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Afrocuban Religions in Sara Gómez's *One Way or Another* and Gloria Rolando's *Oggun*

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Abstract

This paper explores the depiction of Afrocuban religions in two films — Sara Gómez's One Way or Another *(1974/1977) and Gloria Rolando's* Oggun: Forever Present *(1991). A (Western) feminist's analysis of Gómez's* One Way or Another *characterizes Abakuá and Santería as "voodoo" – not only collapsing three different Afro-Caribbean religious traditions, but also reflecting Marxist biases that exclude (ironically) a recognition that Gómez's depictions of Abakuá and Santería reflect a gendered perspective. Rolando's* Oggun *reflects a recent trend in Cuban cinema to celebrate Afrocuban religious practices.* Oggun's *stunning visuals, compelling song and dance sequences, and fascinating mythology provoke a desire to understand the role and impact of this remarkable religious tradition in Cuban society.*

Introduction

For us, film is the most important of the arts.[1] *-Lenin*

The history of Cuban cinema is of particular interest to anyone concerned with examining cinema from a global perspective, constituting as it does, a trajectory intended — from the very beginning of the Revolutionary period — to undertake a "decolonization of the screens."[2] How does this "decolonization of the screen" fare, however, when one considers the intersection of race and religion in Cuban cinema? This paper will explore the depiction of Afrocuban religions in two Cuban films — Sara Gómez's *De cierta mañera/One Way or Another* (1974/1977) and Gloria Rolando's *Oggun: Forever Present* (1991). The two filmmakers I discuss in this paper, Sara Gómez and Gloria Rolando, represent what, perhaps, could be considered two "generations" of post-Revolution Afrocuban filmmaking in Cuba, in the sense that as Afrocuban women filmmakers, they negotiate(d) substantially different political and social milieus in regard to the acceptability of acknowledgment of African ancestry in post-Revolution Cuba.[3]

The late Sara Gómez joined ICAIC, the Cuban Film Institute, during the early years of its existence — one of only two black filmmakers, and the only woman director there for a considerable period. Gloria Rolando is a contemporary filmmaker determined to celebrate her African heritage. Rolando has traveled to the United States on several occasions where her documentary film, *Oggun* (1991), has appeared at several festival screenings.

Cuba is the largest of the Caribbean islands and is located only 90 miles (150 km) south of Miami, Florida. Cuba is an archipelago consisting of two main islands and about 1600 tiny islets in the Caribbean Sea. As a socialist state, Cuba has long been a thorn in the flesh of its powerful neighbor and ideological antagonist, the United States. The US imposed a trade and financial embargo against Cuba in 1962, after the Cuban government expropriated American economic interests in Cuba.

The 1990s have been a particularly challenging period for Cuba, a period generally referred to as "the special period", a term Castro has used to refer to the current economic and political crisis in Cuba resulting from the disintegration of the ideological and trade support of the former Soviet Union, intensification of US trade embargoes and internal political and economic instability. The widespread changes within Cuban society, many of which are a response to external developments in geopolitical alliances, have prompted a re-evaluation of the entire Revolutionary paradigm among Cubans. Nevertheless, there appears to be a consensus that the country cannot regress to its pre-1959 past.

It was in March 1959, less than three months after it came to power, that the new Revolutionary government established the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC), often referred to (in English) as the Cuban Film Institute. The Revolutionary government's conviction that film could play a critical role in social transformation may have been influenced by the friendship between Alfredo Guevara,

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ICAIC's first director, and Fidel Castro. In addition, Marxist ideology viewed the industrial technological base of film production as entirely compatible with its respect for science and technology as tools for progress (Agosta and Keeton, 1994). Whatever the reasons, the support of the Castro government resulted in film becoming the premier form of cultural expression supported by the Revolution. ICAIC's founding members included Guevara and filmmakers Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Julio García Espinosa.[4]

Under ICAIC's supervision over the next 15 years, Cuban cinema developed an aesthetic identity very much attuned to and aligned with the political and ideological developments of the early Revolutionary period. The socialist mode of production permitted filmmakers a degree of financial security while still learning their craft. Filmmakers at ICAIC are paid a salary, both while working on a script as well as during production, and have full access to the resources of the Institute. In addition, Cuban cinema's willingness to explore different forms and genres resulted in support for production of both documentaries and shorts, forms generally marginalized in other national cinemas. Both documentaries and shorts not only provided opportunities for filmmakers still learning their craft, but the lower costs of production (as opposed to feature films) provided opportunities for experimentation and innovation. Unfortunately, the cutbacks introduced at ICAIC over the past few years have resulted in fewer documentaries being financed.

The consequences of the "special period" for Cuban cinema is that the scarcity of resources has resulted in drastic reductions in the resources the country can allocate to film production and distribution. This has led to a dramatic reduction in film production by ICAIC and a more concerted effort to develop coproductions with other countries. Whereas Cuba produced 13 feature films in 1985, this figure had dropped to two by 1993, including the taboo-breaking *Strawberry and Chocolate*, directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabio, which was made possible only as a coproduction with Spain and Mexico (Agosta and Keeton 1994; UNESCO 1993).[5] Cuban feature film production has entered an era in which, after decades of state support, the highly respected Cuban film industry faces once again, as it did in pre-Revolutionary Cuba, a future in which it will have to reproduce itself through revenues generated within a system of global commercial competition. Perhaps, this combination of coproductions and a greater willingness to address long-suppressed issues in an increasingly open political/economic climate will mark a new turning point in the development of Cuban cinema.

