

Diana Pardo

Oklahoma University

Traces of Santería in *Encancaranublado*

Some minority writers who wish to remain loyal to and within the realms of their culture do so through experimentation. They extract cultural elements that bind reader to text. In so doing, deviation from the dominant order is imperative, because

... minority discourse... claims that the languages of power and the historical assumptions and distortions they have engendered endow their users, potentially at least, with a power-based vision of the world and with a consciousness of the world that tends to devalue those who are different and less powerful... minority literature is not just jettisoned against the dominant canon and its hegemonic centers, but also is immersed in those substratum African/African-American linguistic forms customarily thought to be outside the possibilities of creativity. (Kubayanda 118)

These writers aspire to attract the attention of the native people through themes that are identifiable by the reader. Morsels of culture are dispersed throughout the text for the reader to decipher, identify, and enjoy.

Experimentation is crucial for minorities who want to remain minorities and affirm perspectives (in their works) reflective of their cultural spheres. It is done "inconnection with a specific cultural context" (14). María Carmen Zielina corroborates this idea and insists that the efficaciousness of this depends on the "lector informado" of the "africanía". Zielina states:

aplico el término "africanía" específicamente a la literatura, fuera de las ciencias sociales, teniendo en cuenta el papel de "sistema de códigos" que la cultura africana ha tenido para los escritores caribeños, convirtiéndolos en "masters of these codes". (15)

This reader must be "un lector entrenado en las cosas del Caribe, capaz de seguir ciertas pistas ofrecidas a través de la transculturación, de la idea del nacionalismo y sincretismo que aparecen en el texto" (31). Puerto Rican writer Ana Lydia Vega in the short story *Encancaranublado* manipulates her literary skills to attract the attention of her audience by appealing to the idiosyncrasies of the people. Vega herself has said:

esta generación de escritores los que surgieron de los setenta ha echado mano de elementos de la cultura popular muy importantes, entre ellos la música, el humor, el baile, el lenguaje festivo, la santería, el espiritismo; todo lo popular ha sido aprovechado para decir el país, para construir la cultura nacional. Estos elementos

A JOURNAL OF THE CÉFIRO GRADUATE STUDENT ORGANIZATION

son tan importantes, son experiencias tan vigentes y auténticas que nos hemos sentido integrados a ellos, como partícipes más que observadores. (314)

With this in mind, a brief history of Santería in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean is of essence because its attributes are significantly observable in the story *Encancaranublado* and of major importance for the purpose of the analysis. The reader of the "africanía" is invited to decode and decipher the traces of Santería in the story.

The Survival of Yoruba Elements in Santería

For various reasons African religious elements (Santería and Voodoo) survived in the Caribbean.¹ The chief reason was the landholder's failure to acknowledge the depth of the African slaves ties to ancestral beliefs, rituals and practices. The landholder so consumed with the production of the slaves did not realize the participation of slaves in Christian ceremonies and rituals was a disguising of their own religious practices. Zielina adds:

por estas razones, tanto en Cuba como en Puerto Rico, gobierno y hacendados miraban con "buenos ojos" la práctica cultural de cantos, vestimentas y adornos, que desplegaban los esclavos en determinados días, como por ejemplo el día de los Reyes Magos, o el de Santiago de Compostela, o el de cualquier otro santo religioso. El colono aceptaba esta práctica cultural porque la consideraba como una válvula emocional para los esclavos; pensaba que era inofensiva y además resultaba al final una forma de halagar su narcisismo de colono; éste se autorreconocía y autohalagaba como persona generosa y cristiana. (24)

Of course, after the Haitian revolution there was a bitter transformation of which the slaves bore the brunt. Haiti gained its independence from France in 1804; as a result, the colonialist powers in the Americas considered this independence a threat to their colonies. The treatment of slaves became more cruel, austere, and inhumane as fear of uprisings increased. Nevertheless, the slaves continued to practice their religion under the guise of the master's religion.² From the fusion and interaction of different Yoruba beliefs combined with Catholic beliefs, Santería is born.

