Afro-Chinese Lukumi in Cuba: A Case of Interdiasporic Cross-Fertilization

In the Panel: “New Approaches to Asian-Latin American Studies,”

Latin American Studies Association (LASA), San Juan, Puerto Rico. May 27–30.

Martin Tsang, martin.a.tsang@gmail.com

In this paper I take as my inspiration the way Afro-Chinese and Chinese Cubans, have given voice to the shaping and manifesting of their constitutive worlds and the rise of what I call “interdiasporic cross fertilization”. Interdiasporic cross fertilization reinvigorates and updates discussions of cultural and religious interchanges that occurred between Afro-Atlantic and Sino-Pacific subjects in Cuba. I seek here to define what constitutes the Afro-Chinese religious world through examining key individuals within it and to present their religious life histories and lived experiences. In turn, I link these narratives to the broader enterprise and official discourse of identity making in Cuba, the notion of la cubanidad, and the challenges produced in discerning and analyzing cross-diasporic complexities of exchange, obliquely labeled syncretisms and religious cross-fertilizations.

Following the unwinding of Chinese indenture in Cuba in the late 19th Century, the first generations of Cuban-born Afro-Chinese began carving a life for themselves separate from the past instances of chattel slavery and contract work their forebears knew. One such person was Antonio Chuffat Latour, born in 1860, a second generation Chinese mulato, well educated, polyglot, and socially engaged Chuffat rose to prominence in Cuban society and authored Apunte Histórico de los Chinos en Cuba. Writing the book in his sixties, he and many of his generation witnessed “the rise of Chinese presence in Cuba, the insurrectionary wars for Cuban independence, the
abolition of slavery, and American occupation” (Yun 2008, 183). His work speaks of a pivotal moment in Cuban history that indicates a deep troubling of racial categories and the careful negotiation of identity for mixed Cubans, like Chuffat Latour, whose experiences did not readily fit existing official criteria and categorization. His work is a rare attempt at fashioning a positive, inclusionary history leading to a new understanding of the Caribbean present.

The importance of that time in Cuba’s history as a turning point or celebration of Afro-Chinese presence is complimented by the work of Wifredo Óscar de la Concepción Lam y Castilla, or Wilfredo Lam (1902-1982) an Afro-Sino Cuban artist. Lam is heralded for his contributions on Afro-Cuban religious themes and brought his subject matter to a global audience and of great international acclaim. We can therefore see that the Afro-Chinese, from an early point had a direct hand in the shaping of socio-cultural conceptualization of themselves in Cuban textual and artistic productions.

Within his well-documented social history published in 1927, Chuffat Latour depicts the lives and social biographies of Cuban Chinese and Afro-Chinese, spanning approximately from 1840 to 1920, and divides his work between coolie and post-coolie narratives, that help to bridge the lacunae evident in scholarship that have tended to focus on one or the other. A major theme of Chuffat Latour’s work is devoted to the legacies of indentured coolies and their impact on the island. One of his prime motivations was to frame the dissolution of African Slavery and Spanish colonial governance as intimately linked and indebted to the actions of Chinese and African presence on the island (Yun 2008, xvii).
This cross-diasporic world and their operating religious vocabularies fall outside the purview of established and current analytical frameworks with regard to prevailing ideas of Ortizian transculturation and also with regard to Afro-Cuban religion. The themes that Chuffat Latour’s oeuvre pre-empted, and Lam’s work celebrated, each in their own way, offered alternative counter-hegemonic viewpoints. The construction of a case for contemporary Chinese-African hybrid religiosity, I claim, is robust and coherent enough to be studied in its own right following in the footsteps of these 20th Century Afrochino pioneers. This identification can only commence with carefully dismantling the existing conceptual frameworks, unpacking the presumptions of engineered race, ethnicity and identity that have, historically, ignored the special and different places, persons and processes inhabited and experienced by Chinese-Cubans and Afro-Cubans.

There has been a persistent preoccupation in a number of Cuban State-led efforts to de-emphasize the unique socio-historical experiences and religious pollinations that have occurred between these groups. Such culture contact and the processual synthesis of religiosity have been carried out following the collapse of both indenture and the gradual breakdown of the apparatus of slavery, at the end of the 19th Century. While I cannot claim that there is a linear continuity of Afro-Chinese religiosity from the starting point to the present, there are occasions over the last century and a half, which are significant signposts of the development and constitution of the making and practicing of these religions.

Intrinsic in the state led process mentioned above, was the promotion of a rigidly enforced, classed, and racialized Cuban social order. Many critiques have been advanced
of the steadfastly theoretical models of race contact and culture integration, that sought to
remove ethnic factions and divides in favor of an overarching Cuban citizenship, that was
inclusive, and whose models, looked further to the west than to the east for its ideologies.
After Colonization and a hard won independence, the search and construction of an
independent Cuban identity was built against a fear of being subsumed, once again, by
external hegemonic powers, leading to an inclusive, raceless and solidary construction of
their citizenry. This preoccupation was deemed a preventative for factions to form along
racialized lines and overthrow the fledgling government. These were direct attempts to
normalize and formalize a coherent Cuban identity from the mixture of different cultures,
races and ethnicities, and underscoring a departure from previous racially felt
inequalities. Distance from previous legislation that allowed for slavery and indenture
was purposefully inscribed in the formation of la cubanidad. No longer were Chinese and
African persons deemed devoid of history and culture, as blank slates waiting to be
acculturated, rather, they were contributing members of a dialogic that gave value to their
knowledge and participation in the culture making process. This was achieved in various
ways but especially through the auspices of Ortiz’s model of transculturation discussed in
the last chapter. However, being an ideologically led model and apparatus for
institutionalizing “Cubanness”, there are limitations to its explanatory and explorative
powers within the jurisdiction of cross-diasporic relationships.

