



# Vodú Chic: Haitian Religion and the Folkloric Imaginary in Socialist Cuba

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GRETE VIDDAL

## VODÚ CHIC: HAITIAN RELIGION AND THE FOLKLORIC IMAGINARY IN SOCIALIST CUBA

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of Antillean workers – the majority Haitians – arrived in Cuba seeking employment in the expanding sugar industry of the newly independent Cuban republic. While some of these laborers returned to Haiti, many settled permanently in Cuba. How did Haitian migrants and their descendants integrate into Cuban society during ensuing decades?

Historically, Haitian laborers were marginal, disenfranchised, and occupied the lowest socio-economic status in Cuban society. Haitian spiritual practices were misunderstood and feared; even practitioners of other Afro-Caribbean religions such as Santería often characterized Haitian Vodú as diabolical, powerful, and potentially dangerous. Similarly, officials scapegoated Haitians to quell anxieties produced by the social and economic transformations in postcolonial Cuba. As economic conditions in Cuba worsened during the worldwide economic downturn of the 1930s, Haitians were targeted for summary deportations under successive regimes.<sup>1</sup> Until relatively recently, the maintenance of Haitian spiritual beliefs, music, dance, and language in Cuba were associated with rural isolation and poverty. Ethnographers who focused on these communities typically conceptualized them in terms of villagers in the mountains of the eastern provinces preserving their grandparents' picturesque or bizarre Haitian customs, including Vodú.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See James, Millet & Alarcón 1992, Lundhal 1982, McLeod 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Including Pedro 1967, Corbea 1987, Guancho & Moreno 1988, James, Millet & Alarcón 1992.

Today however, the continuation of Haitian customs is no longer linked with isolation, but exactly the opposite: performance troupes, heritage festivals, art exhibitions, the circulation of religious specialists, collaborations with research centers and academia, endorsement by music promoters, and the tourism industry. In socialist Cuba, “folklore” is a valuable resource. Although some Cubans of Haitian descent hide their affiliation, others proudly claim their heritage and this inclination is growing. Policy makers and culture brokers both within the socialist state and internationally have begun to notice, valorize, and promote the arts and traditions of this ethnic subgroup. *Haitiano-cubanos* themselves have found innovative ways to transform the abject into the exotic, and are currently gaining a public voice in cultural production, particularly through folkloric performance. Also, Vodú is spreading across the island and emerging in Havana. Cosmopolitan practitioners of Santería in the capital have begun to study Haitian religion, perhaps as the final frontier of exotica available in a country where travel abroad is restricted.

In the staging of Cuban culture as folklore, spiritual practices expand and take on new meanings in front of wider audiences, becoming theater, art, entertainment, and cultural currency as well as expressions of devotion and technologies of communication with the divine. This essay examines the folkloric imaginary and the economy of folklore as a key process by which Haitians and their cultural practices came to be acknowledged as an element within Cuba’s cultural mix. Rather than delve into the details of Vodú ritual practice in Cuba, I focus on the religion’s changing public face. What forces have shaped the relationship of Haitians as an ethnic minority to national identity in Cuba? The “folklorization” of arts and religion has set in motion the formation of dance troupes,

musical bands, heritage festivals, exhibitions, and publications. This “economy of folklore” creates new careers and novel opportunities for participants, as public arenas offer practitioner/performers new resources and new motivations to deepen their craft, share it, and identify it with a regional or national legacy, reshaping what it means to be of Haitian descent in Cuba. These transformations have come about through the visions and projects of various cultural agents, including performers, intellectuals, researchers, and members of *haitiano-cubano* communities.

### *Haitian Migration to Cuba*

Cuba is unofficially separated into *occidente*, or the western region where Havana is situated, the central part of the island, and *oriente*, the eastern provinces. While Havana has been deemed Cuba’s “Latin American” capital, Santiago, the second-largest city on the island, is known for its “Caribbean” character, because it has a multifaceted and distinctive immigration history and ethnic weave that differentiates it from Havana. It faces the Caribbean Sea and is much closer to Haiti and Jamaica than to the Cuban capital.

The eastern provinces of Cuba were host to two major waves of migration from what is today Haiti, one during the time of the Haitian Revolution and another in the early twentieth century. Both waves of migrants brought well-defined, and quite different, traditions that are still practiced in Cuba today. In this essay, I focus on the spiritual practices that arrived with the agricultural laborers, or *braceros*, who came to cut sugarcane and pick coffee in the initial decades of the twentieth century when both industries were rapidly expanding in eastern Cuba.

Calculations of the numbers of migrants range widely. Labor recruiters paid bribes to circumvent quotas so real numbers were much higher than official statistics kept by consulates and port authorities.<sup>3</sup> Also difficult to calculate is how many cane cutters and coffee pickers returned to Haiti versus those who settled in Cuba permanently. Historians and ethnographers (including Alvarez Estévez, Carr, Lundahl, McLeod, and Pérez de la Riva) have proposed figures ranging from fewer than 200,000 to more than 600,000, depending on sources and methods used.<sup>4</sup> The Casa del Caribe research team that produced the monograph *el Vodú en Cuba* (James, Millet & Alarcón 1992) used algorithms based on the labor force necessary for harvest to arrive at a number of half a million Haitians.

How did the *braceros* fare in Cuba? When the laborers first arrived in Cuba, many lived in barracks and labor camps. Most planned to work for a temporary period in order to save money and return to their countries with the resources to marry or buy a farm. But, as with Manuel, the protagonist of Haitian novelist Jacques Roumain's classic *Masters of the Dew* (1978), who returned penniless to his native village after fifteen years in Cuba, the hoped-for opportunities did not always materialize. Because many sugar refineries or *centrales* paid workers using a system of company scrip that was redeemable only at company stores, inflated prices for basic goods were common. Most Haitian laborers were illiterate, and this hampered their skills at understanding and negotiating their contracts. Working conditions were complicated by periods of inactivity between harvests. Many laborers migrated internally between the *zafra*, or sugar harvest (most

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<sup>3</sup> Lundahl (1982, p. 29) notes, "Graft and trickery in the issues of visas and passports were common enough" and emigration taxes levied on the workers constituted an important source of revenue for the Haitian government.

<sup>4</sup> Estimates for other Antillean workers, such as Jamaicans and Barbadians, range from 75,000 to 130,000. See James, Millet & Alarcón (1992) and Pérez de la Riva (1979).

active from January to May) and coffee harvest (generally September to November) but still faced long periods with little work. Also, as workers gradually established themselves in Cuba, working small plots of land during periods of unemployment, acquiring livestock, forming relationships and marrying locally, returning to Haiti became an increasingly distant dream.