... the phenomena of acculturation ... may signify the substitution of some elements for others without becoming effective agents of transformation of the social structure and of behavioral values within the various institutions. (Esteva-Fabregat 5)

The deities in Santería are called Orishas and the most known Obatalá, Changó, Yemeyá, Elegguá, Ogun, Oriunla, and Oyó constitute the Siete Potencias Africanas. The Orishas represent and control all facets of human life. Each possess special powers and although worshipped individually, together as a group they possess insurmountable power. Syncretized as Christian saints; for instance, Obatalá as Our Lady of Lourdes and Changó

as Saint Barbara and even if slaves identified the Catholic saints with the Orishas, González-Wippler claims:

para el devoto católico, la imagen de un santo es la representación ideológica....
Para el santero, o practicante de la santería, la imagen católica es la personificación
de un dios yoruba. (13)

Nevertheless, combining and reconciling different elements allows "syncretism [as] the most complete intellectual manifestation of cultural mixing" (Esteva-Fabregat 6).

The events in the story

Encancaranublado are as follows. A Haitian sails a small boat en route to Miami with hopes of escaping poverty in his homeland. Along the way he picks up a Dominican and later a Cuban who have capsized at sea. Essentially, all leave their countries to flee economic deprivation and political uncertainties. Although they come from different countries, they are all "antillano, negro, y pobre" (14) and dream of the "pursuit of happiness" (13) in the United States.

The uncertainty that looms over the lives of these men is suggested in the title of the story *Encancaranublado* and the epigraph:

El cielo está encancaranublado.
quién lo encancaranublaría?
El que lo encancaranubló
buen encancaranublador sería. (13)

The epigraph serves as an invocation from these men who are blindly and dangerously floating in the Caribbean Sea. It also, for the reader of the "africanía", educes the spirits of Orishas or African deities, Obatalá and Changó. These two Orishas have dwellings in the sky and the clouds and possess power over the natural elements.

Reverberations of the nebulous and ambiguous situation faced by the men abound in the story. At the beginning of the story the narrator makes clear the haphazard situation the men face. For instance, "es como jugar al descubridor teniendo sus dudas de que la tierra es legalmente redonda" (13).

Nevertheless, hope dwells in the heart of the reader of the "africanía" as well as the men. The familiarity with and the faith in *Santería* do not allow despair to creep in. Zielina's position is that "el lector de la 'africanía' tiene que llenar 'huecos', ... tiene que suplir, con su experiencia de cultura sincrética, ..." (32). Hence, the reader of the "africanía" easily unravels the symbolism. For example, the beginning of the story is as follows: "septiembre, agitador profesional de huracanes, avisa guerra llenando los mares de erizos y aguaviva" (13).

The month of September alludes to hues of Obatalá's skills. Obatalá, according to legend, was born in September and endowed with the kingdom of earth by the creator Olorún-Olofi.³ When one invokes his powers he can safely guide them to their place of destination, in this case, Miami. The danger of the journey escalates in September because

A JOURNAL OF THE CÉFIRO GRADUATE STUDENT ORGANIZATION

it is a month afflicted by hurricanes in the Caribbean. As the ninth month of the year, September symbolizes the birth of something new or starting over for these men who seek a better life in the United States, “ese país de progreso” (17).

However, a shadow of doubt is cast on their future when picked up by the American ship, after capsizing at sea. The crude reality of “aquí si quieren comer tienen que meter mano y duro. Estos gringos no les dan na gratis ni a su mai” (20). The men in the story, after consuming their provisions resume their hopes and quest for a better life. “Almorzados el casabe y las mazorcas, los compinches reaunudaron su análisis socioeconómico... con la contentura del que liga los encantos de la Estatua de la Libertad bajo la desgastada túnica” (17).

The image of the Statue of Liberty with the “wasted tunic” blatantly nullifies the dreams of the men's “pursuit of happiness”, and the provisions serve as an offering to Changó for the purpose of keeping him happy, prepared, and adept to perform his craft.

Changó the son of Kalunga, is the Orisha of water. Hence, he inherently rules and dominates the water. During tempestuous times he is called and his powers are elicited. The three men in the story, Antenor, Diógenes and Carmelo, supplicate his mercy and power when their boat capsizes. The immersion in water signifies death and annihilation on the one hand but of rebirth and regeneration on the other, since immersion intensifies the life force. (Cirlot 365)

The narration is as follows:

y a pique se fueron,... A pique y lloviendo, con truenos y viento...
-!Un barco!, gritó Carmelo,... Las tres voces náufragas se unieron en un largo, agudo y optimista alarido de auxilio. Y al cabo de un rato -y no me pregunten cómo el carajo se zapatearon a los tiburones porque fue sin duda un milagro conjunto de la Altagracia, la Caridad del Cobre y las Siete Potencias Africanas- los habían rescatado... (19)

