

***Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion.* David H. Brown. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 413 pp.<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by Kristina Wirtz

David H. Brown's beautifully produced and important book, *Santería Enthroned*, is one case in which a book can and perhaps should be judged by its cover. Brown's project on Santería ritual, aesthetics, and historical change is ambitious: he combines the methods and materials of anthropology, art history, and social history, among other disciplines, to consider what this case can contribute to the ongoing debate over the source of African diasporic cultural forms. A major contribution of the book is to challenge the very terms of the debate between Africanist and Creolist interpretations of origins. He engages both Sidney Mintz and Richard Price's "rapid creolization" model and the Herskovitsian "African retentions" paradigm still apparent in Robert Farris Thompson's art historical analyses, which seek to reveal African continuities beneath changes in diasporic forms. Brown advocates Stephan Palmié's "New World ethnogenesis" model, which envisions innovation—creative responses to changing conditions by historically self-conscious actors—as the driver of cultural change and continuity alike. His analysis shatters any simplistic dichotomy of change versus continuity, and in doing so goes beyond any previous work on Santería to provide the most careful and historically nuanced account of this religion's origins and contemporary practices yet written.

Brown examines the emergence of Cuban Santería and its transformation from antecedents—particularly Yoruba religious practices—into its modern form by proposing that its story of historical change is best explained in terms of agentful, self-conscious innovations, reforms, and inventions of tradition. He documents how Africans and their descendents in Cuba drew upon African and European aesthetic repertoires and cultural logics to recreate African practices in novel forms and contexts. A major theme through which he develops this argument is the prevalence of royalty and royal metaphors in Afro-Cuban ritual and iconographic practice. Hence the book's title: *Santería Enthroned*.

The book is based on considerable research over more than two decades in both Cuba and the United States, and is a substantially reworked and refined version of what was already a masterful Ph.D. dissertation in 1989. It is organized into two sections, in which the first considers institutional and ritual innovation, while the second considers iconographic innovation. The text is greatly enhanced by extensive visual documentation, including a hundred figures and some two dozen gorgeous color plates of Santería thrones and "clothes of the saint" that illustrate the sumptuousness and artistry of Santería's aesthetic practices.

The book is clearly and cogently written, if at times so densely packed with detail and careful discussion that it would likely daunt anyone not already familiar with the topics and theoretical debates he engages. While it is essential reading for specialists in African diasporic and Caribbeanist history, comparative religion, visual anthropology, and ethnography, it would be most useful (in whole or in part) for advanced undergraduate and graduate seminars. And yet I

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am tempted to press it upon anyone expressing any curiosity about Santería, precisely because it so carefully dissects and questions the assumed wisdom about what Santería is and where it comes from, providing an authoritative and insightful alternative account.

In Chapter One, as he does throughout the book, Brown makes brilliant use of colonial-era visual and textual documentation of Santería's origins in Cuba, including traveler accounts, paintings, and lithographs. He uses these to address what is known about how the precursors of Santería and other Afro-Cuban religions arose out of colonial-era social institutions such as urban religious co-fraternities for Blacks (called *cabildos*). While the broad outlines of this account are well-known, for example, from George Brandon's (1993) book, Brown's careful discussion of the evidence sets a higher standard for reconstructions of Santería's early history and suggests fruitful directions for additional research. He argues that the religious co-fraternities were "not 'direct survivals' of African government and communal infrastructures but loan translations or remodelings as mediated by colonial social, administrative, and political categories" (p. 55).

Brown's exploration of Santería's early development continues in Chapter Two, where he applies oral histories he collected among practitioners in Havana and Matanzas to the question of how Santería moved out of *cabildos* and into the realm of modern, rationalized religion. Always careful not to push his interpretations too far, he patiently exercises his oral history data to offer a reconstruction of how Yoruba-derived practices moved out of "Lucumí" *cabildos* and into "house-temples" based on ritually-established lineages of fictive as well as genealogical kinship. This process, he argues, happened late in the 19th century and into the early 20th century through the historically-reflexive efforts of a small number of African and creole priests who actively negotiated what would henceforth be considered authoritative "African" knowledge. One line of evidence from the oral history sources themselves is a clear "sense of dynamic process and conflict" in their recollections of their ritual elders' efforts to mobilize ritual authority by recreating or reforming "tradition" (p. 75). This interpretation of self-conscious and active programs of "reform" resonates with my own and others' analyses of the constitutive role of conflict in contemporary Santería (Dianteill 2002; Gobin in press; Palmié 1995; Wirtz in press). Brown concludes: "In a sense, the 'starting point of the Cuban Santería' was not a place or institution—the 'cabildos' or even 'the ramas' [lineages]—but the process of ongoing negotiation of interests among the emergent ramas" (p. 112).