Part of the shifting cinematic landscape in Cuba has been the emergence of an independent sector in film production, i.e., independent of ICAIC.[6] The only other source of film production in Cuba since the Revolution had been the Armed Forces and Cuban television. ICAIC's control of film stock has led to a number of filmmakers choosing to work in the medium of video. These include Gloria Rolando, the only Afrocuban woman filmmaker in Cuba today, whose work will be discussed later. This independent sector, i.e., the sector involved in production independently of ICAIC — which controlled film production and distribution in Cuba for most of the period following the Revolution — is made up of two groups. The first draws from the ranks of the School of the Three Worlds and is highly international in character. The second group consists of filmmakers working in the medium of video under the loose affiliation of the National Video Movement.[7]

Cinema and television remain virtually separate spheres of cultural activity in Cuba.[8] Benamou (1994, 52) notes that by the 1980s, women's participation in television production had improved significantly with women occupying key technical and directorial positions, but "in cinema, however, women's representations has followed a particularly uneven course of development." Rolando confirms that while no other woman has made a feature film in Cuba since Sara Gómez, there are a number of women in television, especially in the production of telenovelas. Rolando also notes that she remains the sole *black* woman involved either in film/video or in television production.[9]

Cuba has a population of almost 11 million people, making it the most populous of the Caribbean islands.[10] The precise ethnic make-up of Cuba's population is uncertain, with sources varying considerably in their estimations.[11] Whatever the precise demographics, there appears to be a consensus that Cuba is not a "white" society. Matibag (1994/5) maintains that Africanity is pervasive in Cuban society and attributes this to Afrocuban religious influences, particularly the Yoruba-based ones. Sarduy and Stubbs (1993, 6) assert that "with isolation and defiance, the Afro-Cuban heritage appears to have asserted its central place in a new definition of national politics and culture." Even Castro, in a speech in April 1976, stated: "We are a Latin African people," leading Casal (1989, 484) to note that "it was Fidel Castro's role to be the first Cuban white ruler to recognize openly the *mulatto* character of Cuban culture and nationhood".[12] Casal herself asserts that Cu-

ban "culture is ...undoubtedly Afro-Hispanic", noting the influence of African and black cultural elements in Cuban music, proverbs and sayings, religion, poetry and the arts. Sergio Giral, one of the few Afrocuban film directors at ICAIC, and now living in exile in the United States, has commented that his actors required no instruction in the African religious dances performed by slaves depicted in his films, arguing that the African presence in Cuban culture is a part of the collective unconscious of Cuban society.[13]

Open recognition of the African origins of Cuban society were, for many years, contrary to Cuba's official color-blindness and silence on racial issues, although it had been invoked by Castro during Cuba's involvement in African conflicts. The rationale behind the Castro government's silence lies in a belief that there is no racial discrimination in Cuba, since the elimination of class privileges eliminated racial discrimination. The Castro government had removed the last vestiges of legal race discrimination when it came into power. As early as March of 1959, Castro made an announcement that came to be known as the Proclamation against Discrimination, in which he declared racial discrimination and racial prejudice to be "anti-nation", arguing that "what the eternal enemies of Cuba and the enemies of this revolution want is for us to be divided into a thousand pieces, thereby to be able to destroy us."[14] This concern may underlie what has, for many years, been an official silence on the issue of race in Cuba, i.e., preferring to ignore the problem of racial inequities as a way of avoiding divisiveness in Cuban society.

In present-day Cuba, the open acknowledgment of the extent of African influences on Cuban culture permits Afrocuban cultural expression to be fully accepted as *Cuban* cultural expression since much of what is Cuban is actually African in origin. As Barnard (1993, 233) notes, this reflects a major shift in conceptions of Cuban identity. Prior to the Revolution in particular, but persisting even afterwards, "(white) cultural elitists periodically decried the black, foreign or popular contamination of their canon, blissfully unaware that the 'authentic' musical tradition they sought to preserve was itself almost invariably the product of such cross-fertilization."

Despite the increasing acceptance of the African presence as a constitutive element of Cuban national culture, racial boundaries continue to exist. In the case of both Gómez and Rolando, race has functioned to provide a perspective that is not mirrored in the work of non-black Cuban filmmakers. Significantly, both women self-identified themselves as *black* Cubans: Sara Gómez has been quoted as saying she did not want to be "just another middle-class black woman who plays the piano" (Chanan 1985, 285), while Rolando not only dedicates her documentary, *Oggun*, to her African ancestors, her proposals for future work demonstrate an explicit emphasis in not only Afrocuban cultural traditions, but on the African diaspora experience, and the interconnections between diasporic populations — with one another and with Africa.

One cannot acknowledge the Africanity of Cuban society, however, without recognition of the pervasiveness, vitality and dynamism of Afrocuban religions. The Walden Reports state that in 1992, Cuba approved changes to its 1976 Constitution to permit freedom of religion for the first time in Revolutionary Cuba; in fact, despite thorny relationships between religious institutions and the Cuban government, reflected in waves of repression, several churches, both Catholic and Protestant, have existed in Cuba throughout the Revolutionary period.[15] Crahan (1989) and Greer (1989) have documented the improvement in Church-State relations in Cuba in recent years. In 1991, the Communist party opened itself to membership by religious believers "in tacit recognition that their numbers were on the increase, not least among Afrocubans" (Sarduy and Stubbs 1993, 10).

African-based religions have emerged more openly in Cuba, particularly Santería, or *regla de ocha,* which has its origins in West Africa and was brought to Cuba by enslaved Africans. Brandon (1989/90, 208-9) notes the defining characteristics of *regla de ocha.*

> *As an ideological system it is intensely hierarchical, [hu]man-centered, and this-worldly. It does not draw a rigid line between either the living and the dead or between the human and the divine. Between the human and the divine there is not an opposition, but rather a series of grades which are articulated ritually. An encompassing energy,* ache, *envelopes and flows through the entire hierarchy of beings recognized in the system. This energy is manipulable and can be made to manifest itself in different forms.*

This lack of separation between the sacred and the secular is contrary to socialist ideology and no doubt contributed to the Revolutionary state's disapproval of Afrocuban religious practices. Brandon also notes that while deities have been merged together or subordinated and merged conceptually with others, there has been only a limited amount of inter-African syncretism, and that several deities converge with popular stereotypes which are not specifically Catholic or African but Latin (such as Oshun as the flirtatious mulatta).[16] He notes that despite its seeming fusion with Catholicism, *regla de ocha* remains essentially African in its rituals and cosmology.