Throughout the Caribbean and the Americas, stereotypes of Haitians have been synonymous with poverty, illiteracy, contagion, and witchcraft.<sup>5</sup> In Cuba, they occupied the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. As commodity prices fell during the depression of the 1930s, laws favoring native workers were enacted in Cuba, and forced repatriations sent thousands of Haitians back to Haiti. Historian Barry Carr explains:

raids and deportations were initiated by the Guardia Rural [Rural Guard] ... antillanos, particularly Haitians, were tracked down in Oriente province by bounty hunters eager to collect the rewards that had been promised to those who helped in their capture. Candidates for repatriation were chosen arbitrarily. They included Haitians who were employed in the sugar or coffee sectors, as well as others who were small landowners. Many of the Haitian coffee cultivators in the Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo areas had lived in Cuba for over 15 years. Cases abounded in which deportees lost belongings, animals, and wages or other monies owed them. They often had to sell their earthly possessions for a song —providing juicy pickings for employers, merchants, and local functionaries ... Most of the deportees were not even allowed to alert their families or collect their belongings before being moved to deportation centers in Santiago ... Fidel Castro, then a seven-year-old Santiago schoolboy, recalled the sad spectacle of Haitian deportees leaving Santia. (Carr 1998:106-7)

McLeod argues that repatriations of the 1930s forced many Haitians deep into the Sierra Maestra mountains and other inaccessible rural areas. He calls them “modern-day maroons” to emphasize their isolation (McLeod 1998:614). James, Millet, and Alarcón

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<sup>5</sup> For example, rumors of disease led Cuban authorities to set up quarantine stations to process incoming Antillean migrants. See McLeod (2010) and Casey (2012) for analysis of the racial and ethnic bias of public health policies, and also for discussion of witchcraft scares trumpeted in the Cuban press.

argue in *El Vodú en Cuba* that secluded and tight-knit rural communities helped Haitians and their descendants maintain their music, dance, festivals, spiritual practices, language, culinary, and farming customs. The authors also note that while Haitians faced discrimination, they were simultaneously admired, even feared, for particular skills. Coming from a country of land shortage and deforestation, they were accustomed to cultivating in tiny spaces like the shoulder of a road or a rocky hillside, and making do with few tools, often only a machete.<sup>6</sup> Haitian migrants were nomadic, following sugar and coffee harvests from as far west as Ciego de Ávila province all the way to Guantánamo, so they brought news from other towns and provinces to the more fixed Cuban *campesinos*. Alexis Alarcón (1988) argues that their renown as storytellers, skills with medicinal herbs, spectacular festivals, and “strong” magic also functioned as defense mechanisms against bigotry. Historian Matthew Casey (2011) finds evidence of Cubans consulting Haitian ritual specialists for cures, noting that reputed healing abilities gave Haitians social status.

Haitians continued to migrate to Cuba in the years surrounding World War II and during the turbulence of the Duvalier regime in the 1950s, albeit in much smaller numbers. Some of these emigrants were petty traders and merchants. When the Cuban Revolution in 1959 curtailed regular boat traffic between the two islands as the Cuban government distanced itself from the right-wing regime of François Duvalier, many lost contact with family members in Haiti.

The decade after the Revolution brought many changes to Cuba’s Haitian heritage communities as the new regime focused on rural development through literacy

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<sup>6</sup> See Richman (2005) for a discussion of the pride taken by Haitian peasants in “intercropping” skills, for example growing corn or other food plants inside fields of cash crops.

campaigns, public health initiatives, new educational opportunities, and the expansion of infrastructure and services in rural areas during the 1960s. But interest in the arts and traditions of this ethnic minority was largely absent until the following decade.<sup>7</sup>

Beginning in the 1970s, professional dance companies sent research teams to visit the *bateyes*<sup>8</sup> in rural sugar- and coffee-producing areas in order to learn Haitian music and dance traditions and adapt this repertoire for inclusion in their own choreographies. The 1980s saw a surge of interest by scholars in *haitiano-cubanos*. A particular research institution in Santiago province – the Casa del Caribe – began to conduct research in Haitian communities. Founded by an intrepid self-taught ethnographer named Joel James Figarola, the Casa del Caribe and its leader argued for a new vision of regional identity that included the contributions of Haitians. And efforts by people of Haitian heritage to bring their customs and spiritual practices to new locations, contexts, and audiences continue and multiply.

### *The Role of Folklore in the Socialist State*

When Fidel Castro's guerilla army toppled the regime of president Fulgencio Batista and took power in January 1959, the new government took charge of a nation rife with social inequities and class and race disparities. Many citizens lacked access to basic health care and education. Illiteracy was high, particularly in rural areas. The revolutionary government undertook development projects and expansion of social services. After the Revolution, Haitians resident in Cuba were given citizenship and they

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<sup>7</sup> Two essays by Alberto Pedro Diaz profiling the customs of Haitian immigrants in the province of Camagüey published in *Étnología y folklore* in 1966 and 1967 are notable exceptions.

<sup>8</sup> A *batey* is a term used in the Spanish Caribbean to refer to workers' quarters near cane fields or sugar refineries. Today, many Haitian descendants still live and work near sugar towns. In rural zones of coffee production, the clustered homes of Haitian descendants tend to be referred to as *bateyes* as well.



and their families benefited from the new initiatives.

The government also sought to integrate previously disenfranchised sectors of society through the arts. Havana had an internationally recognized ballet. Now, the socialist “new society” would also have a folkloric troupe of the highest quality.

Ethnomusicologist Katherine Hagedorn (2001) describes how the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional was founded in 1962 to represent the nation’s Afro-Cuban heritage, turning the performance traditions of marginalized communities into national symbols. From the beginning, the company performed not only secular dances such as Cuban rumba, but also choreographies drawing from Afro-Cuban religious rituals. By staging black spiritual practices in an acceptably secular format, the new socialist regime could affirm and valorize Cuba’s creole racial mix.

While Fernando Ortiz, the “father of Cuban ethnography,” organized performances of Havana-based Santería and Abakuá drumming and rituals to accompany his public lectures as early as the 1930s, only after the socialist revolution was folkloric performance funded and professionalized on a widespread basis. During the early 1960s, the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional became a national symbol, and soon thereafter regional counterparts were founded, or existing groups, like Folclórico de Oriente in Santiago, were reorganized and reinvigorated across the island. These folkloric ensembles often recruited members among knowledgeable percussionists and dancers from Afro-Cuban recreational societies or religious communities. Armed with training in modern dance, theater, and performance technique, graduates of new art academies such as Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA) in Havana were sent to develop cultural activities throughout Cuba. Many were assigned as producers, directors, and choreographers for new folkloric

companies.

A prominent “economy of the arts” grew under the new regime in Cuba. Government-funded cultural centers providing programming, events, and youth activities were constructed even in tiny villages. The socialist state sought to showcase the unity of its multiracial society through vigorous promotion and funding for sports, the arts, and *grupos folklóricos* – typically staged manifestations of Afro-Cuban cultural activities. Flourishing cultural and artistic expression confirmed that the socialist regime could create a better society. Race and class inequalities were being overcome; arts were no longer the domain of the bourgeoisie. In Cuba, even peasants, tobacco factory workers, or bricklayers would be participants in civic life. And the role of the island’s African-descended population in the formation of national identity was publicly performed in the arena of “folklore.” Rather than being an uncertain or precarious occupation, performing arts became a secure profession, as professional musicians, dancers, and choreographers became salaried employees of the state. Eventually, a Ministry of Culture, a union of writers and artists (UNEAC), and a range of municipal bureaucracies and arts cooperatives were formed to certify the various ranks of professional performers and also to oversee and distribute resources to *aficionado* (“enthusiast”) groups, including *portadores* (“heritage performers”).

