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Mercedes Cros Sandoval. *Worldview, the Orichas, and Santerí-a: Africa to Cuba and Beyond.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. xxxvi + 417 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3020-3.

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Published on H-AfrArts (September, 2007)

A Return to Folklore

Mercedes Cros Sandoval is well known for her decades of research in both Cuba and the United States. Her book–*Worldview, the Orichas, and Santería: Africa to Cuba and Beyond*–offers audiences the benefit of her depth of research into the history and religious practices of Santería as well as her astute organization of resources. The book features twenty-four chapters further divided into three parts. In the title and at very start of her text, Cros Sandoval states that her interest is in examining "worldviews" and how a historic, West African Yoruba understanding of the world has had an impact on the development of Santería, or La Regla de Ocha, in the Americas. Although the initial construction of Cros Sandoval's argument invites debate, the author resolves concerns through her careful presentation of evidence.

The premise of a "worldview" appears to indicate a very broad subject matter, and even Cros Sandoval admits that this approach has fallen out of favor among many scholars. Nonetheless, she very carefully outlines her thesis by adhering to the constructs of other authors. She relies on scholarship by the anthropologist Michael Kearny to define a worldview as the logical social and belief structures shown to thrive over time within a specified region.[1] Furthermore, Cros Sandoval argues that a worldview faces the constant challenge of inconsistencies in social structures and religious practices that can not survive over time, especially in a transition to the diaspora.

This presentation of a unified cultural ethos is particularly challenging in light of the larger, colonial history of West Africa that has more recently come to light. The work of scholars including Andrew Apter, James Lorand Matory, and J.D.Y. Peel increasingly reveals that Yoruba sub-groups often had different social and religious frameworks, and that the delineation of the "Yoruba" is largely a colonial construct.[2] Cros Sandoval did not perform fieldwork in West Africa, and therefore is extraordinarily attentive to the earlier work of prominent field researchers there. Her reliance on some of the classic texts of West African art history allows Cros Sandoval to create a widely framed discussion of the history of the Yoruba in order to move into the strengths of her research.

Cros Sandoval's compilation and critical interpretation of West African Yoruba and Afro-Cuban religious folklore is persuasive. Cros Sandoval has not only read numerous texts on West African religious practices but she has interviewed notable scholars, including William Bascom. Cros Sandoval's extensive work in Cuba and the United States has allowed her to interview and read the notebooks of many religious practitioners, thereby pulling together a strong collection of popular religious folklore. This collection of popular religious stories and narratives provides a broad overview of the religious practices and characteristics of the divinities that are celebrated on both sides of the Atlantic. Equally important, she presents this complicated material in a lucid manner. This approach has established Cros Sandoval as the one scholar who finally makes sense of the work produced by Lydia Cabrera (1899-1991), renowned as a scholar of Afro-Cuban religions. Cabrera herself performed a daunting amount of original research in Cuba and the United States throughout her lifetime, and her complex scholarship reveals a modernist literary flair, peppered as it is was with words and phrases from several different ritual languages. Indeed, not only senior scholars but also senior priests of Afro-Cuban religions have puzzled over Cabrera's work for decades.

Fortunately for contemporary audiences, Cabrera was a mentor to Cros Sandoval. Cros Sandoval writes that she and Cabrera shared with each other many ideas and research methodologies (pp. xxx-xxxi). Now, more than fifty years after Cabrera's notorious 1954 volume *El Monte* (The Wilderness), Cros Sandoval sheds light on La Regla de Ocha's folklore through her rigorous organization and editing.[3] The three parts of her book present

the history of Santería and its hierarchy of practitioners, a discussion of divinities and their popular characterizations on either side of the Atlantic, and an overview of trends emerging in contemporary practices.

Part 1 covers a general history of Santería as well as its organizational structures. This history moves very quickly from West African origins to development in the Americas. Although the author's foray into Cuba's colonial period is brief, she points compellingly to the development of "popular piety," or popular religious cultures, in the 1800s and early 1900s as the means by which Afro-Cuban religions took root and were able to expand (pp. 31-37). Cros Sandoval then offers a larger discussion of the general organization and practice of Santería. She covers initiation practices as well as the archetypal hierarchy existing between different types of priests. Notably, Cros Sandoval complements this information with her critical presentation of folklore, such as breakdowns of different divination tales, which, through her written voice, is a particularly intriguing approach to this material. Even audiences familiar with the history and organization of Santería will likely find new perspectives through Cros Sandoval's interpretations.

Overall, part 2 is the strongest portion of the book. In this section, thirteen chapters explore the folklore surrounding more than twenty-five different divinities that have been celebrated on both sides of the Atlantic. Because Cros Sandoval investigates popular religious tales in depth, the book provides many interesting ideas with respect to the impact of folklore on diasporic relationships and processes. Many of the chapters in part 2 would be particularly interesting to students and researchers investigating the history and folklore pertaining to such specific *oricha* as Obatalá and Elegguá. These thirteen chapters also provide excellent citations for further reading.