Other African-based religious practices include that of the Abakuá, a secret brotherhood which excludes women (but now has both black and white members), uses an African ritual language called Carbali, and a unique set of African drums. The Abakuá society was once the most politically influential of the Afrocuban religious groups. Originating in Congolese practices, Palo (palo mayombe, palo monte and palo croise are various forms) syncretized Congolese deities with both Yoruba and Catholic ones (Brandon 1989/90). Despite official disapproval until recently, Afrocuban religions make an appearance in the films and videos of almost all Afrocuban filmmakers, and feature prominently in the work of Gómez and Rolando.[17]

Sara Gómez

No study of Cuban cinema in general, nor specifically of women, or of Afrocubans in Cuban cinema, can ignore the contributions of Sara Gómez Yera, whose feature film, *De cierta mañera/One Way or Another* (1974/1977), drew the attention of feminist film critics in North America and Europe, who hailed it as a paradigmatic example of Third World cinefeminism.[18] Recognizing its innovative formal approach to the examination of machismo and "marginalism" (i.e. the culture of poverty), in post-Revolution Cuba, the film was lauded for its courage in examining the limits and contradictions of the Revolution in Cuba.

In her tragically short lifetime, Sara Gómez (affectionately known to her friends as Sarita), was Cuba's only black woman filmmaker.[19] By the mid-1990s, only three of ICAIC's feature film directors have been black — Sara Gómez the only black woman. The other two are Sergio Giral and Nicolás Guillén Landrián (Giral 1991). However, one cannot ignore the work of documentary filmmakers and with this category included, we can add the names of Rigoberto Lopez and Gloria Rolando. In addition to Sara Gómez, Sergio Giral, who made one of Cuba's most acclaimed films, *El otro Francisco/The Other Francisco* (1975), and who has been living in the United States since 1991, is the best known of Afrocuban filmmakers.

Sara Gómez was born in Havana in 1943. Raised in a middle-class family, Gómez studied music (piano), literature and ethnography and worked as a journalist on the youth publication *Mella* before joining ICAIC, the Cuban Film Institute, in 1961. As is generally required by ICAIC, Gómez served a long period of apprenticeship directing documentaries and serving as assistant director to more established directors like Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, as well as the visiting French director Agnes Varda.

Gómez made a number of documentaries on a variety of topics, before directing her first (and only) feature, *One Way or Another* (originally titled *The Miraflores Housing Project*) which is a love story based loosely on one of her own relationships. Gómez never completed *One Way or Another.* In 1974, she died during postproduction as a result of an asthma attack. She was 31 years old. The film was finally released in 1977, retitled *One Way or Another.*

One Way or Another is Gómez's only feature film. A 79-minute long film shot in 16mm, and in black and white to minimize cost, the film had the enthusiastic support of ICAIC's then director, Alfredo Guevara. *One Way or Another* is a combination of fictional sequences and documentary analysis of urban poverty and associated cultural traditions. Gómez utilizes professional and non-professional actors, and real and fictitious characters/persons in what Lesage (1979, 23) characterizes as an effective articulation of the goals of socialist art, noting that "in the context of its goals as socialist art, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER refuse [sic] to contribute to segmented knowledge and segmented existence." This is most apparent in the film's exploration of a personal relationship, posited as a determinant of, and determining of, larger social processes — in this case, attitudinal changes originating in socioeconomic, gender and racial stratifications are required at both the social and personal levels.

Some of the earliest analyses in North American scholarship of *One Way or Another* came from feminist film critics, who hailed the film as an exemplary illustration of Third World cinefeminism. Marxist feminists such as Lesage (1979) commended the film for its dialectical revolutionary structure. Lesage (22) also observes that "the film's 'feminism' lies in the way that it attributes sincere emotional interactions to its male characters and considers a profound and sincere emotional life important for men's, especially Mario's, revolutionary development."

Tomás González (1993), who had worked with Sara Gómez on the fictional portion of the script of *One Way or Another*, notes that its central premise of exploring the relationship between a couple in which the male is linked to the secret, exclusively male, Abakuá religion, was rooted in Gómez's personal experience in a past relationship. Gómez's interest in el ambiente, the world of the marginalized, probably also came from having attended a number of seminars at the Institute of Eth-

nology and Folklore. While some have argued that ethnography is in the eye of the beholder, I would contend that an ethnographic text is one in which the "cultural alienness" of the culture being depicted is emphasized — a text in which the filmmaker accentuates the unfamiliarity of the "spoken about" subjects of the text to the "spoken to" spectators in the audience. This type of ethnographic positioning of a text vis a vis the audience is, perhaps, most apparent in texts that provide extended takes of rituals unfamiliar to the viewer, frequently accompanied by an authoritative voice-over commentary by someone outside the culture being depicted, thereby mediating the viewer's experience of the rituals. While Gómez's films may reveal her anthropological interest in subcultures and marginalized groups, those that I have seen do not reveal an "ethnographic" gaze, with the exception of her depiction of Abakuá in *One Way or Another*, a subject to which I shall return.

The three protagonists of *One Way or Another* are associated with the entrenched social attitudes that the film depicts as hindering progressive Revolutionary development. Mario and Humberto represent the pervasive machismo of Cuban society while Yolanda's bourgeois perspectives are dramatized in the form of conflict and rigidity in a professional context. However, Mario and Yolanda are Revolutionary subjects-in-the-making, struggling against machismo and class-based biases, as they try and make sense of their world and the new demands made on them by the Revolution in terms of transformation of personal/social values.