At the time of the socialist revolution, the music and dance of Haitian heritage settlements were largely unknown to urban Cuban audiences and were not recognized as valid ingredients in Cuba’s “ethnic stew” of artistic traditions on a national level.<sup>9</sup>

However, a few researchers, event producers, and other culture brokers began to notice

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<sup>9</sup> The seminal Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz (1940) characterized Cuban culture as an *ajiaco*, a stew made from various ingredients with each item contributing to the flavorful whole.

these art forms and appreciate their potential.

One of a cadre of influential post-revolutionary cultural producers in Santiago province is Antonio “Toni” Pérez Martínez, who directed the Folclórico de Oriente from 1972 until 1991, and is currently the Artistic Director of the Casa del Caribe. Toni Pérez graduated from the Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA) in 1971 and was assigned to Santiago province to help Folclórico de Oriente expand and professionalize. He realized that the troupe had a limited repertoire and decided to focus on developing new choreographies that would distinguish it from Havana’s Conjunto Folklórico Nacional.

Town and city dwellers in Cuba sometimes trekked to rural areas for seasonal work during the sugarcane or coffee harvests. Many of the dancers from the Folclórico de Oriente were from poor families and had grown up working as seasonal cane cutters or coffee pickers in Haitian communities and were therefore familiar with Haitian language, music, and festivals. Toni Pérez remarks that they were thus able to “enter that world, which was a closed world. At that time, the Haitians manifested their traditions only inside their own communities ... I’m talking about the 50s and 60s, before Haitians [in Cuba] were doctors or engineers ... things have changed since then.”<sup>10</sup>

Pérez believed that Folclórico de Oriente should shed the mindset that Cuban folklore consisted of rumba and dances based on Santería religious rituals, traditions originally from western Cuba. He recounts how the group pushed into new territory, establishing a vision of regional identity that included Haitian traditions.

It was September of 1972 and I had been in Santiago for only a month when Folclórico de Oriente was invited to perform in Havana in December. The group had practically no repertoire and it was already September. So I said: “Well, what will we do? We have a two-hour show to do at the Mella Theater in Havana and we have no repertoire.” We had

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<sup>10</sup> My translation from an interview conducted on December 15, 2008 in Santiago de Cuba.

a few tidbits of rumba, some vignettes based on Santiago carnival, and that was that. One of the members of the group says, “When my family used to go to Barrancas to pick coffee, we watched the Haitian dances in the evenings.” The guys began to sing and move and say “I think the step goes like this...” and I realized that between all of them they had clear memories of what they had seen, and that we could create a show from their notions of what the dance looked like. I also remember there was one person who said, “Yeah, but this is a Haitian thing, can we arrive in Havana with this? It’s Haitian culture and has nothing to do with us.” And I said, “What is our culture? That is, who are we?” Well, we presented ourselves in Havana with gagá, a Haitian dance, and chancletas, a local country dance.<sup>11</sup> Tremendous success in Havana. That was in December of 1972 at the Teatro Mella, tremendous success. Because the public was seeing something different. The Havana public was eager to see new things. Gagá made an impact. The national press supported the show. When we returned home after 15 days in Havana, we began to take a good look at ourselves, our local traditions. We realized that we have tremendous vitality in Oriente. We have a vast field in which to research and work, and so far the group has continued in this direction.<sup>12</sup>

Pérez formed teams to research “authentic local folklore.” The village of Barrancas mentioned in the vignette above is a *batey* of sugar cane cutters near the town of Palma Soriano in Santiago province. Locally known for its striking processions, the gagá band from Barrancas had been invited to parade in the carnivals of nearby towns for years.<sup>13</sup> Guided by Folclórico de Oriente member Berta Armiñan, who had grown up accompanying her family to work the sugarcane harvests in Barrancas, Pérez and his

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<sup>11</sup> Spelled *rara* in Haitian Creole, the dance glossed as *gagá* in Spanish is traditionally performed during Holy Week in Haitian heritage communities in Cuba and the Dominican Republic. Much like their counterparts in Haiti, gagá bands in Cuba form processions and march around showing off skills such as fast footwork, fire-eating, juggling machetes, walking across broken glass, or lifting and balancing heavy objects in the air using only the teeth, including tables decked with glasses of liquid. Cuban ethnographer Joel James remarked that the gagás he observed in the village of Barrancas in the 1980s included theater and social commentary, such as skits about the police or the rural guard trying to capture a Haitian, who, playing the clown, fooled them, and escaped (James 1996). While gagá is overtly a festive secular *comparsa* or procession dance, it is also observably linked with spiritual practices. Gagá celebrations culminate with a bonfire setting ablaze a straw-stuffed burlap “devil,” accompanied by elders’ libations and prayers, to drive bad omens from the community. For more on gagá, see Viddal 2010. For an excellent monograph on *rara*, see McAlister 2002. The second dance Pérez mentions, *chancletas*, is a dance of Iberian origin featuring wooden sandals that clack against the floor.

<sup>12</sup> My translation from interviews on December 15, 2008 and April 29, 2009, in Santiago de Cuba.

<sup>13</sup> Cuban towns hold their carnivals in July and August after the finish of the sugar harvest.

team spent a month in the village, living in tents, learning musical and dance traditions. He reminisces, “We realized that here was a marvelous world for us to discover, from the standpoint of the spiritual and cultural wealth they possessed. We had an obligation to begin to cherish these traditions and see them as our part of our regional heritage, to be able to bring them to the stage.”<sup>14</sup> Pérez recounts that he invited people from Barrancas (and eventually other communities as well) to the city, sometimes in groups of three, four, or five, to give classes and teach. They lived in the homes of members of Folclórico Oriente for a fortnight or a month. The Haitian communities began to notify Pérez and his team when feasts, festivals, or religious rituals occurred, inviting them to attend. After adapting the gagá processions of Holy Week for Folclórico de Oriente, Pérez added Haitian merengue. He also eventually created choreographies based on dances, movements, gestures, and salutations he witnessed during Vodú rituals, but this came later.

Pérez was influenced by the work of a famous Soviet choreographer, Igor Moiseyev. The Moiseyev school focused on bringing the technical preparation of the classical dancer to popular folk performing arts. It took elements of village arts and adapted them for the stage, with drama, technique, and contemporary design.<sup>15</sup> Discussing the process of modifying festive traditions and spiritual practices into folkloric performance for the stage, Pérez remarks, “They did it [gagá] in their manner; it was a bit diabolical, we’ll put it that way. What I mean is, it was suffused with their witchery and conjuring. These were isolated communities, even looked down upon by the

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<sup>14</sup> Interview December 15, 2008, my translation.

<sup>15</sup> Pérez was later able to travel to the Soviet Union to apprentice in Moiseyev’s company and to complete a Masters degree, returning to Santiago afterwards to continue working with Folclórico de Oriente. For more on Moiseyev’s legacy, see Shay 2002.

same Cuban, the same black Cubans, who lived in their areas. At the time there was no vision, no visual blueprint, for how to stage these traditions as art, as a national art.” He continued, “Well, the goal was to bring this to the stage as a technically sophisticated professional piece, not to repeat exactly what they were doing in the village, but bring it as a performance.”<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that gagá band members from Barrancas had themselves already modified their Holy Week gagá processions into formats appropriate for carnival parades in nearby towns.<sup>17</sup> Also, by the 1970s, even people living in rural areas would have had exposure to state-sponsored cultural projects that adapted local customs into folklore shows. We should not assume that during early collaboration between Folclórico de Oriente and Gagá de Barrancas, the professionals of Folclórico de Oriente were the only active partners in adapting local traditions for the stage.

