance its standard presentation of essentialized categories of Santería, Reglas de Palo, and Spiritism or describe regional variations. In contrast, the burgeoning international ethnographic literature on Cuban folk religion tends toward studies that are sometimes so grounded in one particular locale, domain of practice, and theoretical issue that they can seem myopic. Larduet presents a third way, closer in spirit to American folklore studies, in which he weaves together documentary and oral history sources to describe the expansion of a religious community in one city. He is an ideally situated insider for this work, being an established researcher on the Casa del Caribe's Team for the Study of Popular Religions and a respected palero and santero.

1 Joel James Figarola, 2006, *La Brujería Cubana: El Palo Monte* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente); David H. Brown, 2003, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Larduet opens Chapter 1 with an overview of the first Santiagueros to be initiated, according to “the collective memory of city santeros” (p. 26), and summarizes the emergence of two major “branches” or lineages of initiates, led by two charismatic priests who had already built up followings through other religious practices: the Santiago-born *muertera* (Spiritist medium) Rosa Torres and the transplanted Matancero and Palo practitioner Reynerio Pérez. From the earliest santeros of the 1920s until the 1960s, Santiago’s religious practitioners relied on lineages based in Havana and Matanzas for major ceremonies, such as initiations. But in the 1960s, Torres and Pérez built up influential “house-temples” in Santiago that had sufficient personnel and expertise to host most important ceremonies. Thus did a locally-grounded, increasingly self-sufficient community of Santería emerge. The social dynamics Larduet reconstructs through oral histories, further recounted in a series of interview transcripts and practitioner biographies in Chapter 5, are fascinating; one only wishes that he had situated this religious ferment in the context of the 1959 Revolution.

Precisely because, in Larduet’s poetic phrasing, Santería “rode on the wings” of other religious practices both in its movement into Santiago and in the way its ritual domain came to dovetail with extant folk religious practices, he provides an historical overview of the entire domain of Afro-Cuban religiosity, starting with the colonial-era cofraternities organized by African “nation.” These organizations, and their later incarnations as mutual aid and pleasure clubs, then carnival societies, incubated the “substrate” of African spiritual orientations that preceded imported Santería and Palo Monte. The chapter includes a tantalizing discussion of historical documents concerning the political power once wielded by Santiago’s Congo cofraternities.

Specially deserving of attention are Chapter 3 on the recent history of the way batá drumming was established in Santiago, demonstrating the symbiosis between the Revolution’s promotion of folklore and the motivations of religious practitioners, and Chapter 4 on the even more recent explosion of interest, then conflict, in the Ifá priesthood in Santiago. The previously untold stories of developing batá and Ifá practice are truly fascinating, involving the exciting blend of cooperation and competition that so characterizes popular religious life in the city.

This important study is worth seeking out by anyone interested in the social dynamics of folk religion in the Hispanophone Caribbean.

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