

Kristine Juncker, *Afro-Cuban Religious Arts: Popular Expressions of Cultural Inheritance in Espiritismo and Santeria* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), xx + 174 pp., \$74.95 (cloth).

Kristine Juncker is currently a research fellow in the Photographic History Research Center at De Montfort University in Leicester. *Afro-Cuban Religious Arts: Popular Inheritance in Espiritismo and Santeria* is her first book. The volume is a transnational study of altar construction across Cuba, Puerto Rico and New York from the beginning of the twentieth century through the 1960s. For Juncker these altars reveal a remarkable amount of information about the popular practices of *Espiritismo* (Spiritism), *La Regla de Ocha* (often known as Santeria) and *Palo*, as well as how these practices interfaced with the social and political transformations across the Afro-Cuban community both within Cuba and beyond. This is an especially important study because, as Juncker points out, in Africana Atlantic traditions many of a leader's rituals tools are destroyed or returned to nature after death. Thus the articles that survive in a community speak of both themselves and what was discarded.

Espiritismo, as described by Juncker shares little with Kardecist Spiritism. Rather its is much closer in form and style to Spiritualism in the United States. It focuses on connection and communication with Afro-Caribbean ancestors through mediums, persons understood to function as a channel between human persons and non-human persons such as ancestral spirits. Santeria also seeks connection with various Ibo-Yoruba ancestral powers including the *orishas*, "avatars of natural forces" (5). These practices are by no means exclusive – *Espiritismo* often focuses on ancestors who themselves practiced Santeria in their day. As Juncker's study makes clear, Afro-Cuban ritual arts and religious leaders frequently practiced multiple traditions with different social norms of engagement – without collapsing the boundaries between these discourses. *Espiritismo* altars are often relatively public and more easily accessible to the clients of the medium/priestess. In contrast, Santeria altars are traditionally closely guarded and any client interaction with them is strictly supervised. Both sets of practices are interpreted by Juncker to be a fulfillment of "historiographic desire" as well as an economic tradecraft.

Similar to the goals of recent Afro-Caribbean women authors (Maryse Conde, Michelle Cliff) Juncker argues that leaders in the ritual arts used their skills to highlight cultural fragments from different Caribbean and Catholic mythologies in the creation of a usable past and present for both themselves as consultants as well as their clients.

Juncker focuses here on several specific case studies: women who have created a ritual arts “canon” by preserving items from the previous generation through different political regimes in Cuba, as well as in Puerto Rico and New York City. Each woman was a successive generational religious leader and consultant from a single lineage, each one with her own clientele. The focus on gender is central to the overall study. Juncker correctly notes that besides Karen McCarthy Brown’s work on Vodou, most of the scholarly focus on Afro-Caribbean religion has concerned men, particularly because male slaves were perceived as more of a threat to a colonial power structure—therefore their religious practices have drawn attention accordingly. Even after slavery, Juncker’s literature review identifies black men in particular to have been considered dangerous. Her examination of Fernando Ortiz’s criminological work, *The Black Sorcerers*, demonstrates how Ortiz often set the tone for both later scholarly engagement (Melville Herskovits) and political engagement (Fulgencio Batista). In pre-Castro days, Ortiz’s legacy led to crackdowns on male religious leaders in the Santería community, which was interpreted as criminalistic African “atavistic” culture. In contrast, *Espiritismo* was relatively tolerated as a popular form of folk Catholicism. After the Communist revolution the reverse was true. Santería was tolerated and even occasionally promoted to the degree it celebrated indigenous African identity, while practitioners of *Espiritismo* were thought to be allied with official Catholicism and its counter-revolutionary views.

Even in her background review, Juncker considers the uses of traditional Afro-Cuban symbolism and folklore in both avant-garde artwork and Cuban folktale production across several trajectories. From political criminology to expressionist painting, Juncker makes clear the multivalent dimensions of Afro-Cuban symbolic discourse. This is no idiosyncratic engagement; she follows the fascinating twists and turns in Cuban folklore as it develops from suppressed “atavism” to cultural nationalism. Through the work of Ortiz, Lydia Cabrera and William Bascom, creolized Catholic and African religious folklore became artistically fashionable and a sign of cultural nationalism among the Cuban elite in the 1940s and 1950s. Ortiz himself left

behind criminology to publish important (and popular) studies on the ethnocultural impact of Cuban tobacco and sugar before compiling a vast encyclopedia on Cuban ethnomusicology, still in use today.