Toni Pérez commented on changes he perceived in the Haitian communities after the socialist revolution and how these trends supported the formation of performance groups: “The Revolution changed a lot of things. The children of these Haitian workers in the *bateyes* began to get scholarships. They attended trade schools, universities ... there they mixed with the sons and daughters of industrial workers or of Cuban peasants or whomever. They begin to share their dances, songs, and customs in *aficionado* [hobby] clubs. On holidays they went back to their communities, so they did not lose their language, did not lose their customs ... And those same students, *pichones*<sup>18</sup> as we called them, also began to communicate and network amongst themselves.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Interview April 29, 2009, my translation.

<sup>17</sup> From a conversation with Alfonso Castillo Pol, a leader of the Gagá of Barrancas, January 14, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> *Pichón* means chick or baby bird in Spanish. Although it can be used to refer to Cubans of any heritage, it has been more typically used to designate Cubans of Haitian, Jamaican, or other West Indian heritage. While some consider it derogatory, others insist that it is merely slang. I found it common for people within

While professional folklore troupes began to incorporate Haitian material into their repertoire in the 1970s, families and communities of Haitian heritage also began working with culture officials to form state-supported performance groups. These are categorized as *portador* groups – heritage performers or cultural stewards. Maria del Rosales Quintana Matos, employed during the 1970s as a dance instructor at the local *casa de cultura*, explained that at the time there were no folkloric groups in the area of Las Tunas. She approached members of “Bella Flor de Fleitas,” a gagá band that paraded in local *bateyes* during Holy Week, about creating an artistic performance group.<sup>20</sup>

In 1974 a company was formed under the auspices of the municipal culture office, directed by Silvia “Titina” Hilmo Sandy, a ritual specialist and the matriarch of a large family, many of whom were active in the group. They named the company Petit Dansé. At first they danced *libre* or freely, as they would at home in the village; later there was rehearsed choreography. Del Rosales Quintana noted that at first the project was not well accepted. The public in Las Tunas was not used to seeing performances that included lying down on broken glass or throwing machetes; it seemed too “barbaric.” However, they eventually became enthusiastic.

Titina’s grandson Carlos directs the troupe today. He explained that at first the group presented ostensibly secular dances like Haitian merengue, country polkas or minuets, and gagá. Later, Titina began to adapt dances from sacred occasions to the stage. Performer Gabriel “Gravier” Expret, a seasoned drummer and dancer, was recruited to become a consultant and instructor for Folclórico Oriente in Santiago. Carlos notes that

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the Haitian heritage community to use it offhandedly. See Moore 2008 and Hume 2011 for a discussion of the term’s pejorative connotations.

<sup>19</sup> Interview December 15, 2008, my translation.

<sup>20</sup> Interview February 24, 2010, in Las Tunas.

Gravier eventually became one of the “great voices” disseminating Haitian culture in Cuba. Gradually, *haitiano-cubanos* marshaled folklore as their own resource (not waiting to be “discovered” by professional programmers or ethnographers). Today, remarked Carlos, troupes presenting Haitian traditions are on the increase, there is even a Haitian heritage ensemble performing at a beach hotel in the resort town of Guardalavaca in nearby Holguín Province.<sup>21</sup>

### *Vodú and the Casa del Caribe*

Actor, dramaturge, and historian Joel James Figarola was active in post-revolutionary Cuba’s new cultural movements and eventually founded the Casa del Caribe in the city of Santiago de Cuba in 1982, an institute devoted to researching and presenting local culture. He remained its director until his death in June 2006. While a number of institutions devoted to the study of Cuban history and cultural identity were founded after the Revolution, the Casa del Caribe has been distinctive in its promotion of Cuba’s bond with the Caribbean, its interest in migrant communities in *oriente*, and its role as a producer and promoter of performance arts, sometimes through unorthodox means. Interestingly, it is an institution created in order to produce a festival, rather than primarily to conduct research, although research is also integral to its mission. This emphasis on performance shaped the spread of non-institutional religions, including Vodú, into the Cuban public space.

Before the founding of Casa del Caribe, James directed the Department of

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<sup>21</sup> Interview February 24, 2010, in Las Tunas.



Dramaturgy and Programming of the Cabildo Teatral in Santiago.<sup>22</sup> During this time, in the late 1970s, a number of people involved in experimental theater in Santiago were eager to include local tradition in their artistic productions. They wanted to create a form of theater compatible with socialist ideals and congruent with Cuba as an “Afro-Latin”<sup>23</sup> nation. Avoiding presenting conventional European masterpieces or repeating North American trends, they looked instead to popular culture for inspiration and material (Alarcón 2007). Joel James and members of his theater group were invited to Carifesta, which was held in Havana in 1979.<sup>24</sup> For the first time, they saw a variety of performance troupes from other Caribbean nations. They set out to organize a similar event in Santiago. From the beginning, including marginalized sectors of Cuban society such as the Haitian laborers and their descendants were part of the objective. James organized Santiago’s first “Festival de las Artes Escénicas de Origen Caribeño” (Festival of Caribbean Performance Arts) in 1981. Later known as the Festival del Caribe and Festival del Fuego, the event has taken place every year since.

Alexis Alarcón, one of the co-authors of *el Vodú en Cuba* (James, Millet & Alarcón 1992) recounted this story, which takes place during the early days of the Casa del Caribe project and illustrates the budding recognition of Haitian religion.<sup>25</sup>

Joel wanted to observe rural traditions and I had family in the coffee-growing region around the village of La Caridad in the Sierra Maestra mountains, so I invited him to spend a weekend in the countryside visiting

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<sup>22</sup> The name “Cabildo Teatral Santiago” for the collective connotes a brother/sisterhood of theater people, or guild. Historically, *cabildos* were mutual-aid and recreation associations formed by enslaved Africans in colonial Cuba, based on *cofradías*, the brotherhoods or guilds of medieval Spain. Later, the word became attached to a variety of organizations based around a common vision of ethnic pride or fraternity.

<sup>23</sup> Fidel Castro first referred to Cuba as an “Afro-Latin” nation during Cuba’s involvement in Africa, specifically during a speech about Angola in April 1976 (see Ayorinde 2004, Moore 1988).

<sup>24</sup> A festival organized under the auspices of CARICOM that gathers artists, musicians, and writers to promote the arts and folklore of the Caribbean. See [www.carifesta.net](http://www.carifesta.net) for more details.

