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Alex Bravo

The preservation of afro-cuban culture in the writings of Lydia Cabrera

Lydia Cabrera was born May 20th, 1899 in Havana, Cuba. In 1960, following the Cuban Revolution, she fled the island to Madrid, Spain, where she started her long exile. Two years later she relocated to Miami, Florida, where she lived until her death September 19th, 1991.

Her father, Raimundo Cabrera, was a writer and a lawyer, a prominent man in Cuba's 1900 society. She received a liberal and humanist education. Probably that is why, since a very early age Lydia Cabrera was interested in Afro-Cuban folklore. The family had many African servants and child caretakers; her interest was sparked mainly because of the stories told by her Afro-Cuban nanny.

Lydia Cabrera published over one hundred books during her lifetime; her most significant book is *The Wilderness* (in Spanish: *El Monte*) (1954), which was her first major anthropological study of Afro-Cuban traditions. *El Monte* is referred to as the "black bible"; it became the go to guide for those practicing Santería in Cuba. Some of her other books include, *Afro-Cuban Tales* (1940): a compilation of stories telling how African traditions came to the New World, *The Secret Society of Abakuá* (1958), *Otan Iyebiye* (1970), and *Yemaya and Ochun* (1974), unfortunately, not all of her books are available in English, some are still awaiting translation.

Through her works, Cabrera tells the stories of Cuba and its African descendant slaves; each story becoming a piece of culture, a piece of religion, and a piece of history from those who were too oppressed to tell their own stories. This short study will focus on her love for the preservation of Afro-Cuban culture.

One of Lydia Cabrera's main concerns was to voice the stories narrated to her by the Afro-Cuban elders. As she would recall, "grandsons, great grandsons, and great great grandsons of the Lucumí people continue to hold on to their ancestral culture and they haven't stopped speaking the language they learned during their childhoods, and the language they must use on daily basis to communicate with their divinities" (Gutiérrez 6). These elders would retell the stories passed down from their ancestors, true accounts of their traditions, specifically those related to Yoruba. In *Koeko Iyawó* (1980:6), Cabrera mentions how she served as scribe, "[...] I continue writing the words just as I heard them spoken by my informants. [...] I wrote everything I heard". She would then compile the stories for publishing, some examples can be read in *Afro-Cuban Tales* (1940).

Her writings revived the customs and practices of the Yoruba people for mainstream Cuba, most of these stories were fading away with the passing of the slaves. In doing so, Cabrera revolutionized Yoruba religion, and gave a new identity to this marginalized part of the Cuban people; although slavery had just been abolished at the turn of the century, Afro-Cubans had no literary knowledge or resources to promote their religions, culture or traditions.

For Lydia Cabrera, the study of Afro-Cuban Folklore became a life's passion. She dedicated more than

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four decades to the writing and studying of this culture, which made Cabrera more ardent than some Afro-Cubans themselves. She recalls a random meeting late in her years, at a local Botánica¹ in Miami, Florida, where an older lady approached her in a conversation criticizing at the time the new generation of Santeros² and Santeras which translates to English as priests and priestesses.

This old tradition of ours is ending! Isn't it? Do you see? Now days everyone is a Santero or Santera, to make money that is, and the worst of it is that they don't know anything, my lady. Can you believe that they don't salute or talk to the Orichas³ in Lucumí? They don't pray or sing the songs, is obvious, they don't know anything! And the padrinos⁴ and madrinass⁵, their knowledge has gone to waste and they don't teach their iyawós (Cabrera 62, "*Koeko Iyawó*").

This passage represents the commercialization of the Santería religion. The emigration of hundreds of thousands of Cubans to Miami caused a boom in the demand for Santería and its products⁶. Stores such as the Botánicas sprung all around the city and state; they catered to true practitioners but also took advantage of the un-initiated with promises of magical items and recipes. A new product was born and everyone wanted to buy it. For Cabrera, this 'commercialization' meant the destruction of the true customs and traditions of the Lucumí people. To her, it meant the fading of a religion she worked so hard to re-establish. She spent more than forty years teaching how to respect and care for these customs and traditions; and now some babalawos were disrespecting it by selling initiations. A religion she had brought to life, where rituals and ceremonies considered to be taboo by the mainstream, were now recognized internationally. That small comment by the old lady truly hurt Cabrera, she would later recall "[...] wanting to reply by citing how catholic priests no longer conduct mass in Latin". Either inferring that if the old ways of Catholicism could fade away, so could Yoruba's; or maybe this was a comment marked by the scarring in her soul.

Lydia Cabrera tried to express the Afro-Cuban worldview by using ethnographic details within her writings. She would do so by describing each event, each detail, and each religious ceremony with an abundance of sensory elements such as colors and flavors. Her stories would immerse the reader into the world she created. This method of writing can be seen throughout her works. In the story of Eyá from *Afro-Cuban Tales* (1940:23) she writes:

The next day, he went back out to sea. The water was so clear that you could see all the way to the bottom, just like looking through a windowpane. You could even see heaven's roots. The same fish came back, took the hook and there it was at the end of the line, brilliant as a jewel.

With the use of these colorful metaphors, Cabrera would paint a picture with her words. It is this ingenuity that allowed her to get inside the world of secrets that is Santería. In her introduction to the English Edition of *Afro-Cuban Tales* (2004:xi), Isabel Castellanos writes: "In her tales as well as her ethnographic work, Cabrera showed that although the Afro-Cuban vision is indeed African in origin, it is first and foremost Cuban". Castellanos would later add that, "It is true that some of her characters are of African origin, but we also find many European elements that are essential ingredients of Cuban-Creole culture", thus making her works a valuable contribution to both black and white Cuban folklore literature.

