

June 2005

Cabrera, Lydia. *Afro-Cuban Tales*.

Lara B. Cahill
anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium>

Recommended Citation

Cahill, Lara B. (2005) "Cabrera, Lydia. *Afro-Cuban Tales*," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol3/iss1/11>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.

Lydia Cabrera

Afro-Cuban Tales

Trans. Alberto Hernández-Chiroides and Lauren Yoder

Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004, xviii+169 pp.

Reviewed by Lara B. Cahill, University of Miami

Lydia Cabrera distinguished herself as the foremost ethnographer and storyteller of Afro-Cuban culture through publications ranging from ethnobotanical and linguistic encyclopedias to short stories and essays. Her approach combined scientific methodology with personal experience and authorial artistry, and brings to life the written and oral Afro-Cuban traditions with greater authenticity and accuracy than earlier work in the field. By locating the folklore and mythology in the quotidian activities of Cuban life, Cabrera documented the African-derived practices, beliefs, and lore that continue to blur the boundaries of race and class by permeating all levels of Cuban culture, from dance and language to familial customs and religion. Cabrera not only transcribed the culture's traditional tales, language, and habits, but also used her intimate experience and knowledge of Afro-Cuban cosmology as the foundation for her own stories. In this regard, she continues the creolization process through which these traditions evolved in the New World. Her work continues to de-stigmatize the rituals and beliefs of Santería, thus lending greater legitimacy to an African-derived Creole belief system previously suppressed by hegemonic Western religions. Cabrera's texts have been consulted by anthropologists and ethnographers of the African Diaspora, as well as practitioners of the Regla de Ocha who consider her ethnobotanical reference books as practical guides for rites and ritual.

In her first collection of short stories, Cabrera combined the roles of ethnographer and writer to illuminate the African influences at the core of the Cuban cultural experience. Originally published in 1936, in a French translation, *Les Contes nègres de Cuba* corresponded with the Negritude Movement's interest in restoring the cultural identity of black Africans in Diaspora. The 1940 publication of the original Spanish version, *Cuentos Negros de Cuba*, followed shortly after the French edition. All of the stories in *Afro-Cuban Tales* convey an ethnographic interest in preserving African-derived traditions, language, and ritual, with as much transcultural authenticity as possible. By detailing the customs of the Afro-Cuban population, Cabrera crafts these folkloric narratives to reflect the syncretism of a distinctly Afro-Cuban perspective and tradition. In her creative function as storyteller, she weaves the voices and scenarios of the Afro-Cuban world she was well acquainted with as a white Cuban. Translations and publications for German- and English-speaking audiences testify to the importance of the ethnographic realism in Cabrera's African-derived folklore to the field.

The most recent English edition, *Afro-Cuban Tales* (2004), is published by the University of Nebraska Press and translated by Alberto Hernández-Chiroides, Spanish Professor and

Department Chair at Davidson College, and Lauren Yoder, James Sprint Professor of French at Davidson College. Their translation conveys Cabrera's artistic intentions by interpreting her Afro-Cuban folktales with the realistic texture of her characters' personalities and the metaphorical meanings in the parables. By drawing carefully from both the French and Spanish versions of the collection, Hernández-Chioldes and Yoder gave careful consideration to the nuances between each story in the original edition and in translation. The rigorous scholarship invested in the translation is evident in the footnotes that document the basis and context for their interpretations. They convey Cabrera's understanding of the complex cultural and religious syncretism of Afro-Cuban traditions, and emphasize such knowledge as the foundation of her own fiction. Hernández-Chioldes and Yoder produce a comprehensive translation that does service to the cultural project that underlies Cabrera's body of work. The edition, when considered as a whole, ultimately brings new vitality and interpretive possibility to Cabrera's collection of folkloric short stories.