<sup>25</sup> The account I offer here is a translation compiled from interviews on April 30, 2009 and April 28, 2010. Alarcón also tells this story in a published interview: “Joel James y el camino de los luases” (2007).

the farm where I grew up. We were walking back to my father's house after a night of watching drumming, dancing, singing, and possession trances. Joel said to me, "Alarcón, this is a goldmine!" I responded, "What goldmine?" He replied: "This! These cultural expressions we have witnessed. We have to document this!" Really, I was unsure what he was referring to. A former batey—a cluster of thatch-roofed houses belonging to a group of Haitian-descendants—was located right next to my family's farm. In previous decades, the Haitians had been laborers on local coffee plantations. After the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, the residents of the batey worked for the agricultural cooperatives that replaced large-scale land ownership, and also tended small private gardens. I had grown up next to the Haitian community. Their drumming and rituals were ever-present. Many Cubans, whether of African or Spanish descent, included revelry and music in their religious practices, including folk Catholics, Spiritists, and adherents of Afro-Cuban religions such as Santería. I didn't see my father's neighbors as something unique. But Joel had a consciousness of the importance of these cultural expressions. He believed that strengthening local culture was a way of strengthening national culture. During our next visit, he asked some of the members of the community to bring their instruments over and the sons of Haitian-born Nicolás Casal played drums at my father's house. Joel explained that what we were seeing was Vodú, the Haitian religion we had read about in books by Courlander and Metraux. He talked about the possibility of organizing a group of Haitian descendants from La Caridad into a performance group and inviting them to events in the city.<sup>26</sup>

Joel James and his team are often credited with "discovering" the magnitude of Haitian cultural influence in Santiago Province. Until the inquiries promoted by the Casa del Caribe, Cuban ethnographers interested in the island's black heritage had largely focused on the provenance of cultural elements brought by African slaves. Ethnographers and historians had theorized that the origins of the religion called Santería lie in what is now Yorubaland in Nigeria, speculated about surviving "Congo" cultural practices from Central Africa and located the ancestral home of the Cuban Abakuá secret societies in the Cross River region of what is now Calabar province in Nigeria. Studies of the influence

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<sup>26</sup> The group from La Caridad made its debut at the 1983 Festival del Caribe and continues to participate.

of various regions of Spain on Cuban customs and idioms were also abundant.<sup>27</sup> Few researchers, however, had been interested in the contributions of hundreds of thousands of Haitian laborers who arrived in eastern Cuba in the early twentieth century. While James was not the only intellectual to investigate Cuba's Haitian heritage, he was a key figure. He publicly promoted and valorized this ingredient in Cuba's "ethnic stew."

James taught his cohort of actors, dramaturges, and theater producers to become grassroots anthropologists, known for their immersive style of fieldwork. Rarely did they conduct formal interviews or take notes visibly. Instead, researchers were encouraged to submerge themselves in the everyday lives of the communities they were studying. He mused: "We tried to live as they lived, drink what they drank, eat what they ate" (James 2007:109; my translation). Eventually, the team attended hundreds of rituals in different parts of eastern Cuba (Alarcón 2007). Notably, folklore has functioned as a vector of social change. Contact with ethnographers and opportunities for public performance have created new contexts for Vodú.

### *Magical Performance in an Atheist Landscape*

The activities of the newly formed Casa del Caribe, with its intrepid and largely self-taught research teams, were not without controversy in the early years. The Revolution was officially atheist and did not support religious expression. Authorities tried to minimize mass gatherings outside of officially recognized events. While many Cubans continued various spiritual practices and retained a sense that the aid of the spirit world was important to health, prosperity, luck, and happiness, the regime believed that socialist education would gradually fade beliefs in magic and religion into acceptable

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<sup>27</sup> See for example see Ortiz 1929, 1950, Lachatañere 1961, Cabrera 1992.

folkloric renderings of former spiritual fervor. As the Casa del Caribe endeavored to present and showcase Caribbean performance arts, producers asked local practitioners to stage their spiritual traditions for the public, with the understanding that they would omit ritual secrets or knowledge meant only for the initiated.

Putting Vodú on the stage in 1983 caused a stir. Founding Casa del Caribe researcher Abelardo Larduet remembers, “The Party made a fuss. The Ministry of Culture was less problematic; at least intellectuals ran it. But people from State Security came to the first Vodú ceremony and discussed stopping it. Joel had to fight some battles.”<sup>28</sup> Alexis Alarcón confirms, “There was tension with the authorities, who had a hard time understanding Joel's ideas. But he was irascible and told the government and the Party to let him work. He asked the authorities if they wanted the drums drumming in favor of the Revolution or against it.”<sup>29</sup>

James’s commitment to not only including the Haitian heritage groups but making them a central element of each festival bewildered many. He recounts, “There came a time when it seemed like the idea of the festival would shipwreck. People asked things like, ‘what the devil are you doing with these Haitian things?’ But, they helped us anyway.” During the early years many local intellectuals were appalled by what the Casa del Caribe presented. However, they were also bowled over by the emotional impact of the performances and events. James recounts, “They were surprised that these things, which they had considered marginal, of the uneducated, were so rich and could stir them” (James 2007:109; my translation). Larduet remembers, “The Casa del Caribe brought the Haitian groups to Festival del Caribe, and people were surprised to see how prevalent and

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<sup>28</sup> Interview, February 14, 2009, in Santiago de Cuba, my translation.

<sup>29</sup> Interview, April 28, 2010, in Santiago de Cuba, my translation. The anecdote also appears in “Joel James y el camino de los luases” (Alarcón 2007).

strong these communities were. Cubans had thought of themselves as Latin American, but our Haitian heritage communities reflected Cuba's Caribbean-ness."<sup>30</sup>

Even after the festival achieved prominence in the ensuing years, the road was sometimes rocky. When Casa del Caribe partnered in creating a documentary profiling a Haitian community in the municipality of Palma Soriano in Santiago province, the Communist Party of Palma Soriano protested Casa del Caribe's efforts. Although the documentary, *Huellas*,<sup>31</sup> later won first prize at a film festival in Moscow, in Cuba local prejudices had yet to be overcome (James 2007).

The Casa del Caribe continued its mission to dignify popular culture in front of the Cuban public, and James recognized additional benefits, "I believe we have also increased the self-esteem of the participating groups." Two of the Vodú priests who collaborated in the filming of *Huellas*, the brothers Pablo and Tato Milanés<sup>32</sup>, have since become sought-after spokespersons on Vodú. James (2007:113 ) suggested, "Pablo is not the same person, Tato is not the same person, in terms of their relationship with their own spiritual system, and their relationships with the lay public" (my translation). The Milanés brothers have since traveled throughout Cuba and been invited abroad as members of Cuban delegations to folk festivals in Haiti, Brazil, and Curaçao. In November 2008, Pablo Milanés was invited to offer a Vodú invocation at the "Cuba em Pernambuco" festival in Brazil. Mounted by a spirit, he fell to the floor and ran sharp machetes across his body without injury: a cultural ambassador from a socialist realm offering a magical spectacle of trance possession.

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<sup>30</sup> Interview, February 14, 2009, in Santiago de Cuba, my translation.

<sup>31</sup> The film, released in 1986, was directed by Roberto Román González and produced by Estudios Cinematográficos de la TV Cubana, with Casa del Caribe consulting. *Huellas* means "footprints" or "traces."

<sup>32</sup> Not to be confused with the Latin Grammy-winning Cuban singer-songwriter also named Pablo Milanés.

The Casa del Caribe's projects initiated exchanges between different collaborators. Members of folkloric groups got to know each other and spend time together in the context of the Festival. Although there had always been communication and interchange between the various Haitian communities, the Festival was a further opportunity for them to strengthen ties, exchange information, and work together. The Festival has been an important factor in motivating Haitian descendants in *oriente* to maintain their customs.