Feminist film discourses – both those that celebrate the film's feminism, as well as criticisms of such celebration[20] — continue to be characterized by an effacement of the question of race. This effacement of race as worthy of analysis is the result of Euro-American feminist privileging of gender over other axes of oppression such as race, religion, national origin and class, among other things.[21] Admittedly, *One Way or Another* itself both articulates and effaces issues of race, sometimes in complex ways. While class and gender conflicts are explicitly addressed, race remains a subtext. The scenes depicting the tensions arising out of class differences between the middle-class teacher, Yolanda and the mothers of the children she teaches, reflect Gómez's acknowledgment that the marginalized sector in Cuba comprises primarily black and mulatto Cubans. Gómez's articulation of the racial underpinnings of the socioeconomic hierarchy is reflected in the casting and narrative structures (such as the vignette on the black singer/ex-boxer), rather than through explicit dialogue or themes.

The effacement of race in Euro-American feminist analyses of *One Way or Another* allows feminists to dispense with the necessity of cultivating an understanding of Afrocuban culture. Thus, Lesage (1979), a Marxist feminist, characterizes Abakuá as "voodoo", and confuses the orishas (of Santería), belonging to Mario's mother, with the practices of Abakuá. While the documentary section on Abakuá is clearly condemnatory, one cannot assume that Gómez disapproved of all Afrocuban religious practices as regressive. In this regard one has to agree with Martínez-Eschazabal (1994) that the depiction of Afrocuban religious practices in *One Way or Another* reflects a clearly gendered perspective. However, this gendered perspective cannot be completely understood without the cultural knowledge that allowed Gómez to distinguish between two different religious traditions, and which an otherwise favorably disposed Western feminist critic could not.

Gómez's disapproval of Abakuá is reflected in a distinctly ethnographic mode of presentation, unlike Santería, which is integrated into the narrative without the supposition that it requires additional comment or analysis. In other words, Gómez does not present Santería in a manner that underscores its alienness from mainstream religious beliefs, but does so in the case of Abakuá. The element of race is underscored in the narrative by the fact that the relevance of Abakuá for Mario emerges from his identity as a black/mulatto man. The brotherhood, until recently, was not open to whites.

Perhaps Lesage's reduction of both Abakuá and Santería to some vague notion of seemingly atavistic Afrocuban religious practice — part of a larger and equally unspecific notion of Afro-Caribbean religions classified as "voodoo" — reflect Marxist biases against religious observances, but it is difficult to argue that film does the same.[22] *One Way or Another*'s explicit disapproval of the exclusively male secret society of Abakuá, founded on the notion of woman-as-betrayer, is not apparent in the depiction of the more egalitarian Santería, the religion observed by Mario's mother. Lesage's use of the term "voodoo" in this context – especially without additional comment, considering voodoo is not depicted, nor referred to, in the film – is likely to tap into existing negative connotations associated in the Western mind with that much maligned religion.

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Julio García Espinosa completed *One Way or Another* which was eventually

released in 1977.[23] Although Alea has said that the commentary was what Gómez had intended, (Chanan 1985, 285) Gonzalez's (1993, 136) account suggests a certain dissatisfaction with the manner in which the film was completed.

Neither myself nor her closest collaborators were allowed into the editing room. The film that we had conceived for two hours, told in Sara's very particular way, was edited down to just over an hour. Even so, it was saved by the strength and veracity of the images, its solid arguments and its encompassing analysis of the marginal proletariat.

It will probably never be clear to what extent Sara Gómez subscribed to the Eurocentric assumptions of Marxism-Leninism which saw a linear progression from barbarism to civilization and which associated African-derived religious practices as falling into the realm of the former. Even if we accept that authorship of the commentary is clearly what Gómez had intended, her attitude to Santería lacks the explicit disapproval displayed towards Abakuá, a distinction that can be considered illustrative of an attitude that reflects both a gendered and racialized subjectivity — during a period when Afrocuban religious practices were generally considered to be regressive.

Gloria Rolando

Gloria Victoria Rolando Casamayor was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1953. She studied music at the Conservatrio Provincial de Musica Amadeo Roldan until the age of 18. In 1976, having completed a degree in art history at the University of Havana, she was recruited by ICAIC as a researcher. At ICAIC, Rolando became involved primarily in documentary production, working with highly respected documentary filmmaker, Santiago Villafuerte. Her education and training in music is reflected in the scripts she wrote for a documentary feature, *Tumba francesa*, which explores the origins and role of the French/Haitian "tumba", or drum societies, in Cuba and for Tan solo con la guittara which profiles the life of the Agentinian "Lady of the Guitar," Maria Luisa Anido. In her graduate studies, Rolando focuses on migration in the Caribbean, a theme she later takes up in her script for the documentary *Haití en la memoria*, and again in her second documentary, *My Footsteps in Baragua*. She worked as an assistant director at ICAIC, on both feature films and documentaries, and with well-known Cuban filmmakers including Santiago Alvarez, Sergio Giral and Pastor Vega.[24]

Although she spent over 20 years at ICAIC, Rolando now heads her own independent video production group, Imagenes del Caribe, based in Havana.[25] The group consists of Cuban film and television professionals and artists and has official status as part of the Movimiento Nacional de Video de Cuba (National Video Movement of Cuba). Rolando notes that her participation in Imagenes del Caribe does not preclude her continuing connection with ICAIC, arguing "it doesn't mean we are separate [from] the Institute of Cuban Film. We [still] belong…[but] we are trying to taste the world of video."

Rolando directed her first documentary, *Oggun: Un eterno presente/Oggun: Eternally Present* in 1991. Produced by VideoAmerica SA, a video company with representation in Cuba, this popular documentary has made regular appearances at festivals in the US.[26] The 52 minute-long video documentary was written and directed by Rolando, and produced at a cost of $30,000. It is the first of a proposed series on Afrocuban traditions.

