LYDIA CABRERA

Afro-Cuban Tales

Translated by
Alberto Hernández-Chiroldes
and Lauren Yoder

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Cuentos negros de Cuba

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With an introduction by
Isabel Castellanos

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Introduction to the English Edition

ISABEL CASTELLANOS

On June 6, 1930, Lydia Cabrera paid her first visit to the home of Calixta Morales, better known in the Ocha Rite by her saint's name "Oddeddei." Teresa Muñoz, an old seamstress in her household who was also an ancient priestess in the religion of the orishas, took her there. That meeting left its permanent stamp on her. One might say that there, in Calixta's home on June 6, the day when the Catholic calendar celebrates the Feast of Saint Norbert and the Ocha Rite pays homage to Ochosi the hunter god, the storyteller and ethnographer Lydia Cabrera was truly born.

Many prior and subsequent events contributed to shaping her as a writer. However, that meeting with Calixta, Teresa Muñoz, and José de Calazán Herrera (another of her best informants) turned out to be decisive as we can see by reading her field notes, preserved today in the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami library. For example, in an ethnographical entry made that same day, Lydia describes the altar that Calixta prepared to regale her guardian orisha:

> At night the altar's set up already. Two wildcat skins embroidered with shells.
>
> On the ground, a large pot of rice and beans with popcorn. Two burning candles.
>
> By touching the ground and kissing the tips of their fingers, they bow to the altar. . . .
>
> The smell of guava fills the small room.

In "Bregantino Bregantín," the first tale in *Afro-Cuban Tales*, we find the following:

"Sanune touched the earth and kissed it on her fingertips. Prostrate at the men's feet, she lost consciousness. When she opened her eyes, she was surrounded by night, in a room thick with the smell of warm foliage and guavas. . . . She found herself before an altar made of two wildcat skins and two freshly cut poplar branches propped against the wall. On the ground she could see several soup tureens with their lids on, a horseshoe, two huge pots of rice, some red beans, and popcorn."

Calixta Morales's birthday altar ("trono de cumpleaños") in Havana is the same altar before which Sanune regains consciousness in "Bregantino Bregantín." Ethnology gives life to Cabrera's fictional works as much as her storytelling instinct gives distinctive character to her ethnological writings.

Lydia Cabrera was born in Havana on May 20, 1899, and was the youngest of eight children. Her father, Raimundo Cabrera Bosch, was a prominent lawyer and writer who had lived in exile in New York until the end of the Cuban War of Independence (1898). He displayed a special fondness for Lydia because she was the child of his later years. Prominent writers, politicians, and artists were frequent visitors in the Cabrera household. As a child, Lydia liked to paint and write, and since her father wanted to please her, he allowed her to publish her first article in *Cuba y America* (a magazine published by Don Raimundo) when she was fourteen. It was the first in a series of articles that she published during the course of almost three years under the name Nena en Sociedad. In this series Lydia writes articles hiding behind her pen name. In addition to recording weddings and baptisms, Lydia criticizes the government's indifference to culture and letters. These articles are not by any means conventional society pages. Although they may lack literary value, they are clearly

precursors of Lydia's more mature style with which she began to compose tales in 1930.

Until she settled in Paris in 1927, she sometimes wrote for Havana publications, almost always to support and encourage some artistic project, as for example the restoration of the old Santa Clara convent. However, during that time Lydia wanted to be a painter, not a writer. That's why she moved to France, where she studied at the Ecole du Louvre and the Académie Contemporaine, whose director was Fernand Léger, studying under the famous painter Alexandra Exter. Her vacation in Havana in 1930 and that meeting with Teresa, Calixta, and Calazán changed the course of her life. That's when she began to write these short stories that were translated in 1936 and published in France with the title *Les Contes nègres de Cuba*.

Little by little, she devoted herself more to writing and less to painting. Her first book was well received by critics in France, but the Spanish edition didn't appear until 1940 in Cuba. After this initial volume, three more fictional works and many other ethnographic publications followed, including *El Monte*, one of the most significant books of twentieth-century Cuban literature.

Lydia's close relationship with her old Afro-Cuban friends opened up an unknown world for her. She 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). This is a reality in which seemingly inanimate beings (trees, stones, rocks) are filled with spiritual energy, or *aché*, a universe in which the gods, like human beings, eat, love, and fight. This experience can be explained through numerous myths, legends, or *patakís*, where animals possess human

characteristics and interact with men and women, where a cotton plant can trap an envious bird, or where Ikú (death) herself could fall in love with a king's son. To summarize, in the world that kindled Cabrera's imagination, basic categories, the foundations of Western culture, are radically called into question.

In a variety of ways, Lydia incorporates this Afro-Cuban worldview into her tales. Some narratives are based directly on slightly modified *patakís*. In other cases, she recreates stories by adding incidents, themes, and characters. She bases other stories on old Afro-Cuban songs, and, in fact, in these the music becomes the central element of the story. Rather than being simply legends collected by an anthropologist, many of the tales are of her own creation, products of an imagination deeply permeated by Afro-Cuban thought.