The limitations of Fernando Ortiz’s model of transculturation sits squarely on its
inability to discuss the hybridity that occurs within discrete components of its make up.
Different from the amorphous understanding of transculturation inherent in the ajiaco
analogy, the case of the Chinese and their special relationship with specifically African
people in Cuba is missing. Ortiz’s model was special because it was not simply a “model of” but became a “model for” (Stewart 2011, 50), whereby it was not merely used to describe a possibility or pathway of observable and causal data, but became the *blueprint* for the process of achieving *la cubanidad*. A principal reason I argue is that such a program of mixing and racial unification mitigated against race and rebellion, especially following such profound socioeconomic inequalities experienced. Transculturation offered a plan by which Cuban official history and discourse could spark an interaction of broad categories of race and ethnicity putatively described in many different works as *los chinos, los indios, los negros,* and *los blancos,* that do not really constitute the island’s demographics. Rather, these reified categories became instilled as the model for integration and culture exchange, promoted and enforced by a select cadre of Cuba’s sociocultural and socioeconomic elite.

The politically motivated understanding of Cuba as a melting pot foregrounded the effects, culture and contributions of white, European elements, simultaneously announcing the importance, centrality and inclusiveness of black culture. This grew out of Fernando Ortiz abiding interest and celebration of black culture and religiosity, who single handedly credentialed such studies as academically acceptable. Contingent on this, was the identification and celebration of *afrocubanismo,* an artistic and literary movement, to which Wilfredo Lam directly contributed to, that occurred as much in Europe as it did in Cuba, forming a dialectic of self referencing and legitimizing intellectual pursuits that could focus on African presence in Cuba. To a much lesser extent, the Chinese, were late to be included as part of the Cubanizing process, inhabited the borderlands of the transculturation process. The Chinese and their culture contact
with Africans did not fit into these plans in any meaningful way. Little reference was ever made to the linkages of people of African and Chinese descent in Ortiz’s work, and no explicit connections were made within the larger schema of their particular contributions. Their absence I argue is a result of their unions being unplanned, and so, unconstitutional, relationships with ambiguously understood power, that became regarded as a nuisance, or, a threat to cultural and governmental ideals. With the gradual change of official status from indentured outsider to integrated, transculturated Cuban, the Chinese-Cuban did not escape being “othered” by racist and orientalist imaginaries and their power and place kept in check and invoked in interesting ways. These are experiences in the iterations of popular sayings explored below, which situate the Chinese as being agents of cause and effect, isolating and marginalizing them from Cuba’s transculturated, integrated citizenry.

We can glimpse from the work of Chuffat Latour, Wilfredo Lam, and many others, that the Afro-Chinese became a significant and complex categorization for the connections between Chinese and Afro-Cubans, one that developed out of but not governed by colonial and economic forces, producing compelling evidence for a new model to understand these complex interactions. These unions produced a new identity within the existing *topos* of the Cuban nation. The emergence of Afro-Chinese in ethnic, social, artistic and religious fields denotes a type of unwarranted *mestizaje* that had no prior exigency nor governmental apparatus that could offer a response of definition. These unions are similar to what Whitten and Corr (2011) discuss of connections between black and Indigenous peoples of South America, in particular Amazonian Ecuador. These unions resulted in ethnic merging unmediated by the state, and thus producing a crises of existing racial classification by the emergence of a new *mestizo*
built on previously polarized negro and indio paradigms. Such offspring were conceptualized as zambo in colonial and contemporary discourse and as yumbo within indigenous cultures (Whitten and Corr 2011, 62). Their very presence troubles existing racial orders and provoke great anxiety to existing orders of colonial power because this mixture was not engineered or mediated by hegemonic, white forces. Furthermore, the zambo came to represent “bodies of human beings with shamanic powers… to challenge that control system” (Ibid). Both the feared mestizaje and embodied supernatural powers echo the experiences related above. Hierarchies of power that are contingent on polarized, racially separate beings are contested by their unification, and, crucially, phenotypic characteristics become intimately associated with cultural and religious characteristics.

In contrast, the continued complicity of Afro-Chinese priests in the crafting of Afro-Cuban religiosity was subsumed in existing discourse as being attributed to a dominant motif of Afro-Atlantic transculturation. The voices and experiences presented here, update these historical processes and stress the need for a new understanding of the trans-diasporic processes offered through the lens of interdiasporic cross fertilization that evidently constitutes Cuba’s contemporary religious landscape.