It is important to note that part 2 is especially strong because this is the portion of the book that builds upon Cros Sandoval's earlier work. It incorporates much that is a translation into English of her 1966 doctoral dissertation *Lo Yoruba en la Santería Afrocubana* (Yoruba Traits in Afro-Cuban Santería) and her 1975 book *La Religión Afrocubana* (Afro-Cuban Religion).[4] For this publication, however, Cros Sandoval has updated her work, with references to new literature and much more field research, and there are many recent additions to the text that merit attention.

The strengths of part 2 are, perhaps, slightly compromised by two curious features. First, Cros Sandoval starts at the very top of the hierarchy of *oricha* and moves downwards. This organization is somewhat awkward since in actual performance of ritual, *santeros* and *babalao* usually begin to salute the *oricha* from the bottom of the hierarchy. Thus, *oricha* who are considered messengers, active hunters, or warriors are addressed before the divinities who are perceived as older, wiser, and most divine (if a divinity is addressed at all). In order to teach audiences about the worldview of La Regla de Ocha, would not this bottom-up approach be more appropriate? Similarly misleading is a short list of "minor" *oricha* created by Cros Sandoval in the last chapter of part 2. Although some of the *oricha* so listed may not be part of the practice of every *santero* or *babalao*, many under this heading, like the Ibeyi, or twin *oricha*, and Inle, the medical doctor, should not be considered minor, celebrated as they are by the most experienced leaders of Santería. Senior priests seek to be initiated into practices surrounding these *oricha* for many personal reasons, but, most commonly, in order to reinforce their own power and status. The more rituals a *santero* conducts, the more the priest needs the protection of enhanced communication with a larger retinue of *oricha*. Perhaps not as common as Ochún or Changó, *oricha* who figure in the most popular stories, these less discussed divinities are still held in high esteem by members of La Regla de Ocha's religious communities.

Part 3 is an objective overview of "New Ways and Current Trends" in Santería practice. Here, Cros Sandoval addresses the most controversial material in the book. Her first chapter in part 3 serves as a conclusion to her larger thesis concerning the bridge between West African Yoruba worldviews and Afro-Cuban Santería. Ultimately, she asserts that the presence of both "structural consistencies and inconsistencies" between West African and Afro-Cuban religious folklore reveals that Yoruba and La Regla de Ocha religious practices are not entirely congruent (pp. 321-322). This important conclusion sets the tone for her succeeding analysis that indicates that the religious structures and folklore associated with Santería are actually part of unresolved and extremely active debates. Part 3 then raises a number of issues that practitioners actively dispute, including ideas concerning leadership structures, training, Afro-Centrism, problems involving the international spread of a belief system, and trends encouraging individual expression. Cros Sandoval presents this material as briefly and objectively as possible. Because this section is abbreviated, it does not have the richness of detail provided in other parts of the book.

The appendices at the end of the book return to the author's strength in critical presentation of folklore.

Here, she provides brief descriptions of the "roads" or different paths of seven *oricha*: Obatalá, Elegguá, Changó, Ochún, Yemayá, Babalú Ayé, and Ogún. By ending the book in this manner, Cros Sandoval evidences that *Worldview, the Orichas, and Santería* is a particularly strong source for the collection and critical presentation of popular stories related to both West African Yoruba religious practices and Afro-Cuban Santería.

One flaw in the book, from the viewpoint of students of visual culture, is the use of photographs. Nineteen plates appear between sections 1 and 2. Despite considerable descriptive content in her actual text, these images are not discussed, limiting their potential to both complement her writing and extend her readers' understanding. Only one has a caption that provides a date for the picture in question, certainly an important detail for historical studies. Nonetheless, this book will be of interest to a number of audiences, including advanced undergraduate and graduate students studying the transatlantic traditions, and should be particularly beneficial to educators who interpret West African Yoruba and Afro-Cuban religious folklore for wider audiences.

Notes

[1]. Michael Kearney, *World View* (Novato, Calif.: Chandler and Sharp, 1984).

[2]. Andrew Apter, "On African Origins," *American Ethnologist* 29, no. 2 (2002): 233-260; James Lorand Matory, "The English Professors of Brazil: On the Diasporic Roots of the Yoruba," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 1 (1999): 72-103; J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

[3]. Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte* (Miami: Colección del Chickerekú, 1971[1954]).

[4]. Mercedes Cros Arrúe, "Lo Yoruba en la Santería Afrocubana" (Ph.D. diss., University of Madrid, 1966); Mercedes Cros Sandoval, *La Religión Afrocubana* (Madrid: Editorial Playor, 1975).

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Citation: Kris Juncker. Review of Sandoval, Mercedes Cros, *Worldview, the Orichas, and Santerí-a: Africa to Cuba and Beyond.* H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. September, 2007.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13583

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