*Thompson: Reggaeton or Grandma's Vodú?*

Although I first visited Cuba in 1998, it wasn't until graduate school that I was able to spend extended time on the island. Between 2008 and 2010, I lived in Santiago de Cuba for fifteen months and traveled to towns and villages throughout the eastern provinces to attend events, festivals, and religious ceremonies linked with *haitiano-cubano* communities.<sup>33</sup> Since my previous research indicated that folkloric troupes are a significant vehicle for valorizing *haitiano-cubano* culture, I collaborated with performers specializing in Cuba's Haitian heritage. I also met practitioners of Vodú and attended rituals. Scholars, research institutes, festival organizers, and other culture brokers helped me understand how Cubans of Haitian descent have or have not been formally integrated into the national imaginary, as well as how policymakers have officially studied, ignored, discouraged, or sponsored *haitiano-cubano* cultural practices.

When I visited small towns in Santiago province with concentrations of Haitian descendants, I was surprised to see how many communities had amateur folkloric dance

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<sup>33</sup> I first visited Cuba to participate in a two-week dance program hosted by a professional folkloric troupe, the Ballet Folklórico Cutumba, and returned annually over the next decade.

and drum troupes. In the village of Thompson, I counted more members in “Grupo Folklórico Thompson” than children enrolled in its tiny one-room school. Many villagers spent their leisure time practicing and perfecting songs, rhythms, and dance steps. I found devotion to the calendar of Vodú rituals valued both as an expression of the troupe’s authenticity and as a spiritual bond that knit the community together. Troupe membership prompts thoughtful consideration of how to perform dance steps or drum sequences, the meanings of words and songs, and focuses new generations on improving their execution of these Haitian customs. Salsa, reggaeton, rap, and other popular genres hold less sway, as does absorption into more prevalent Cuban spiritual traditions such as Santería. Today, folkloric groups – initially sponsored by culture programmers and institutions, later springing from the efforts of *haitiano-cubanos* themselves – are a key aspect in both maintaining and popularizing Haitian identity and culture in eastern Cuba.

*With the Spirits at the Milanés’*

Brothers Tato and Pablo Milanés, whose father emigrated from Haiti in the 1920s, are prosperous farmers who live in the Sierra Maestra mountains in eastern Cuba. They are also well-known priests of Vodú. Although Tato lives on a mountaintop farm with no electricity, plumbing, or vehicle (besides his horse), clients from as far away as the capital seek him out for consultations. In October 2008, accompanied by colleagues from Casa del Caribe, I visited him. Arriving disheveled after crossing two rivers and revving up a twisty mountain trail in the institute’s jeep, we found a youth in low-slung jeans, gold chains, and a fashionable cap sitting on Tato’s patio, fiddling with his cell phone and complaining about a lack of reception. The young man explained that he lived in Havana,

but had made a journey to the farm for in-depth work to complement a consultation he had received during Tato's last visit to the capital. Vodú has spread from rural enclaves to urban centers. Both Tato and Pablo regularly travel to Havana where they are eagerly awaited by clients and spiritual godchildren and lavishly hosted.

Pablo has become a something of a spokesperson for the Haitian community in Cuba. He is invited to festivals and events as a keynote presence, and has visited Haiti three times as the guest of cultural NGOs. He also directs a folkloric troupe that parades every year in the Festival del Caribe, and often supervises a public ritual during the festival. Although government officials were not always supportive, the Casa del Caribe pushed boundaries soon after its founding by staging not only orderly re-enactments of rituals presented as dance shows, but presenting actual rituals as a part of its festival programming. This continues today. The Casa del Caribe's budget provides funds for rum, sacrificial animals, and other ritual necessities during festivals. Practitioners appreciate institutional support in buying sacrificial animals and other items for the spirits. I have spoken with many practitioners who collectively exclaim that they feel that rituals staged for the public are as "authentic" as any they might do at home. Those attending the public rituals, whether general festival-goers, or television crews or anthropologists, confirm the status of Haitian spiritual culture within Cuban national identity.

Use of the word Vodú is relatively recent in place of "serving the spirits" or "serving the mysteries." Practitioners tend to describe events as "parties for the saints" (*fiestas del santo*) rather than "ceremonies" or "rituals." Some are held to coincide with saint's days, others whenever a family can raise the resources or receives help from an



institute or organization. The spirits are the guests of honor who will attend in the form of trance possession. They are invited and coaxed with singing, music, dance, and attractive tables or altars set with food and drink.

In April 2010 I attended a three-day celebration for the Vodú spirits at the home of Pablo Milanés in Pilon del Cauto in the Sierra Maestra mountains in Santiago province. The penetration of institutions into many *haitiano-cubano* communities runs deep. Amateur folkloric performance troupes have become ubiquitous, and almost all are tied to culture bureaucracies that provide budgets for costumes and transportation, however modest. Joined by bonds of friendship and collegiality, the director of the Casa del Caribe, Orlando Vérges, attended Pablo Milanés' spirit fete, bringing along cases of rum, and a truckload of other party guests, including Santiago's most famous sculptor, Alberto Lescay, and a young group of practicing Paleros from the city. Institutional sponsorship of rituals in Cuba is not unlike current practices I observed in Haiti, whereby Haitians living in the first world diaspora fund Vodou events in their home village, or intellectuals, artists, politicians, or rock bands patronize large Vodou temples. Many Vodú families in Cuba have ties to institutions, and their ritual specialists regularly preside over public rituals at festivals.

The term that believers use for these events – calling them “parties” for the spirits – sheds light on perceptions of authenticity. A fete may be enhanced by institutional donations of food and drink, VIP guests, and media coverage. Vodú practice in Cuba also includes the work spiritual consultants do in healing clients, private magics, initiations, or small family events, and they do guard their professional secrets, but as the above

enhancement suggests, notions of “pure” ceremonies hosted for and by “insider” groups can be illusory.

### *Vodú in Cuba*

What is the relationship of Cuban Vodú to Haitian Vodou? It can be tempting to classify the Cuban version as an “antique” practice, an older version of Haitian Vodou, preserved by lack of contact with its homeland. Cuban Vodú does reflect characteristics of the *braceros*. Haiti of the early twentieth century was more regional (and many *braceros* were from southern Haiti) and less centralized before deforestation, land seizures by elites and by U.S. companies, and military occupation displaced peasants to the cities and abroad. Rural Vodou practice was largely familial, with the patriarch or matriarch as ritual specialist tending inherited spirits called *loa*.<sup>34</sup> Today, urbanization is a standardizing factor, and many temples in the capital maintain a branch in the lead ritual specialist’s home village.<sup>35</sup> It is more hierarchical, with more elaborate initiations. While Vodú in Cuba has many common points with the family-centered practices of rural Haiti of decades past, it is not a museum of 1920s Vodou, but has adapted and changed in its new environment.<sup>36</sup>

What is the relationship of Vodú to other spiritual practices in Cuba? Santería, the most emblematic Afro-Cuban spiritual practice and more formally called Regla de Ocha,

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<sup>34</sup> In current Haitian Creole orthography *lwa* is the common spelling convention. Spelling variants also occur for the names of deities, for example “Erzulie” or “Ezili” is typically rendered as “Ecili” in Cuba.