In Chapter Three he continues his thorough and theoretically nuanced historical account of the emergence of Santería as a "modern, theologically rationalized twentieth-century religion." To do so, he continues to question, rather than simply repeating, received wisdom about Santería that too often becomes established through mutually-entailing repetitions by scholars and practitioners. For example, he interrogates the depiction of Santería's deities or *orichas* as a "pantheon" and the "syncretism" of Yoruba deities and Catholic saints. He also closely examines how particular liturgical practices—divination techniques, initiation procedures—arose as a product of experimentation, alongside the efforts of practitioners to professionalize their ranks. Remarkably, he accomplishes this innovation-centered reading of Santería practice while simultaneously providing as thorough an overview of ritual practice in Santería as any account available, save perhaps a few manuals published by practitioners. His conclusion is compelling: "Through discussion, debate, experimentation, and the advancing of self-conscious 'reform'

agendas, African and creole leaders worked to theologize and pantheonize the Lucumí religion and standardize the orichas' iconographic attributes, mythology, and associated liturgy" (p. 130).

The second half of the book, on iconographic innovation, shifts its focus to a "cultural biography of things" (Kopytoff 1986). While continuing to develop the themes of historical agency, self-conscious innovation, and royalty, Brown turns his attention to the iconography of initiation rituals, altars, and the myriad "stuff" of modern Santería practice. In Chapter Four he explores how modern initiation rituals in Santería incorporate symbols of royalty that draw upon multiple European and African influences: the altar, sacred garments and cloths, representations and accessories of each saint, beaded sashes, and head and facial decoration of initiates. In a clever reading of this iconographic evidence, he shows how distinctions between "warrior" and "court" orichas are manifested in altars, garments, and rituals, despite the development of a standardized ritual protocol for all initiations (itself a product of earlier negotiations among priests over ritual authority).

Chapter Five presents a "biography of things" by re-examining the various components of altars and clothing documented in his illustrations—fabrics, styles, ceramic and other vessels—in a broader historical context, in order to tease out the contributing influences and functions of these particular choices. Brown's exposition is a lesson to all ethnographers to ask the obvious questions: why do Santería practitioners put their sacred stones into decorative china soup tourens? Why do they cover their altars with what, at first glance, seems a mishmash of kitsch? Why do they dress initiates in shiny satin "princess" dresses and pant-suits reminiscent of the "Three Musketeers?" To answer such questions, he juxtaposes wide-ranging examples of diverse origins to argue that there is never just one simple source, African or European, and that the multiple significations of any choice—be it fine porcelain vessels for the "santos" or sumptuous cloth draping these vessels—make these into overdetermined symbols charged with spiritual power. That is, such masterful bricolages of European, Cuban, and African forms (fine fabrics and porcelain together with painted facial cicatrices and animal skins, and so forth) are not simply superficial decorative "window dressings" over some "real" African substrate (Bascom's 1971[1950] "stones, herbs, blood"), but are "traditionalized and cherished expressive means to celebrate the greater glory of the *orichas*" as well as becoming sources of power in their own right (p. 288).

Brown has opened up rich territory for further historical, ethnographic, and iconographic exploration. With all he does do in this book, there are many lines of evidence he barely considers—language and dance come to mind, as do greater attention to regional variation in Cuba, the U.S., and Yorubaland—and much else that, as he himself admits in his conclusion, could not be treated to fully "thick" ethnographic and historical description. These are hardly complaints, given the scope of the book he has written. To such a masterful work as *Santería Enthroned*, one can only respond ¡*Aché!* and get on with the work he has challenged us to continue.

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