Although Gómez and Rolando were/are both black women filmmakers in Cuba, I do not wish to reduce the relationship between their texts to a simple lineal one of ideological and/or aesthetic influences. An analysis of their work based on textual readings alone certainly foregrounds their common interest in Afrocuban subjects and themes. However, despite only a 10-year age difference, and a common structural positioning as filmmakers who were both black and female in Cuba, Gómez and Rolando encounter(ed) and negotiate(d) vastly different racially- and gender-coded institutional configurations. The consequence of these differences is reflected in the degree to which Rolando is able to explicitly explore issues relevant to race and ethnicity, while Gómez could only do so more indirectly.[27]

Gómez was, for a long time, the only woman director and the only black Cuban at ICAIC. Unlike Gómez, Rolando has worked at ICAIC during a period when there were a number of women filmmakers there (although she herself never achieved the status of director); nevertheless, she remained the only black woman. In addition, although Rolando has worked at ICAIC for over two decades, she is part of a new Cuba that has permitted, in recent years, a more open exploration of issues of ethnicity/race as well as the development of an independent film (or more frequently, video) production sphere.

That Gómez served as an inspiration to Rolando cannot be denied. In discussing her plans to produce a documentary on Sara Gómez for whom she (and many other Cuban filmmakers) shows great admiration, Rolando states that despite the tributes paid to Sara Gómez (as in a special issue of *Cine Cubano* dedicated to her), she (Rolando) has been unable to obtain con-

sent from ICAIC to produce a documentary on Gómez.[28] Rolando has already written the script, but is still trying to get production funding for this documentary which she plans as "a re-encounter with this singular woman." [29]

Rolando has conducted several tours of the United States in recent years, attending conferences and festivals. The limited access to resources within Cuba that independent filmmakers face has forced Rolando to look abroad for collaborative projects with institutions and organizations that can provide not only funding and equipment but access to research facilities, distribution, marketing and promotional support. The loosening of the restrictions on Cuban travel to the US thus positions Rolando in a very different political economic context than that faced by Gómez. Rolando has been working with a consortium of academics and a public television station in Tampa, Florida, as guest director on a project involving the history of the Tampa Cuban community during the period when Cuba's national hero, Jose Martí, obtained substantial backing from the Afrocuban Pedroso family.

Rolando's stated purpose of examining aspects of the African diaspora experience has, to date, been manifested in all of her three documentaries. The first, *Oggun*, is "about the ancestral legacy" of Afrocubans. According to Rolando, "in Cuba this tradition is not something that you need to go to the archives to find. It is something that is part of the country, of my culture. When I say "my culture" it is because I am a black woman... [but] the African tradition is very spread [among] different people." The second documentary, *My Footsteps in Baragua*, depicts the migration of Afro-Caribbean peoples and the presence of Anglophone Caribbean populations, especially Jamaicans and Barbadians in Cuba. The third, *Eyes of the Rainbow*, "incorporates the ancestral legacy with present-day political struggle," profiling Assata Shakur, a former member of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army, as well as the Yoruba deity, the orisha Oya.[30]

In 1994, *Oggun* won the Premio de la Popularidad at the Festival de Video Mujer e Imagen in Ecuador. Dedicated to the tradition of Yoruba-Lucumí chanting, *Oggun* features Cuba's leading akpwon (orisha praise singer/chanter), Lázaro Rós,[31] a devotee of Oggun, god of metals and war. [32] As a celebration of Afrocuban religious practices and mythology, it is both entertaining and informative. Rolando points out that Oggun's primary value, however, lies in its preservation of cultural forms that were the province of a generation that is now dying, and whose legacy is only now being captured in its original form. Arguing the oral tradition which Rós practices as an akpwon reflects a communal history, drawing as it does upon the words of many others before him, Rolando presents the legend of Oggun through the spoken and sung words of Rós, combined with striking visual reenactments from the rich mythology of Santería.

In *Oggun*, Rolando's opening shot reveals both a gender and race-inflected sensibility in the dedication, "to my mother, to my grandmother, to my African ancestors", which appears in stark red letters against a black background. As the sound of drums begins to rise, this textual screen gives way to another, this time a quote by the Haitian writer, Jacques Stephen Alexis, which sets the premise of Rolando's approach: "Africa does not leave the Negro in peace, no matter from which country he is, the place from where he comes or goes."

The opening visual, an altar, appears to the accompaniment of Ros' voice in song. It pays homage, in accordance with Santería tradition, to Eleggua, the trickster deity, the owner of roads and opportunities, and lord of the crossroads. Eleggua must always be the first orisha honored during any ceremony, or at the beginning of any endeavor. Shots of the holy ceiba tree follow as the camera tilts down, to reveal Rós, a dedicated devotee of Oggun, seated at its foot. The ceiba tree is considered a holy tree because it reminded the early Yoruba slaves of the sacred baobab of their native West Africa.[33]

Structured around Rós' recounting of the legends from his position at the foot of the ceiba tree, the film combines dramatizations of these legends with Rós' participation in the toque de tambors. The toque de tambors are ritual drumming ceremonies intended to invoke an orisha. Oggun is a powerful presentation of Santería "as a living tradition in rituals, dance, music, performance, storytelling, costume, spectacle and spirit possession."[34]

Rós' words reveal the patakís, the mythical legends of the Yoruba oral literature passed down over the ages by the akpwons. The dramatic recreations of the patakís draw upon, and are presented using, the tools of the oral tradition, i.e., tales, performance, dance and songs. Rolando supplements these with those specific to the cinematic medium — slow motion shots, shooting during the early light of dawn, curtains of mist created with the use of a fog machine, the use of fades and slow dissolves, use and careful manipulation of multiple sound effects, especially in the forest scenes. Rolando also includes music that was especially composed by the renowned Cuban singer and performer

Pablo Milanés. The editing juxtaposes scenes of Rós seated under the holy ceiba tree with those of Rós singing at the toque de tambor, accompanied by the ritual singing and dancing of other followers and with altars of the various orishas depicted.

