



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

## What's Cookin'?

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Comment on Palmié, Stephan. 2013. *The cooking of history: How not to study Afro-Cuban religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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Only seemingly caught between the confessional genre and the apologia, my esteemed colleague Stephan Palmié's *The cooking of history* at once gives a status report on—to use his graphic devices—“Afro-” “Cuban” “Religion” as a now emergently transnational institution. In so doing, Palmié the anthropologist who would study the thus captioned object ruminates on the epistemological consequences more generally of culture's dialectical semiotics and thus of its always dynamic condition of being in history. With a scholar's retrospective wink at classificatory nominalism, Palmié notes that there is a US Library of Congress classification for the sanitarily cited phenomenon, BL2532.S3, so presumably it exists in that universe of scholarly fact associated with text-artifactuality, books, et cetera collected on shelves. Well, he asks, how much of its existence is a creation, a performative entailment, of such scholarly interventions? And while we're at it, even for its reflexive practitioners, let alone its analytic observers, how much of such cultural factuality depends for its mode of existence on an institutionalized realm of *inter-meta-discursivity*, a circulation of talk about and other representations of cultural practice, into which, as would-be ethnographer and culture historian, Palmié has been drawn? The “natives,” as it were, not only think—just as does the social scientist—they talk, they write, they broadcast. Situated in different positions in a field of mutual engagement, they pick up on and argue with someone else's—even the ethnographer's—discourse, in doing so reflexively seeming to anchor or to mobilize understanding of the contrastive place of their own practices in a universe of others' comparable but distinctive ones, perhaps even for a time having, as it were, the last word. But never for long, as Palmié's story reveals, in this fast-paced, discursively rich field of engagement.



Such has long been the condition of what goes under the name of Afro-Cuban religion, as serially brought into focus for us as we follow its distinctively verbal chefs in the “kitchens” of culture. Palmié’s historical and ethnographic discussion emphasizes the last century and a bit, during which Santería—to pick one among many sometimes very context-specific synonyms—has been curatorially ushered into the context of nation-state modernity—let alone of Weberian politico-economic modernity—where “religion” as a distinct institutional form must find its corporate organizational site and where the modalities of publicly revealed religiosity have, perforce, to become legible in relation to a paradigm of contrasting others. To be sure, one of the more important anthropological insights of its older “savage slot” (Trouillot 2003) period dealing with small-scale social formations was this: institutionally distinct “religion” was not really to be found in such societies, even though systems of belief about a cosmos that includes beings and forces beyond the human and determinate sites of ritual expression of such were indeed universal, whatever their role or functionality in the way of having, in the local view, consequences for humankind.

Contrast this with, for example, the various major religions of the book, where sacred cosmogonic scriptural narrative and layer upon historical layer of interpretative writings inform current doctrinal discourses and pronouncements of official incumbents of each of the traditions, frequently at hierarchically tiered levels. Such modes of religiosity are reflected as well in liturgical practices of worship on various cyclic schedules; in life-cycle rituals transforming religious adherents in mediated relation to the corporate entity (like a church) as well as to fellow adherents; in sites for procedural reckonings of adherents’ troubles; et cetera. There is a hierarchy of organizational officialdom, if only one of achieved distinction, endowed with essential qualities of the particular religiosity, and officials have, through their ordained priestly incumbency, a role distinct in kind in the cosmic order of things from that of the more numerous lay adherents and practitioners of the religion to whom, and on behalf of whom, they minister. This kind of religion is not only legible even from the outside to anyone socialized in the contemporaneous world—even if the belief system of those functioning within its institutionality is considered to be in lesser or greater error for someone reading it from within another such tradition. And, importantly, it is conformable as an institutional form to the requirements of the larger nation-state and intersecting politico-economic structures in mass society—with which such “organized religion” has become comfortable, recognized by bodies such as the US Supreme Court, and even sometimes “established” *de jure* as well as *de facto*. There is an unfortunate tendency to try to discern so-called primitive religion in essentially social-evolutionary terms so as to make such cultural forms in local-scale social formations legible as “Religion”—and “religions”—on a temporal scale of unfolding of one or another sort. We see this with clarity as the professional outlook common in the field of history of religions, for example in schools of divinity and in seminaries. Even the great Max Weber succumbed to the tendency, let alone the locust-like waves of missionaries who have over centuries of European imperialism descended on peoples with nonconformable “primitive religions” to transform them into participants in, if not completely convincing adherents of, institutional Christianity of one or another sort.