Cabrera uses many linguistic devices to communicate Afro-Cuban life to her readers. One of these devices is to eliminate the conventional limits separating the semantic categories of people, animals, and things. For example, the princess Dingadingá is able first to marry an earthworm and later a bull. The masculine gender is eliminated from language in the kingdom of Cocozumba. Jicotea (the turtle) falls madly in love with Arere Marekén. The Almendares River dares to claim Soyan Dekín for itself. Encouraged by the flexibility that pervades the Afro-Cuban world, Cabrera juggles all limits and offers us a world upside down in which guinea hens can make Christopher Columbus and the king of Spain dance, little fat cooking pots are able to cook by themselves, the pope can send encyclicals to pumpkins, and officials can be defeated by the shrewdness of turtles. What is unreal becomes real, and what is real, unreal. To explain it in Cabrera's own words, it is "the reality of unreality." This narrative style

is a forerunner of what will be known later in Latin American literature as "magical realism."

Another means employed by Cabrera to express the Afro-Cuban worldview is the use of ethnographic details within her stories, supported by meticulous descriptions of her characters, of practices, and of objects used in religious ceremonies. Many readers unacquainted with Afro-Cuban religions find that the abundance of these sensory details, such as colors, fragrances, flavors, and textures, creates a setting, a visual and olfactory reality that allows them to experience and enter into the narrative world created by the author.

Moreover, on many occasions the characters use expressions from the Bozal language, a creolized dialect now extinct, or in Lucumí, Congo, or Abakuá languages. Most of the time, however, the characters speak Spanish, using a rich Cuban vernacular full of colloquial expressions, at times archaic or at least sounding archaic. For example, "no daba un golpe," and "Yo no te dije que si te encontraba con otro Negro te hacia papilla?" Although Lydia seldom explicitly sets her tales in a particular time or space, language usage as well as the description of the landscape confirm without saying that the events take place in Cuba, some at an unspecified time and some during the colonial period.

In her tales as well as in her ethnographic work, Cabrera showed that although the Afro-Cuban vision is indeed African in origin, it is first and foremost Cuban. It is true that some of her characters are of African origin, but we also find many European elements that are essential ingredients of Cuban Creole culture. For example, the king of Spain came to dance in Havana in one of her tales. In another story, even the parrot lowered his voice on Good Friday, and only after Easter would the parliament open and the lottery begin. In a third, the bishop decreed that nobody should pay attention to a

miraculous branch that had appeared on the wall of a rooming house. In other words, these magical events are set in a Cuban context and the characters are Cubans who live in rooming houses, play the lottery, and read the local press.

Despite reflecting local mores, these tales should not in any way be considered as simply the expression of local color. On the contrary, a delicate surrealism that transcends the frontiers of any national environment underlies these stories. In her own masterful way, Lydia Cabrera manages to recreate the Afro-Cuban cosmological worldview. Yet these writings are as well some of the most universal, and, paradoxically, some of the most distinctly Cuban contributions to Latin American literature.

Introduction to the Spanish Edition

FERNANDO ORTIZ

This is the first book written by a Havana-born woman. She began studying Afro-Cuban folklore with me years ago. Simple curiosity first led Lydia Cabrera to delve into the forests of Havana's black legends, and she found them truly delightful. She began transcribing and collecting those stories, and has gathered a large number. When she read some of these tales to literary personalities in Paris, they were enthralled by their poetic qualities. The poet Francis de Miomandre, himself a connoisseur of Latin American literature, translated some of the legends into French, and a perceptive editor published them in a collection called *Les Contes Nègres de Cuba*, now already out of print. Some of the tales had already been published in such prestigious literary reviews as *Cahiers du Sud*, *La Revue de Paris*, and *Les Nouvelles littéraires*. That's how it happened that the stories appeared first in French rather than in Spanish, their original language. The foreign critics' favorable reception of these tales and their excellent reputation thus precede the first Spanish edition.

Some of these critics praised the stories for the spontaneity of their poetry and their art; others, like E. Noulet, found the psychology of the tales quite distinct and unusual. He speaks of "a voracious sense of life, a very sensitive reaction to every form and language, a spirit that is both indolent and courageous, naive and mockingly humorous." Others, like Jean Cassou, concentrated on the social aspect of the stories,

Fernando Ortiz (Havana, 1881–1969) was an eminent Cuban ethnographer who was Lydia Cabrera's mentor and brother-in-law.

where he saw portrayed an oppressed race's pain and sadness.

