Das Exil der Gotter. Geschichte und Vorstellungswelt einer Afrokubanischen Religion.
Stephan Palmie

This volume is based on a German doctoral dissertation dealing with santeria or regla ocha in Miami, where the author conducted extensive fieldwork. What makes this book particularly interesting is the double (or triple) distance of the author to his materials: A German scholar studying displaced Cubans in an American setting. The Cubans and Cuban-Americans are seen as descents of Africans and Spaniards. The work required two field languages: English and Spanish (and, at times, a mixture of the two) as well as some acquaintance with the ritual vocabulary of lucumi, that is, Yoruba as used by santeros. The exile of the gods is a double one: from Africa to Cuba and from Cuba to Florida. The emphasis is on the religion of the Yoruba and their neighbors, brought to Cuba, mostly by the slave trade, during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Lesser attention is given to the religious practices of other groups, notably Bantus, as integrated into forms of santeria. A second exile occurred with the arrival of the adepts and their gods in the United States, beginning in 1959, and then, others in a new wave, with the Mariel boat lift. The subtitle sets out the aim of the book clearly: the first half is devoted to a lengthy review of the literature, mostly in Spanish and English, of the slave trade and the migrations of Africans to Cuba, and the record of their beliefs and religious practices as reflected in this history. The aim here is to present the history of the origin and development of the religion. The second half discusses the belief system of the religion known as santeria, primarily as recorded by the author in his field research. The aim here is to present the world view of the adepts from their words and ritual behavior, as well as from the available literature. Both in the historical and the ethnographic section, Palmie seeks to fill gaps he perceives in the existing literature, but there is no indication that he consulted original historical sources. He is highly critical of the concept of syncretism, though he himself finds it necessary to use it. The relationship between oricha of the Yoruba and the Catholic saints is discussed at some length, adding however little that is new. Palmie finds it difficult to deal with various explanations of the relationship, be they conceptional, mythical, political or iconographic. His informants seem not to be troubled by his difficulties, however. The ethnohistorical approach of Herskovits and others is rejected as "speculative." Importantly, Palmie notes changes that have occurred in this...
religion in the United States. As a result of various contacts, elements of other traditions have been incorporated, so as to constitute, to some degree, a re-Africanization and particularly a re-Yorubaizaization, of santeria. Here, the author is particularly interested in the "Yoruba American Movement" founded by Gregory King. Consequently, observations made in Cuba before 1959 become points on a historical trajectory, not accounts of current beliefs and practices. Information on santeria as it has developed in Cuba in the past thirty-five years would provide an interesting comparative perspective here.

In the second half of the book, Palmie presents the results of his field research. It is striking to note that little research has been conducted on the Afro Cuban religions in this country. Palmie notes the contributions of Weidman, Sandoval and others associated with the Miami Health Ecology Project, but is critical of the interpretation which sees the recourse of immigrants to the religion in functionalist terms, as a strategy for dealing with the stresses of acculturation. Indeed, he rejects all functionalist approaches. Palmie himself, while rendering a very interesting account, gives little indication of an analytic or theoretical approach. In his ethnography, he focuses on presenting a theology of santeria. He gives particular attention to the cult of the dead, where the influence of Kardecist spiritualism is most clearly felt. Another factor in change is the need felt by some santeros to write accounts of their religions, with some attempts at offering a systematized, formal theology. Although he avoids considerations of social structure, Palmie does note that the leaders of santeria in the first wave of migrants were largely white as was much of their clientele, and that conflicts with authenticity and claims of leadership arose with the arrival of larger numbers of Afro Cuban migrants with the Mariel boat lift. At the same time, he also notes the attractiveness of the religion for numbers of non-Cubans in the Miami area.

The book is rich in descriptive detail, and offers a picture of a dynamic religion with a complex representation of the world. It steers clear of interpretation by the author. Regrettably, the book lacks an index.

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