Introductory remarks by Isabel Castellanos, a leading contemporary scholar in Afro-Cuban Studies and Cabrera's work, ground this translation of *Afro-Cuban Tales* by Hernández-Chioldes and Yoder. She bases her biographically informative introduction on the author's field notes and personal papers that are now digitized as the Lydia Cabrera Collection in the Cuban Heritage Collection of the University of Miami library. Castellanos traces Cabrera's awakening to the African elements thriving in all aspects of Cuban culture. Cabrera was able to communicate the syncretic influences at work in the Cuban cultural landscape thanks to her informants: the Afro-Cuban servants in her family's home who were also priests and priestesses of the Ocha rite. Experiences with an older generation of Afro-Cubans prompted her efforts to preserve the stories passed on to her that reflect the myriad of African traditions brought by slaves who became part of the Cuban landscape and culture.

Castellanos maintains that, through these friendships, Cabrera "was able to penetrate a magical cosmos in which the limits between natural and supernatural realms are tenuous, an environment in which deities are accessible and communicate directly (through spiritual possession) or indirectly (through divination)" (ix). Indeed, Cabrera conveys a sensorial perception of the marvelous that not only derives from the brilliance of the tropical landscape, but also charged with an inherited belief system that blurs the boundaries between humans and animals, gods and mortals. Based on Cabrera's unique position of immersion and insight into Afro-Cuban culture, and the cultural authenticity she re-creates in her stories, Castellanos appropriately locates the author's work among those that herald the "magical realism" movement in Latin America. Hernández-Chioldes and Yoder support such an assertion with careful cross-referencing of Cabrera's fiction and non-fiction to enhance and clarify the magic that Cabrera seeks to convey in everyday life.

Hernández-Chioldes and Yoder also depend on *El Monte* (1954), Cabrera's seminal text that comprehensively examines African-derived Cuban culture and religion. They use this functional guide to contextualize the rituals of Santería and the significance of different animals,

symbols, and words within Afro-Cuban religious cosmology and daily life. References to Cabrera's dictionary explain the etymology of African words in an Afro-Cuban lexicon. Their notes on the ritual incantation of African words that have lost their literal meaning, yet still act as spiritual signifiers, attest to the continuing faith in this belief system. The translators contribute their own ethnographic insight to explain the further integration of Afro-Cuban words into the lexicon of Cuban Spanish. One such word is *sánsara*, which is defined in Cabrera's *El Monte* as "to flee." As the translators note, however, "[i]n popular Cuban vernacular, it has come to mean 'walk'" ("Papa Turtle and Papa Tiger" 52).

Hernández-Chiroides and Yoder invite contemporary readers to consider the history of interpretive angles by including the introduction written by Fernando Ortiz for the 1940 Spanish Edition, *Cuentos Negros de Cuba*. Ortiz was not only a top Cuban anthropologist and a pioneer in Afro-Cuban cultural studies, but also Cabrera's brother-in-law and mentor. Ortiz's introduction highlights Cabrera's short stories for their relevance to the contemporaneous cultural trends in surrealism and psychoanalysis. He also interprets the collection from the anthropological perspective of the Negritude movement of the 1930s, and the publication of the text's French edition. The juxtaposition of his introductory remarks with those of Castellanos emphasizes the evolution of critical discussion and the text's shifting value in different cultural climates.

Ortiz's remarks recall the initial steps towards locating and defining the identity of Africans in Diaspora. When included in this edition of Cabrera's Afro-Cuban stories alongside Castellanos's historical overview of the author as ethnographer, his comments re-orient modern readers to the foundations of the critical discussion during the first publication of the collection. Cabrera's short stories thematically and culturally complement the movement's literature, such as Aimé Césaire's poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), which celebrates the African legacy in Martinique. Cabrera does not embrace a return to Africa as Césaire does, and subsequently the focus of her short stories demonstrates itself to be thematically and culturally more evolved. Like her mentor, Ortiz, Cabrera asserts Afro-Cuban identity and culture to be the result of a transculturation process rooted in predominantly African traditions and highly charged with the imposition of European values. This model, however, is easily expanded for regional comparison: with its efforts to reveal the African cultural inheritance that had permeated the Antillean landscape and nearly all the social and racial distinctions within Caribbean culture, the Afro-Cuban mythology and cultural specificity of Cabrera's stories are marked as distinctly Caribbean.

