Todd Ramón Ochoa, *A Party for Lazarus: Six Generations of Ancestral Devotion in a Cuban Town*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020. xviii + 314 pp. (Paper US\$29.95)

Elégua claimed Todd Ramón Ochoa long ago, but the sovereign who rules over crossroads and passage points did not set the agenda for *A Party for Lazarus*. Rather than clearing a path from an “African-inspired” community in North Central Cuba to his readers, Ochoa set out to “mediate as little as possible.” His goal was “to import the liveliness of the *santos-orisás* into the social life of the reader” (p. xviii). Nevertheless, Ochoa’s portrayal of Sierra Morena, where his fieldwork began in 1999, transports us to a location where universalizing abstractions have little purchase. His humane ethnography trades “religion” for “praise,” underscoring the “tiny forces”—interpersonal, material and even political—that come together at a feast or *bembé* for San Lázaro-Babalú Ayé. Ochoa calls the master of illness and healing a “santo-orisá,” a compound word that points to the “recombination” of African and Catholic resources and marks the distance between the beloved sovereign and the no less beloved orichas of Havana’s Ocha. Priests and initiations are not required in Sierra Morena. The descendants of people enslaved in nearby plantations inherit their *santo-orisás*, who take them for mounts, directly from their ancestors. At every feast, they nourish the memory of the deceased as well as the *santo-orisás*.

A distinct historical consciousness suffuses the rural praise community. *Bembés* may be annual events, but they unfold out of time. Participants, who include singers and drummers, seasoned mounts, cooks, people who come with offerings to settle their debts to the saints, and passersby looking for a good time recall the past in the present. But the travails that compel them to seek out the *santos-orisás* are grounded in the moment. Despite the braiding of past and present, Ochoa argues that sovereigns’ “work,” which is synonymous with healing, is ultimately about creating new conditions of “becoming.”

Ochoa’s seemingly effortless handling of distended temporalities is one of the many pleasures of his account. The celebration at the heart of *A Party for Lazarus* began on December 17, 1943, when Cucusa Sáez hosted it in gratitude to San Lázaro-Babalú Ayé after he saved her daughter from an illness that had claimed one of her children already. The *bembé* at Cucusa’s place, a ranch house known variously for its cockfighting ring, its altar room, and the town’s first Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, ran without interruption until the host died in 1998. Cucusa’s daughter Isidra, a teacher of Congo-inspired palo and an Ocha initiate long resident in Havana, struggled to continue hosting San Lázaro’s feast. With no deed to the house and without a will to rely on, Isidra faced multiple obstacles to retain control of the property,

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though none as painful as the conflict with her siblings. Changes in the Revolution's laws concerning religion, inheritance, and housing scarcely helped to settle things. As the dispute simmered, competing feasts grew in prominence. Although the bembé survived, Cucusa's home did not escape harm. In 2016 the house was cut in half to satisfy the siblings' claims.

A Party for Lazarus does not contain photographs. This may be because Isidra's sister threatened to bring charges against her for allegedly selling photographs of Cucusa's patrimony to Ochoa. Even without accompanying images, Ochoa's prose gives us a revealing time-lapse depiction of the social reproduction of Sierra Morena's praise communities. Relying on interviews rather than archival sources, Ochoa traces Cucusa's development as a bembé host to her involvement in a storied but now defunct society dedicated to La Caridad-Ochún. Chacha Cairo, a first-generation Cuban born in the 1860s, founded her Sociedad Africana in the early twentieth century. The Sociedad assembled emancipated Creoles and their children to praise seven santos-orisás in a style that Isidra described as "country Arará." Other informants, however, pointed out that African-born elders (*lucumises*) stayed away from Chacha's bembés because they objected to innovations. Almost a century later, Isidra and other keepers of Cucusa's feast questioned the legitimacy of rival hosts on similar grounds. In their bembés, newcomers replaced songs for the santos-orisás with Spiritualist melodies and allowed Indian and Congo spirits to impinge on the orisás' sovereignty.

Ochoa wears his erudition with ease. His scholarly commentary is concise and shrewd and his footnotes are sparse. But his book is far more than an engaging and authoritative instructional text. Generous characterizations and moving descriptions of the texture of social life in Cuba since the advent of the Special Period command attention because Ochoa shows, among other things, that these are also the headwaters from which "religion" flows today.

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