<sup>35</sup> My thanks to ethnographer Katherine Smith for this observation.

<sup>36</sup> For more on Cuban Vodú vis-à-vis Haitian belief systems, see Alexis Alarcón’s “¿Vodú en Cuba o Vodú cubano?” (1988).

is linked to beliefs brought to Cuba by slaves from the Yoruba ethnic region of Nigeria.<sup>37</sup> It has become a ubiquitous symbol of Cuba's African heritage, and the religion's brightly costumed dancing deities adorn labels of rum bottles, postcards, and hotel restaurant menus. However, Santería emerged in western Cuba, specifically Havana and Matanzas, only spreading to *oriente* in the early twentieth century (Wirtz 2007). Now common in urban areas, its pantheon of charismatic deities and colorful symbols have penetrated other spiritual practices, as for example when believers use Santería vocabulary, explaining that the Vodú *loa* Ecili Freda is "like Ochun" or the deity Lucero "is the Congo version of Elegua." The various branches of Regla de Palo or Regla Congo have also fluidly entered *oriente* from the west, although initiation remains much less expensive than in Santería, and many practitioners use it in conjunction with other systems.

Traditionally, eastern Cuba has been a stronghold of Spiritism (*espiritismo*) and folk Catholic devotions such as celebrating saint's days, making pilgrimages, and fulfilling *promesas* ("promises" or resolutions) to secure holy intercession. "Muerterismo" is becoming a more common term to describe spiritist ancestor veneration (see Millet 1999). And, there is *bembé de sao*. In Cuban vernacular a *bembé* refers to a party for the spirits, and *sao* means "bush," connoting backwoods, so a *bembé de sao* is roughly translatable as "bembé of the bush" or a rural spirit ritual, usually mixing practices from various belief systems, mirroring the background of local practitioners, from *espiritistas* to *vodouistas*.

Whether and how Vodú in Cuba has incorporated influences from other Cuban

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<sup>37</sup> For discussion of the history of Santería, see for example Bolívar Aróstegui 1990, Palmié 2002, and Brown 2003.

practices depends on the community and practitioner. Spiritism is visible in the many “stair-step” style altars (as opposed to flat on a table or on the ground) constructed by Vodú practitioners in Holguín province, a stronghold of *espiritismo*. The Haitian language terms “manbo” and “oungan” for ritual specialists are sometimes replaced by the “santero” and “santera” more familiar to Cuban clients. In both Barrancas and Santiago city I met specialists who treated clients with a mixture of Vodú practices taught to them by their Haitian fathers and Spiritist philosophies cherished by their Cuban mothers. Many *haitiano-cubanos* hold their biggest spiritual festivities during the month of December, rather than on the saints’ days traditional in Haiti, reflecting the importance in Cuba of celebrating Santa Barbara on the 4th and San Lazaro on the 17th. Some *loa*, like Gran Buá (Gran Bwa in Haiti), are relatively unimportant in Haiti, while in Cuba the opposite is true.<sup>38</sup> Gran Buá is regularly feted at celebrations across the eastern provinces of Cuba and is an important inherited deity in a number of Vodú families.

Today, a few *haitiano-cubanos* are able to travel to Haiti. As mentioned earlier, the Milanés brothers, likely Cuba’s most famous *oungans*, have visited Haiti as guests of cultural organizations. The Creole Choir of Cuba has made several trips to Haiti, most recently to perform in displaced-persons camps following the 2010 earthquake.<sup>39</sup> Some Cubans of Haitian heritage have asked Cuban doctors completing missions in Haiti to search for family members or befriended Haitian medical students on scholarship in Cuba. It is possible for Cubans who can prove a Haitian parent or grandparent to get a tourist visa from the Haitian Embassy in Havana, forgoing a more complex process

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<sup>38</sup> During informal conversations between 2008 and 2011, Pablo Milanés confirmed my observations, remarking that during his visits to Haiti he was surprised by the lack of attention dedicated to Gran Buá.

<sup>39</sup> Conversation with members of the choir on October 1, 2011. The choir, known as Grupo Vocal Desandann in Cuba, sings a repertoire in Haitian language.

necessitating letters of invitation. I know of two members of folkloric groups who successfully secured visas and managed to raise the funds for one of the twice-weekly flights to Port au Prince from Santiago. Both bought items like jeans and watches in Haiti's markets and sold them for a profit on the black market in Cuba, allowing them to recoup travel costs and plan the next trip. One lamented that he had not be able to attend any Vodou events while in Haiti or find his Haitian family members. He stayed in the home of Cuban doctors running a clinic, and spent all his time shopping.

### *New Festivals Dedicated to Haitiano-Cubano Culture*

The penetration of the folkloric imaginary into Haitian heritage communities in Cuba is deep. Festivals serve as points where *haitiano-cubanos* perform their culture for the general public and as opportunities for people spread across the island to network, dance together, and engage in all-night jam sessions.

The Eva Gaspar Festival in Ciego de Avila province was established in 1999 to commemorate the legacy of Eva Gaspar, who immigrated to Cuba from Haiti in 1918, becoming a tireless promoter of her native culture in her new country. It takes place in a town dominated by a sugarmill and its large smokestack. A rail line transports cane. The small station house still proclaims "Violeta" although the municipality was re-named "Primero de Enero" after the socialist revolution.<sup>40</sup> With its enormous sugar-processing plant, the town has been a destination for cane cutters and processors for decades. In the early twentieth century, many of the laborers were Haitians and their descendants still live locally.

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<sup>40</sup> "Primero de Enero" or "First of January" referes to the date of the revolution in 1959. Subsequently, many towns, streets, parks, and factories in Cuba were re-named.

Every year the festival includes a country fair with children's rides and snack vendors. It also features performances, an academic symposium, exhibits of traditional Haitian handicrafts and culinary arts, and "burning the devil" or *quema del diablo* in the town square after the closing parade. Festival director Ana Delia Marcial Reyez, herself of Haitian descent, works for the municipal culture office. She focuses on inviting companies who perform a repertoire of Haitian-heritage dance and music, both *portadores* and troupes that combine genres to form "fusion" styles or "restorations" (*restauraciones*). Some of these groups, including Ana Delia's own troupe, Nagó, include Cubans of various ethnic and racial backgrounds as well as Haitian descendants. The Festival Eva Gaspar has become Violeta's biggest public event, and receives support from the Haitian Embassy in Havana, the University of Ciego de Avila, UNESCO, the Haitian Association of Cuba, and the Havana-based organization Bannzil Kiba Kreyol. Producers and programmers from the Casa del Caribe attend the Eva Gaspar Festival to scout talent for the next Festival del Caribe.