In this regard, the text implicitly appropriates its relevance to the more contemporary field of Caribbean literature and theory that forges a regional identity based on the cultural syncretism. Her work corresponds to the efforts of modern Caribbean literary figures and theorists such as Édouard Glissant, who locates African cultural inheritance, rather than language or race, as the potentially unifying element of the Caribbean region. Like Cabrera, he takes as his intellectual focus the evolution of African traditions in a new landscape. A few of Cabrera's tales

have a timelessness that reflects the myths of their African origin, and other tales reflect the culture as it evolves in the New World. The story of “Papa Turtle and Papa Tiger,” for instance, grafts a traditionally African tale onto a Cuban landscape. According to editor’s notes to the story that cite Cabrera’s *El Monte*, the turtle represents the common man in African lore. This African character brings the spiritual beliefs and healing practices of his homeland to a new place. The turtle figure is also re-cast in this New World folktale as a priest of the Ocean. He is a Mocoeroy turtle, a species, according to the edition’s footnotes, native to the waters of Cuba. Further contextualizing the story in a transcultural landscape, Mocoeroy is the one who, “in a key moment in the history of the world . . . right around the year 1845,” carries Turtle and Stag to “the shore of a blessed island” (36).

Her short stories also support readings into the mythology of the Afro-Cuban culture, which resonate with Caribbean literature’s fixation on the primordial moment of their culture. In “Papa Turtle and Papa Tiger,” the characters look towards the sea and the passage over the sea as the point of a new beginning. The evocation of Kalunga, the Great Mother, was explained in a footnote as the Atlantic Ocean (36). Such details serve as the conceptual foundation of motifs addressed by Kamau Brathwaite’s construct of the Middle Passage in various works, and by Derek Walcott in his poetry that identifies the voyage across the Atlantic as the incipient moment of Caribbean history. Cabrera’s approach, like other Caribbean writers, deciphers the culture that originated in Africa from the culture that evolved to become the Cuban folklore; however, there is an emphasis on examining its development in new lands while it was still subject to European influences and the imposed limits of slavery.

The translation of Cabrera’s *Afro-Cuban Tales* by Hernández-Chioldes and Yoder appears at a time when criticism has begun to focus on contemporary Caribbean women writers’ contributions to the field. Cabrera’s work can be further refreshed through comparison with current women writers, such as Jamaican poet Olive Senior, who explore a Caribbean identity through the individual’s relationship to the landscape. Senior’s collection of poems, *Gardening In the Tropics*, like Cabrera’s short stories, refers to the bounty of the landscape, metaphorically represents characters’ relationship to the landscape, and conveys a belief system rooted in the natural world. Similarly, the poems are largely based on African-derived folklore and capture the interconnectedness between the worlds of plants, animals, humans, and gods. Her invocation of a pantheon of gods as eclectic as the creolized culture they represent engages the African-derived deities in their various Caribbean manifestations. This thematic frame recasts Cabrera’s work as a primary source for referencing the depictions and narratives of Cuban gods and folkloric motifs.

Just as the original editions were essential to the preservation of African-derived folklore and traditions for Cubans and outsiders alike, this University of Nebraska edition demonstrates that *Afro-Cuban Tales* continues to be an important reference point for the mythology of Afro-Caribbean culture. The edition emphasizes the cultural qualities Cuba shares with the other islands of the Caribbean, thereby placing it in the regional paradigm of Caribbean culture,

without diminishing Cabrera's value to Latin American cultural production. It facilitates a reading that considers Cabrera's short stories for their contributions to the Caribbean cultural imagination as well as critical perspectives on regional identity. Through their bi-lingual scholarship and comprehensive translation, Hernández-Chioldes and Yoder further contribute to the creolization of Cabrera's short stories by combining the artistry of the original text and the original translation to produce a standard, definitive edition for readers.