In the first of her specific case studies, Juncker illustrates the differential importance of gender. As sorcerer males were prosecuted by the government for their perceived threat to the public sphere, women's delegation to the domestic household allowed them a degree of protection for their altars and clientele, causing a rapid increase in their numbers relative to male practitioners. Tiburcia, Juncker's first example, constructed a series of interrelated but discrete altar spaces each to Catholicism, *Espiritismo* and Santería. According to Juncker's informants, this was decided on the basis of a specific divination by her adoptive godmother, and understood by her family as a specific competitive advantage over other spiritual consultants in her area. Drawing on valuable handwritten manuals for the semi-public Havana religious society to which Tiburcia belonged, Juncker contends Tiburcia's pre-Revolutionary experience is consistent with other practicing consultants, at least those part of this particular society ("Cabildo Africano Lucumi"). But most importantly in my opinion, Juncker provides architectural plans and axonometric diagrams detailing the relative locations of both permanent and temporary altars in Tiburcia's home with regard to the front door and the more public front room (visible from the street) as contrasted with the more private bedroom and bathroom spaces, creating a spatial "nesting effect" of religious discourses. Moreover, Juncker provides excellent thick descriptions of the clothing, colors, jewelry, and materials used to dress spirit dolls and altar spaces in metonymic relation to the different orishas and Cuba's version of the Virgin Mary, La Caridad del Cobre (Our Lady of Charity).

As Juncker moves past the death of Tiburcia (1938) and into the next generation of practitioners, she considers more explicit visual documentation in the form of photographs commissioned by Tiburcia's adopted goddaughter, Hortensia. Indeed nine surviving photographs held (and used) by the descendants to this day demonstrate the accumulated social power held in historical materiality of these altars. The well-worn condition of the photographs attests to their use, and their use creates a narrative of historical legitimization when shown to potential clients. In addition, in a way similar to the confiscation and display of earlier altars in museums, these kinds of exhibits (and the popular manuals that prescribed their use) served to create a popular canon of ritual art.

According to Juncker, while much of Tiburcia's time was spent in promotion of the Afro-Cuban religious society to which she belonged, Hortensia concentrated almost exclusively on developing client relationships, resulting in far more participants involved than in her godmother's case. Moreover, Hortensia was able to initiate far more professional santeros than Tiburcia in her day. But as an ancestor, one still present at the time through her house portrait, Hortensia was able to build on the social base of her godmother and present herself as a continuity of Catholic, *Espiritismo* and Santeria practice, rather than a novelty or upstart. With the overthrow of the Batista regime, the Revolutionary government accused the Catholic Church of conspiring with *Espiritismo* practitioners and thus began to persecute them. More and more African medicinal/rootwork plants are seen in many of these second-generation altar photographs. Echoing the ethnomusicological work of Michael Largey (*Vodou Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism*) Juncker understands this as a growing acknowledgement and celebration of Pan-Africanism as a force linking Santeria and Cuban nationalism, celebrated as indigenous culture by the new Castro government. In contrast to Tiburcia, Hortensia also practiced Palo. While she never photographed her Palo altars, she incorporated much of their symbolism (such as reflective mirrors and fabrics) into her more public altar spaces.

With the rise of the Castro revolution Juncker's narrative shifts, following Hortensia's goddaughter, Iluminada, into New York City's Spanish Harlem of the early 1960s. Finding an *Espiritismo* society already in place, Iluminada joins the society, eventually initiating a compatriot into Santeria. Hortensia's compatriot, Carmen, grew up practicing *Espiritismo* and opened a consulting clinic in New York City. Instead of separate vertical altar constructions (and thus religious discourses) of previous generations, Carmen's altars are horizontal, mixing Amerindian, Marian, Afro-Caribbean women and Orisha spirit doll figurines. Each of these types of spirits or energies plays a specific role in her séances but does not recapitulate any specific Catholic or Yoruba narrative. Rather the altar becomes a bricolage of reconstructed fragments. Elements of ancestral history beyond mundane recovery were metonymically filled in by divination experiences within Carmen's community. Using spirit dolls marked by upper-class clothing and jewelry sacred to female leaders in the *Orisha* traditions, Carmen and her community are drawn into spiritual kinship with a female Haitian slave spirit whose history of economic success and Vodou practice is gradually

(re)constructed by the community over time. These spirit doll (and attendant spirit) are constant iconic companions in the personal household and professional office, creating a transtemporal autonomous community.

In the end Juncker challenges scholars who perceive these kinds of popular artifacts as “kitsch.” Instead Juncker categorizes all these Africana-Atlantic ritual art constructions as based in a “popular sublime.” Arguing for the overall significance of these religious altars in art history, she notes both the filial importance of handmade items and the economic importance of mass-produced items sold in *botanicas* throughout the United States as part of a larger circuit of cultural dissemination and reinforcement.

Juncker’s work is strong evidence for community practices elevating popular presentation and ritual art preservation projects in light of lost history. Situating her overall project as documenting the (re)creation of a historical imaginary, and the reframing of Africana history as one of agency, survival and recovery, her work carries important implications for scholars of contemporary Paganisms. The combination of a material culture, art historical and spatial analysis paradigm is an important challenge to the dominance of both textual investigations and ritual ethnography in the larger field.

At the same time, her investigation of multiple (and separate) religious modalities by practitioners offers new insights into how both Afro-Caribbean and non-Afro-Caribbean Pagans move and use multiple religious strategies in identity construction. And lastly, many Pagan Americans, both Anglo-American and African-American, regularly construct their own altars with a mix of handcrafting and mass-produced items, whether they practice facets of *orisha* religion or not. Those especially studying the use and context of altar construction in general would be wise to consult Juncker’s analysis.

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