Oggun dramatizes the tale of Oggun, the god of metals, war, progress and civilization who, after becoming enamored of his mother, goes into self-exile into the mountains. This puts at risk the progress of civilization, and Rolando's visual metaphors of the metallic tools of civilization – anvils, hammers, machetes — falling apart, are compellingly presented through slow motion photography which renders the scenes dramatic, lyrical and spiritual. Into the forest hideout where Oggun lives and works in solitude, only Oshun, goddess of love and of the rivers, is able to succeed in seducing Oggun back with drops of honey, symbol of the sweetness of life.

In addition to Rós' tale of Oggun's departure from, and return to the world, Rolando provides audiences with visual and aural introductions to some of the other major orishas of Santería — Oshun, the goddess of love, Yemaya, goddess of the seas, Oya, goddess of the whirlwind, cemetery and rainbow (she appears wearing a vivid multi-colored dress), and Shango, god of thunder and lightning, all of whom are linked to Oggun. In each case, the colors, symbols and shrines of the relevant orishas herald their appearance, being immediately recognizable to anyone acquainted with the basic attributes of the major orishas. Rolando (1996a) elaborates on the notion of a Santería aesthetic:

In order to enrich the symbolism of [the] dances, they are often combined in the editing with different "representations" of the orishas (shrines, and lidded vessels, tureens, or bowls where stones and other properties of the orishas are kept). No artist who attempts to approach the aesthetic values of Santería can ignore these expressions. The believers show their affection for their orishas with fruits, flowers, sweets, and different adornments; they "dress" them or drape them with cloths that correspond to the attributes or colors that identify them.

Oggun (portrayed by a non-professional actor), as the god of metals, is seen initially in his manifestation as a blacksmith. In a later sequence, he hacks down the vegetation around him with a machete as he searches for the mysterious presence he can sense nearby. In the Cuban context this deity, whose tales refer to him as a clearer of forests and dense vegetation, is often portrayed with a machete in hand. Gleason (1993, 114) explains the reason for this:

Having drawn new breath of life from an altered atmosphere, those segments of African invocation and praise-poetry to have been solidly retained in collective memory have gradually shifted to mesh with conditions of diaspora. For example, of Ogun's canonical 21 tools and weapons, it is primarily the machete that figures in this Cuban song from the cane fields.

The images of the swishing machete in Oggun are accompanied by the song referred to by Gleason, i.e., a rendering of the Lucumí song for Oggun, "Ikiri Ada" ("Restless Machete") led by Rós, and accompanied by a chorus of women in accordance with Santería's gendered conventions of call and response (Gleason 1993). Rolando was also able to capture the living tradition of Santería by ending the documentary with a follower of Oggun, appropriately with a machete in hand, being "mounted" (a state of spiritual possession by a deity) during a religious ceremony.

An otherwise excellent documentary, *Oggun* would have benefited by a contextualization of the role of Santería in Cuban society. *Oggun's* beautiful visuals, compelling song and dance sequences, and fascinating mythology provoke a desire to understand the role and impact of this remarkable religious tradition in Cuban society, both historically and contemporarily, without satisfying it.

As previously noted, both Moore (1988) and Martínez-Echazabál (1994) have maintained that African-derived religious practices in post-Revolutionary Cuba have received harsher forms of censorship and criticisms from the State than have Catholic practices. In the early post-Revolutionary years, Carbonell (1993, 200) questioned the silence of Revolutionary writers on the political and cultural role of African religious beliefs, arguing that the Marxist interpretation of religion as an opium of the masses may accurately reflect its use as an instrument in the service of the dominant class (as was the case with Catholicism), whereas African-derived religions in Cuba were the beliefs of the most exploited sector. He points out that "the religious organizations of the Africans in Cuba were not only the most effective instruments for preserving the cultural traditions of the blacks; they also functioned as political organizations against slavery. The clandestine, religious nature of these organizations concealed their real political role", that of providing their members a forum for resistance or subversive activity.

It could be argued that a film that explores or represents only the ritual aspects of a religion, and not its political and social dimensions, can be said to be folkloric. A greater tolerance of depictions and explorations of Afrocuban religious practices, and Brandon's (1989/1990, 212) argument that African-based religions in socialist Cuba are tolerated if they are presented as folklore, may explain the recent emergence of films about Santería from Cuba — such as Oggun and Rigoberto

Lopez Pego's Mensajero de los dioses (1989) — that are openly celebratory.

Afro-Cuban religions receive some tolerance and solicitude when presented as folklore, as do the theatrical companies that travel throughout Cuba and to foreign countries. Dances and music which are part and parcel of an entire religious complex are presented as "people's folklore." In the context of contemporary Cuban society such performances serve not to publicize religious practices but rather to desacralize them. In a sense they have been tamed. The entire world which they create in the life and imagination is reduced to an entertainment.

Brandon's somewhat pessimistic view of the possible threat posed to Afrocuban religions through their folklorization, by what Martínez-Echazabál (1994, 19) describes as "reducing viable and integrated social phenomena to exotic fragments for tourist and popular consumption", appears to have been reinforced by recent changes in Cuban official policy towards freedom of religious expression. Martínez-Echazabál (20) notes that in the 1990s, there has been a proliferation of Afrocuban activities and artifacts in Cuba including conferences, documentaries, T-shirts bearing the names of orishas and an historical soap opera (*Passion and Prejudice*) in which the "central characters are 'good' ñáñigos," a phenomenon which she decries as "de-secularizing Afro-Cuban culture and relocating it in a ... space which the State ... had only seemed to acknowledge when relegated to the historical or to the aesthetic realms, and now to the commodified one." [35]

Manuel (1991, 295), however, denies the existence of state policy to folklorize Afrocuban religious practices.