Some of the stories originate from the turn of an African phrase that has been contaminated very little by cultural links with the white world. These particular stories retain their original African flavor and pathos. One critic said that the tales demonstrate "a deep immorality" and "lack any didactic intention." This was written in the 1940s. We do not know to whom the author refers. This was part of an ongoing debate. Other comments included the following: "The stories are unable to distinguish good from evil," and "they have an extraordinary talent for forgetting." All of these opinions surely come from the perspective of white men who prejudge blacks according to an ethic that white people have decided upon among themselves. In my opinion, it would be better to try to understand an ethic that is different and distinct rather than claim that morality is lacking in the stories. There are values in the tales that emerged from economic, social, and political circumstances that were surely different from white circumstances. Those circumstances developed in the blacks' traditional ancestral African culture and also in their new more artificial culture that evolved in the Americas. Perhaps it would be more productive to consider Africans, whose soul is reflected in these stories, in the same manner that we view the ancient Greek, Etruscan, or Roman civilizations. We could then develop a comparative approach for studying their mythology and social system.

We should not forget that these stories are the result of input from both Afro-Cuban folklore and the white translator. For the Spanish text is in reality also a translation, and a second translation at that. From the African languages (Yoruba, Ewe, or Bantu) in which the stories were created, they were translated in Cuba into the mixed colloquial language of Afro-

Cubans. The old black Cuban woman who told Lydia these stories may have heard them from her ancestors in a mixed Afro-Spanish language. From that dialect, Lydia had to translate the stories into a more intelligible form of Spanish, such as they now appear in this text. By keeping the stories' exotic content and form, the author has faithfully fulfilled her difficult task. This collection of stories opens a new chapter in Cuban folk literature.

For the most part, these Afro-Cuban tales are not religious stories, although many of their protagonists are indeed characters from the Yoruba pantheon, characters such as Obaogó, Ochún, Ochosí, etc.[1] Most of the stories can be classified as fables, like the fables of Aesop or the Afro-American stories of Uncle Remus, so popular among the children of our neighbor, the United States. The tiger, the elephant, the bull, the worm, the hare, hens, and above all the turtle. Or sometimes the pair turtle/deer, so typical of Yoruba folklore, in which the turtle, archetype of cleverness, always wins out over physical strength and stupidity.[2]

Some stories, like "Papa Turtle and Papa Tiger," probably originated in Cuba, because they display a combination of various folk elements, such as a unified plot followed by simple fables.

Other stories, like "Two Queens" and "Los Compadres," are about truly human characters. In these tales, mythology appears only marginally. In several other tales we see totemic traits; a good example would be the references to Tiger-Man, Bull-Man, and Papa-Turtle.

1. The name Obaogó seems to have been invented by Cabrera or her informants. Ochún is the goddess of love, sexuality, beauty, and diplomacy. She is often invoked in matters of love and money. Ochún is represented in the Catholic religion by the Virgin of Charity (*La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*).

2. The pair turtle/deer is "la pareja jicotea-venado, o tortuga-ciervo."

The distinction made by the god Ochosí between polygamy and prostitution is interesting. Ochosí, the male lover and hunter of the Yoruba cycles, describes the distinction this way: Polygamy is a situation in which a man, like Ochosí himself, has many permanent wives who are always well fed but whom he never pays. Prostitutes, on the other hand, work for a man.

"Bregantino Bregantín," a tale with an old traditional Spanish title, is a story that Freudians should pay attention to, because it expounds the social myth of the patriarch who kills all other men and male children. In the story, a clever mother saves one of her boys, who manages years later to destroy the power and domination of his father.

Another tale explains how the first men, the first black and the first white, came into being. In black folklore there are many myths of creation, but this one was new to me. The great creator, Oba-Ogo, made the first human by "blowing on his own excrement." This is not a very flattering myth for humans, however divine the excrement is! But it is not really very different from the biblical myth in which the first human being is created from mud, mud molded by Jehovah and to which he gives life by breathing on it with his divine breath. The black myth does not explain what early humans were like. It does say, however, that in spite of the sun's prohibition, one man climbed up on a beam of light and got his skin burnt when he got too close to the sun. Meanwhile, another man went to the moon and became white.

Most of these stories collected by Lydia Cabrera are of Yoruba origin, but I cannot with certainty say that the origin is always the same. In several tales, there is evidence of white cultural components. In other stories there are significant, interesting cases of cultural transmission, like the tales in which the narrator assigns the god to the position of secretary

of the supreme court; or, in another case, captain of the fire department.

This book makes a valuable contribution to both black and white Cuban folklore literature, in spite of some negative opinions by critics stemming from forgivable ignorance or from ridiculous, prejudiced vanity. There are many people in Cuba who have negative attitudes, but true culture and progress means affirming rather than rejecting what is real. People who reject who they are will end up on a path of self-destruction. An old Afro-Cuban proverb puts it this way: "The goat who breaks a drum will pay for it with his own skin."[3]

3. "Chivo que rompe tambor con su pellejo paga."

AFRO-CUBAN TALES