From the very beginning Lydia Cabrera had the basic principle of getting her information directly from black elders, the children of African slaves. She would then get these words to her readers without changing or manipulating them. As she recalls in her book *El Monte* (1954:12), "I was careful enough so that I wouldn't alter their opinions or words, clarifying only those points that would not be understood by a common reader". In his book, *Pioneers of Afro-Cuban Ethnography* (2003:193), Jorge Castellanos points out that, "in order for Cabrera to accomplish this, she had to earn the respect and confidence of the black elders". This was no easy task for a white woman from the upper class. As Castellanos mentions, "she had to get rid of all intellectual arrogance, applying herself with an infinite patience to be able to understand her informants" (Castellanos 193). For Cabrera, the most important thing was to stay true to the version of the investigative material that she had gathered, and for that material to not have passed by what she calls: "the dangerous filter of interpretation" (Cabrera 12, *El Monte*)

One of the most interesting stories compiled by Lydia Cabrera is "Papa Turtle and Papa Tiger" from her book *Afro-Cuban tales* (1940:30), where she narrates the story of the creation.

As she was told: everything then was a little chaotic, the fish drank from flowers and the birds built their nests on the crests of waves. Oceans poured out of seashells, and rivers from the corners of the eyes of the first sad crocodile.

A mosquito dug his stinger into the rump of a mountain, and the whole mountain range began to quiver. And that's the day the elephant marries the ant. A man climbed up to heaven on a ray of light. The sun was watching, and said: "don't get too close or I'll scorch you. But the man didn't listen. He got too close, was roasted, and turned black from his head to toes. That was the first black man, the father of all black people.

Belkis Ayón

This story also tells how the moon told a hare to deliver a message to men. She told the hare to tell the men the following: just as I was born, die, and come back to life, they too must be born, die, and come back to life. The hare found a cousin on her way to delivering the message, her cousin was drinking and partying, and so the hare drank and got drunk. Tumbling from side to side when she delivered the message, she said: "just as I am born, die, and uh, don't come back to life" (Cabrera 31, *Afro-Cuban Tales*) then, men began digging their graves.

Stories as such are the legacy of what Lydia Cabrera was able to accomplish. By her writing them, people continued to tell them. A very important part of a culture was saved. These stories are what were left of the Lucumí people once they were brought over to the New World. These stories, like a DNA sample, carried the key to the survival of Yoruba and the making of a new religion, Santería.

Another important part of Lydia Cabrera's work was her incorporation of the music into her writings, the music that she heard many times over during the Yoruba ceremonies she attended. It can be said that Cabrera used her words, as Picasso used his brush. She had a cunning ability for making her written stories jump out; it was her sincerity and respect for the sacred that allowed her to write the way she did. This style of hers becomes very important to the preservation of the folklore, because the correlation among our African based religions and music is one and the same. In Africa, just as in Cuba, music is associated with all sorts of life events: births, mourning, wars, and even love. This devotion to singing, playing, and listening to music has its roots in traditional religious ceremonies.

Lydia Cabrera and Josefina Tarafa recorded slave descendant communities performing religious songs and ceremonies in the Cuban countryside of the Matanzas province.

In the Cuban countryside, Yoruba, Dahomean, and Kongo-Angolan religions had been faithfully preserved, and linguistic, symbolic, and musical elements were blended to produce new religious expressions. These recordings are a soundtrack to Cabrera's writings on Afro-Cuban religions (Cabrera, Tarafa).

It is said that Lydia Cabrera was able to photograph the sacred drum of the Cuban Secret Society of Abakuá, the only existing public picture of such drum. It would be impossible to replicate the taking of this picture by an outsider; the Abakuá's sacred drum is guarded as well as the United States Constitution is to anyone outside their brotherhood. In her book *The secret society of Abakuá* (1958:14), Cabrera states: "The oaths of loyalty to the Abakuá society's sacred objects, members, and the secret knowledge taken by initiates are a lifelong pact which creates a sacred bond among the members".

The oath made during initiation is one that will not reveal the 'secrets' of the Abakuá to non-members, which is why the Abakuá have remained hermetic for over 160 years. The duties of an Abakuá member to his ritual brother, at times surpass even the responsibilities of friendship (Cabrera 61, "*La Sociedad Secreta Abakuá: Narrada por Viejos Adeptos*")

Lydia Cabrera wrote the stories of Cuba and its African descendant slaves, and each story became a piece of culture, a piece of religion, and a piece of history. She saved what would have been many

lost traditions. Lydia Cabrera published over one hundred books in her life; she was an ethnographer, a historian, and a writer. Her writings painted the pictures that preserved the heart of Afro-Cuban culture, Santería.

Endnotes

- 1- A shop that sells charms, herbs, and other materials used by practitioners of Santería.
- 2- Lesser ranked priest than a babalawo.
- 3- A spirit or deity that reflects the manifestations of lesser gods in the Yoruba religious system.
- 4- Another name for Babalawo.
- 5- A name for a Santería priestess, also refer to as Santeras.
- 6- For more information on Santería and exile, see Joseph M. Murphy, *Santería: An African religion in America*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

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