Like the Festival del Caribe, the Festival Eva Gaspar includes a public ritual, hosted each year by a different ritual specialist. In 2010, the ritual was dedicated to the Vodú spirit Togo,<sup>41</sup> a divinity represented by a powerful bull, and presided over by Tomas Pol Jr. from the town of Morón. Pol is an *oungan* and also the director of the folkloric group Renacer Haitiano. The ritual was originally scheduled for the town park, but after some discussion, organizers decided the event – with its potentially unruly possession trances and feeding the spirits with animal blood – should be moved to the home of Benancio, an elder of Haitian descent who lived nearby. Everyone present lit a candle and placed it on the ground around a simple altar featuring water, rum, coffee, an

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<sup>41</sup> Spelled "Towo" in Haitian Creole orthography.

egg, sweets, and other foods. In Cuba it is costly (and requires permission from local authorities) to kill a bull, as would be traditional for Towo in Haiti. During the ritual, Pol, mounted by Togo, crouched astride a *verracó* (boar) before sacrificing it, a Cuban adaptation of the offering. At the close of the Festival Eva Gaspar, a professor from the local university urged that state promoters of tourism arrange transportation from the provincial capital and resort hotels, arguing that the Haitian-Cuban festival was an underexploited resource.

The sign welcoming visitors to the town of San Germán in Holguín province is shaped like its famous *central*, Urbano Noris, a sugar-processing factory with signature smokestacks. I arrived on August 14, 2008, to attend the first annual Festival Bwa Kayiman.<sup>42</sup> For years, event organizer Bertha Julia Noris – a provincial culture functionary of Haitian descent – wanted to commemorate the town’s Haitian mill laborers.<sup>43</sup> However, authorities preferred to promote the town’s Spanish legacy as more congruent with their image of the province. Nevertheless, Noris persisted, and in 2008 San Germán hosted its first Haitian heritage festival. The celebration featured museum displays, a culinary competition, folkdance in the town auditorium, and a public Vodú ritual held at the home of a local practitioner. Although the ceremony did not get started until 12:30 am, representatives from the municipal culture office attended, followed by a news cameraman unsuccessfully trying to rig up a klieg light to record the event.

Both the Eva Gaspar Festival and the newer Bwa Kayiman Festival attract the attention of academics, journalists, and tourism promoters and contribute to a re-visioning of Haitian heritage as a feature of the *oriente* region as a whole. Participation

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<sup>42</sup> Bwa Kayiman (alligator forest) refers to a legendary ritual held August 14, 1791 in the north of Haiti by slaves plotting against the colonial French regime. The ensuing rebellion launched the Haitian Revolution.

<sup>43</sup> Noris wrote a Masters thesis about Haitian laborers in Urbano Noris in the early twentieth century.

by Cubans who are not of Haitian descent has become ubiquitous. Cubans of varied backgrounds attended both Festival Eva Gaspar and Bwa Kayiman. Renacer Haitiano includes members who are not of Haitian descent, as does the artist's collective Taller Ennegro. While Cubans have long visited Haitian herbalists and ritual specialists for cures and consultations, Vodú has become part of the repertoire of at least one well-known Havana-based *santera*, as we shall see in the next section. Just as Santería is no longer associated with *lucumí* (Yoruba) parentage, Vodú has spread outside *haitiano-cubano* enclaves, perhaps growing into a regional as much as ethnic symbol.

### *Vodú Chic*

Expertise in Vodú is becoming a sought-after spiritual skill in Cuba's capital city. For example, influential *santera* Nancy Pulles Méndez, the proprietor of "el Templo de Oyá," a large Santería sanctuary and religious art emporium in Havana, has been studying Vodú, with help from members of Grupo Misterios del Vodú, a folkloric dance troupe currently led by Silvia Gardes. The group, originally based in Santiago, moved to Havana in pursuit of new opportunities. Gardes and Pulles co-sponsored a public ritual for the *loa* Oggún Ferraire in Gardes's home in Havana in March 2009. Pulles explains that she finds Vodú inspiring and is always seeking to expand her knowledge of African-rooted spirituality.<sup>44</sup> She has even enrolled in Haitian language classes. The Temple of Oya is becoming a channel for disseminating Vodú in Cuba's capital.

Vodú priest Tato's son Emilio Milanés Zamora is a member of "El Taller Experimental Ennegro," an artists' collective in Palma Soriano, a town in Santiago province. His group includes sculptors, actors, musicians, dancers, and ritual specialists.

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<sup>44</sup> Personal conversation, March 19, 2009.



Ennegro artists take their inspiration from Vodú.<sup>45</sup> Creating art installations inspired by Vodú imagery is a specialty. A *vevé* is a Vodú symbol drawn on the ground for ritual occasions, traditionally using cornmeal or flour. As the ritual proceeds, the participants' dancing feet erase the designs. For the Festival del Caribe 2010, Taller Ennegro created a mandala-like *vevé* from multi-colored sand depicting linked Cuban and Haitian flags and sacred symbols on the patio of the Teatro Heredia in Santiago. Sculptures and a temporary *ounfort* or *cai misté* (Vodú temple) completed the installation, with Taller Ennegro member *oungan* Yosvany Milanés Carbonell offering blessings and greeting visitors (often while mounted by a spirit).

Taller Ennegro have a bigger project underway, the “Proyecto de Eco-Arte y Economía Sostenible: Vevé de Afá” an artists' colony and ecological shrine. To be situated on fallow land at a confluence of two rivers, the project proposal envisions community gardens, studios, ritual space, and a massive *vevé* fashioned from vegetation planted in designs that can be recognized from above. This eco-art project has been listed in the U.N. Habitat Best Practices Database.<sup>46</sup> The efforts of El Taller Experimental Ennegro exemplify new international relationships for avant-garde visions of practitioners of Cuban Vodú.

### *Conclusion*

Haitian laborers and their descendants were once viewed in Cuba as dispossessed and disadvantaged migrant workers holding firm to old-fashioned traditions carried from their homeland, with conditions of privation and segregation facilitating the preservation

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<sup>45</sup> From conversations with Geobanis “Emilio” Milanés Zamora March 19, 2010 in Palma Soriano and May 4, 2010 in Santiago de Cuba.

<sup>46</sup> For more on the project, see <http://openarchitecturenetwork.org/projects/2032>.

of time-honored customs. While preservation of lifeways and customs has been attributed to isolation and poverty, the academy, political actors, commerce, and tourism can influence the maintenance of traditions. In the decades after the Cuban Revolution, the socialist government opened a vehicle for the re-imagining of spiritual traditions through public performance in the burgeoning arena of folklore. Professional performers such as Toni Pérez and research institutions such as the Casa del Caribe invited members of Haitian communities to share their music, dance, and traditions, and to form folklore troupes. As the Special Period opened venues for contact with the world outside Cuba, culture ministries, academic institutions, festival producers, and conference programmers became active culture brokers, distributing resources such as access to audiences and travel opportunities.

*Haitiano-cubanos* became increasingly active agents in the dissemination of their culture to a larger public. Haitian culture in Cuba is braided into the economy of folklore. Festivals and performance have become important motivators in the preservation and renovation of Haitian spiritual practices, music, dance, and language. The creation of folkloric dance and music groups motivates new generations to learn customs associated with their Haitian identity. People of Haitian descent in Cuba have found innovative ways to work against the discrimination and marginalization they face. In a country where national identity balances between socialist values and endorsing the country's rich legacy of African-inspired performance arts and spiritual systems, Vodú has begun to take its place as a recognized element in Cuba's national identity and perhaps even in some circles, as the latest frontier of the eco-artistic avant-garde.

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