There is something of this in the story of Santería, a.k.a. *Regla de Ochá*, a.k.a. *Regla de Lucumí*. I take Palmié's story to be very much about the curatorial care with which various intellectuals both within and beyond the practices of Santería have severally and variously struggled to define it as—to prescribe for it—one or another intersection of characteristics that would make it legible in ways acceptable to outsiders at the same time reflexively conferring the pride of authenticity to its adherents, and especially to its leaders anxiously negotiating the external context as well as looking inward. One such characteristic is having the organization and paraphernalia of “religion” in the modern paradigm of such, for example by making it possible to understand the polytheistic structure of a pantheon as something like a universe of Catholic saints ready to assist suffering humankind through the ministrations of adept devotees who, blessed in this way, can channel the divine/saintly signs and wonders. (A doctrine of historical syncretism works well in this respect.) Another desirable characteristic is the anchoring of ultimate spiritual authenticity in “Yorùbá” Africa, the terminus as conceptualized of the forced passage of slaves across the Atlantic, at once giving an ethno-racial essence and the patina of Old World venerability to the tradition as a transplant. (Compare the European compactarian origins of distinctively WASP New England Congregationalism; or the continuities narrated in the Book of Mormon and the faithful's latter-day migration to a “promised land,” Utah.) Like such historically transplanted and thus dynamically globalizing religions, one might also see Santería's New World diasporic crystallization in “*cubanía*,” that is, as historically a postslavery distinctively *cubano* socio-cultural phenomenon paralleling Brazilian Candomblé in the crucible of that nation-state's heritage of its ethnic and racial melting pot, its analogous *ajiaco*. Such strands of legibility provide the dimensions of a trajectory of interpretative takes on this tradition in a continuing dialogue between insider and outsider intellectuals and scholars.

Hence, the account in *Cooking* is definitively not an ethnography of ritual practice as such, so much as an historical view of recent trends in such curatorial concern about the fashioning of Santería as recognizable “religion,” as a mode of spirituality that has integrally made its way from Yorubaland across the Atlantic in the Middle Passage—whatever the Rankean anachronisms revealed by the meticulous historical sociology of John D. Y. Peel—and yet the religion bespeaks the folkloric essence of cultural—and perhaps racial—amalgamation in Cuba. Along each of these dimensions, Palmié's historian's eye for documentation and chronology looks carefully at the potential divergence between claims of the curatorial class—supported, sometimes unawares and/or inadvertently by anthropologists (think of Melville Herskovits)—and what might be gleaned from careful reconstruction, which all the more demonstrates the sociological locatability in time and place of particular foundationalist ideas that have arisen as the pillars of claims to authenticity, respectability, continuity, global potentiality, et cetera of Santería. We meet a cast of intense practitioners and students of the religious tradition, with many of whom the author has had long-term relationships of give-and-take: Fernando Ortiz, Ernesto Pichardo, Miguel “Willie” Ramos (Ilarí Obá), Christian Ifakolade Carranza, and others. Indeed the debates about “Afro-“ “Cuban” “Religion”/religiosity are, of course, thriving and have moved to the Internet and other

loci of wide circulation, bespeaking a curatorial consciousness that is now trans-Atlantic, global even, both in its personnel and organizational structure and in its imaginary.

But Palmié's work, while focusing ethnographically on the—might we venture?—anxieties of the curatorial class's historical consciousness, should be considered in a somewhat more abstract way as a revelation of a new consciousness among anthropologists about “the nature of ‘culture,’ ” to use the epistemologically loaded phrase. Culture is semiotic. It is semiotic all the way down—even “religion,” as Mr. William James' interlocutor noted for him after a lecture, in the metaphorical idiom of turtles. It brings great joy to me to read this text steeped in a profound understanding that the reason all matters “cultural” are “historical”—recall the German tradition of post-Kantian social theory out of which milieu came Boas—is because they are facts of an inevitably dialectical semiotics. Excepting denotational language, everything in culture presents as one or another mode of what Charles Peirce termed “iconicity” (resemblances, including schematic, analogic, and metaphorical) and “indexicality” (connected co-occurrences, including metonymy and bidirectional causes-and-effects, such as contextual affordances and semiotic entailments). But, being essentially conventional—socio-historical—in kind, such iconicities and indexicalities only operate in a dialectical field in which human conceptualization, sometimes even conscious, agentive conceptualization (Weberian *Verstehen*) is an essential component, situated as “mind in society” reflexively contemplating and plotting its own semiotic engagement. As Palmié's discussion reveals, generously citing key texts by Webb Keane and Greg Urban in our very Chicago-based interdiscursive field of theorizing, such conceptualization, such *metasemiotic discourse* itself is socially located and seems to move, to circulate across sites of semiosis as a function of engagement of social actors in projects that bring their interests together, whether congruently or antagonistically.

Because of this we can follow these processes focused on “Afro-” “Cuban” “Religion” in this always-exciting story, a metahistory, as it were, of historical consciousness among intensely nondisinterested parties to it. They argue about the proper metasemiotic terms, about rights to use them, about their aspirations for them; they argue about doctrinal as well as factual matters; about the proper circulation of semiotic forms and who may be violating them. In short, these are all—including the author, Palmié, himself—people semiotically “inside” the cultural phenomena generated by the dialectical field in which they engage each other through the mediation of whatever “BL2532.S3” turns out to be designating at any focalized moment in its semiotic trajectory of existence.

## References

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