[Cuban] Scholars and spokesmen do not attempt to draw sharp dichotomies between folkloric and practical realms. Nor is it the policy of the state to co-opt the cults by celebrating them as folklore while actively repressing cult practice itself. Accordingly, it is often difficult to separate the self-consciously "folkloric" recreations of Afro-Cuban culture from their grassroots, primary "folk" sources, just as the word folklórico *is generally used in Spanish to denote both meanings.*

Conclusion

Moore (1988) condemned the official silence on racial issues in Cuba as itself being racist in nature, accusing the Castro government of "negrophobia" because it has been particularly repressive of Afrocuban religious/cultural practices.[36] There is no doubt that even though the "marginalized" populations referred to in Gómez's *One Way or Another* consisted primarily of mulattos and blacks, the newly Revolutionary Cuba's analysis of social relations permitted only a class-bound perspective that inhibited consciousness of the dialectical intersection of race, gender and class. Gómez's insistence in incorporating aspects of gender and race into her exploration of various aspects of Cuban society reflected a desire to buck the official/conventional tendency to subsume issues of race in particular.

Rolando's work, on the other hand, reflects a growing movement to integrate ethnicity, especially African heritage, into the politics of representation in Cuban cultural expression. Rolando worked as assistant director on two short documentaries by a fellow Afrocuban, Rigoberto Lopez Pego, whose *Mensajero de los dioses /Messengers of the Gods* (1989) explores Afrocuban cultural identity through an examination of drumming rituals in Santería. Lopez's earlier *El viaje mas largo/ The Longest Journey* (1988) explores the history and significance of the Chinese presence in Cuban society. Sergio Giral's feature film, *Maria Antonia* (1991), made prior to his leaving Cuba in 1991, similarly explores the cult of Oshun in the slums of Havana.

One Way or Another integrates Santería into the narrative, briefly and without comment, but isolates Abakuá for analysis of its role in contributing to the prevalence and persistence of machismo in Cuban society. Would Gómez have elaborated on Santería if she could have done so in a manner that permitted an open appreciation of this Afrocuban religious practice? We will never know. Giral's María Antonia, coming much later, in 1991, integrates Santería into the narrative as a crucial element in the lives of its central characters, but is celebratory nor condemnatory of the practices depicted.[37]

The recent documentaries, *Oggun* and *Mensajero de los dioses*, clearly reflect a recent trend in Cuban cinema to celebrate Afrocuban religious practices — but they do so without providing any type of social, historical or political contextualization of the roles played by Afrocuban religions as sites of resistance, both during slavery and later. Nor do any of these films present an analysis of racial inequalities or racial discrimination in post-Revolution Cuba. This is perhaps understandable since the context of production and, perhaps more importantly, distribution of these documentaries within Cuba is unlikely to prove conducive to challenges to an official policy that is unwilling to confront the history (and, therefore, also their potential) of Afrocuban religions as sites of political subversion.

In September 1997, an electronic press release announced the limited release of Rolando's third documentary. [38] *Eyes of the Rainbow* profiles the life of Assata Shakur, an African American political activist now living in exile in Cuba. A former Black Panther and Black Liberation Army activist, Shakur was con-

victed and imprisoned for life on charges of accessory to murder after a shootout with New Jersey State Troopers. She escaped from prison in 1979, and was granted political asylum in Cuba.[39] Eyes of the Rainbow also profiles a Yoruba deity, the orisha Oya, goddess of fire, wind and death, who is also manifested as a warrior goddess.[40] Perceived as strong, assertive, courageous, independent and always willing to take risks, the connection to Shakur is obvious. *Eyes* also features music by the Cuban Grupo Vocal Baobab and the all-woman African-American a capella group, Sweet Honey in the Rock.

What emerges as a pattern in Cuban filmmaking, even within the newly ethnicity-friendly environment within which Rolando and Rigoberto Lopez are able to explore, interrogate and/or celebrate their own and other cultural and ethnic legacies, is that none of these films present an analysis of racial inequalities or racial discrimination in post-Revolution Cuba. Whether the context of production is within the state-controlled apparatus of ICAIC, or whether through a relatively young, and therefore fragile, independent video movement, it is unlikely that any challenges will emerge in the near future to an official policy that is unwilling to confront either the analysis of racial inequities in contemporary Cuba, or the history (and, therefore, also their potential) of Afrocuban religions as sites of political resistance.

Notes

1. Quoted in Baxandall (1983, 77) who points out that this statement by Lenin "relates to communications - to information, propaganda and persuasion as such - rather than to film as an art."
2. Chanan (1985, 275).
3. I am not referring here to differences in age (the age difference between the two women, had Gómez still been alive, would have been only 10 years); but to the different politico-economic and institutional contexts in which they work(ed).
4. During the guerrilla war, García Espinosa headed the insurgents' film unit, Cine Rebelde (Burton 1986).
5. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea died of cancer in April 1996.
6. Almendros 1988; Paranagua 1992.
7. Gloria Rolando, at a discussion after the screening of *My Footsteps in Baragua* at the Union for Democratic Communications conference held at Loyola University, Chicago, October 12, 1996.
8. See Paranagua (1988). Pineda-Barnet (in personal discussion with the author, October 13, 1997, Evanston, Illinois) notes that occasionally, the two institutions may work together, but that the leadership of the two institutions have a long history of antagonism. Chanan (1985) situates this antagonism in ideological differences and rivalries originating in the early days of the Revolution.
9. Discussion with author at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, October 14, 1996.
10. This is a 1994 estimate.
11. Most sources refer to the population as being predominantly mulatto, i.e. racially mixed. The last official Cuban census to reflect racial demographics was conducted in 1981 and indicated 66% of the population considered itself white, 21.9% mulatto or mestizo, 12% Black and 0.1% "Asiatic" (Walden 1995). Cuba no longer documents racial classification of its population.
12. The degree of racism prevalent in pre-Revolution Cuba can be ascertained from the fact that Batista, even as Cuba's president, was barred from Cuba's exclusively white upper-class clubs and associations because he was what Cubans called a *mulatto avanzado*, a very light-skinned mulatto. Although Fidel is an illegitimate child of a white (reportedly also racist) Spanish immigrant and his mulatta servant, he is generally considered white (Brock and Cunningham 1991). Unless specifically referred to as Raúl Castro, references to Castro are to Fidel.
13. Sergio Giral made the remarks on April 20, 1996, at the African Film Festival, Visions II, held at Columbia College in Chicago.
14. Quoted in Sarduy and Stubbs (1993, 6).
15. It should be noted that attacks on the Cuban government because of its repressive stance towards many churches tends to overlook the engagement of those institutions in political

activities; North American writers often characterize such attacks as being targeted towards religious activity. In pointing out this omission, I do not mean to contend that Churches should not participate in political activity, nor do I condone government repression of political activity by churches.

16. Santería has also integrated what are separate cults of the orishas in Yorubaland into one unified cult in which the orishas are ranked in a hierarchy of initiations.
17. I say "most" because I have not been fortunate enough to see any of the films made by Nicolás Guillén Landrián, nephew of the renowned poet. Sergio Giral's *María Antonia* (1991) takes place within a milieu infused by Santería beliefs and practices and Rigoberto Lopez's *Mensajero de los dioses* (1989) deals with Santería drumming.
18. See Lesage (1979), Kuhn (1982), Kaplan (1983).
19. According to Paranagua (1990), despite the widely-held belief that Sara Gómez was the only woman filmmaker in Cuba during her lifetime, she was the only *black* woman filmmaker. Paranagua names Rosina Prado as a woman who had already begun to tackle issues relating to women in a film called *Palmas Cubanas* (1963). This was confirmed by Enrique Pineda-Barnet, a Cuban filmmaker who joined ICAIC in 1963 (in conversation with author, October 13, 1997, Evanston, Illinois).
20. See Lopez (1990).
21. However, in *One Way or Another*, the question of class is an explicit concern of the narrative, making it less easy to ignore.
22. The reference to African-derived, especially Afro-Caribbean, religions as "voodoo" is a common practice in North America, especially in the media. Reviews of the John Schlesinger film, *The Believers* (1987) for example, abound with the term "voodoo" but the film is about Santería, which is depicted as a cult that is involved in child sacrifice!
23. González states that Alea and Espinosa had to finish the film, and others (Chanan 1985, Lesage 1979) note the additional participation of the Afro-Cuban documentary filmmaker, Rigoberto Lopez.
24. Biographical information on Rolando was obtained from a copy of her curriculum vitae, dated 1992/3, and from an interview conducted with her by the author in October 1996, as well as from the Afrocuba website, located at http://www.afrocubaweb.com.
25. This information was obtained from Rolando herself during a discussion at the UDC Conference at Loyola University in Chicago, Nov/Oct 1996. Rolando stresses (telephone conversation with author, Sept. 1997) that Imagenes del Caribe is a video group, not a company.
26. Source: http://www.Afrocubaweb.com/GloriaTour96.htm
27. I elaborate on this subject, particularly with regard to Gómez's documentaries, elsewhere (Ph.D. dissertation, expected completion, June 1998).
28. Conversation between Rolando and the author, Chicago, October 12, 1996.
29. Source: http://www.Afrocubaweb.com. October, 1997.
30. I am quoting Rolando's own description of her third project, stated during a telephone conversation with the author on September 19, 1997. As of November 1997, I have not been able to persuade Rolando to part with a copy of this documentary. Both Rolando and her US promoter, Chester King, would only say that the situation regarding distribution rights to *Eyes of the Rainbow* in the US was "very complicated," and they both expressed reluctance to make the documentary available even for scholarly research.
31. I use this shorter spelling of his name, which appears more frequently in various sources than the spelling "Róss" which appears in the opening credits for *Oggun*.
32. Lucumí is the Cuban version of the Yoruba language in which liturgical songs of the Santería religions are performed. See Castellanos (1996) for elaboration of the term "Lucumí" in relation to its African roots.
33. Afrocuba website. http://www.afrocubaweb.com, October 1997.
34. Lindsay (1996, xxi).
35. Ñáñigos are the "little devils" or deities that members of Abakua honor or impersonate. Drewal (1996) has noted that in Brazil too, Afro-Brazilian cultures were forced to operate "underground" until recent years when Brazilian authorities began exploiting them as a commodity to attract tourist dollars.

36. Moore's contentions have been criticized for their anecdotal nature, lack of historical context and combination of truths and untruths, and his race analysis has been characterized as overly narrow, but his insistence on spotlighting race-related issues in post-1959 Cuba has been commended by many scholars. According to Sarduy and Stubbs (1993, 23), Moore reversed his position within three months of the publication of his book, acknowledging to the US mainstream press that blacks have improved their material and social status in Cuba under Castro, and that blacks "would rally around Mr. Castro, or a successor regime, if it appeared that the financially powerful, predominantly white Cubans of Miami were a serious threat to their social position" (quoted in Sarduy and Stubbs).
37. Santería also makes an appearance in the Cuban film *Strawberry and Chocolate* (1993).
38. Email press release issued by Chester King, dated September 4, 1997.
39. Source: http://www.afrocubaweb.com/Rainbow.htm#Shakur.
40. Santería website. http://www4.nando.net/prof/caribe/Dictionary.html, September 12, 1997.

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