While the forces of “Altagracia, la Caridad del Cobre y las Siete Potencias Africanas” rescue the men from the perils of the elements, who will secure them from the racism to which they will be subjected?⁴ Once on the ship, the captain takes a look at them and shouts:

-get those niggers down there and let the spiiks take care of 'em.... Minutos después,... tuvieron la grata experiencia de escuchar su lengua materna, algo maltratada pero siempre reconocible. (20)

As hopes of their dreams evaporate they realize that in spite of the differences or “pedacitos de cultura, de idioma, de ideologías, de creencias” (Zielina, 165) they will continue to be “antillano, negro, y pobre” (14). Befittingly, the story ends with the image of “un brazo negro...” (20), a metaphor for the laborious prospects awaiting the men, since, they have been advised “si quieren comer tienen que meter mano...” (20). At the beginning of the story the “brazo” serves another function. “Ese mollerudo brazo de mar que lo separa del pursuit of happiness” (13) is an obstruction of their destination. However, at the

end of the story, ironically, “un brazo negro” belonging to a Puerto Rican who speaks the language “algo maltratada” is the link between their Caribbean culture and the North American culture, which they will have to assimilate. This embracement of cultures in actuality is a clash of cultures unequivocally highlighted by Nicolás Guillén in the following poem “Canción Puertorriqueña” as follows:

Cómo estás, Puerto Rico,
tú de socio asociado en sociedad?
Al pie de cocoteros y guitarras,
Bajo la luna y junto al mar,
Qué suave honor andar del brazo,
Brazo con brazo, del Tío Sam!
¿En que lengua me entiendes,
en qué lengua por fin te podré hablar,
si en bien,
si en well,
si en mal,
si en bad, si en very bad?... (31)

According to Yoruba legend, man was created without a head “la cual fue añadida por Obatalá” (110). The various parts of the body “brazo, cara, ojos, cabeza, mano, etc...” mentioned in the story serve to elicit the image of a new creation. In *Santería* it is believed that “toda la estructura ósea del cuerpo pertenece a Obatalá... y también la cabeza y los sesos” (110), hence, it is his responsibility to shape (in this case reshape) the fragmented human body and spirit with a new sense of consciousness.

In conclusion, Vega appeals to the idiosyncrasies that embody that community. She assumes the responsibility of connecting the reader to the text. For instance, she attracts their attention through “identity themes”. In the story *Encancaranublado* she aims at providing another perspective of history and identity for the people. That is, the themes (history, racism, *Santería* etc.) addressed in this story are not unfamiliar to the readers of “africanía”. By addressing these issues she offers another perspective from which to view their reality. She penetrates the popular culture in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Instead of portraying stereotyped characters, she resorts to humanizing the image of Blacks by representing various aspects and dimensions of a more credible and genuine Black psyche.

Notas

¹ Migene González-Wippler says:

en Haití, el culto del vudú fue propagado por los nagos, ibos, aradas, dahomeyanos y otras tribus. En las colonias españolas y portuguesas especialmente Cuba y Brasil, los yorubas y bantúes transmitieron ritos mágicos semejantes. Aunque algunos de los rituales y ceremonias de la santería no son diferentes de ritos del vudú haitiano, las divergencias son marcadas, pues no solamente estuvieron implicadas en los dos movimientos..., sino que también Haití se encontraba bajo influencia francesa durante el tráfico

A JOURNAL OF THE CÉFIRO GRADUATE STUDENT ORGANIZATION

de esclavos, mientras otros países del Caribe, como Cuba, Puerto Rico y la República Dominicana estaban bajo el dominio español. (13)

² The Yorubas of Nigeria and other areas of West Africa brought along their myths, rituals, and beliefs to Latin America when they came as slaves. The Yoruba tribe comprised several ethnic groups, which extended to Benin. When the Ewe tribe invaded Dahomey, many were forced to leave for the coast where later the slave traders captured them. (González-Whippler)

³ Obatalá, syncretized as Our Lady of Lourdes, in an outrage of jealousy yanks out his wife's eyes leaving her blind. Subsequently, he is endowed with the capacity of guidance and clarity.

⁴ La Virgen de Altagracia is the patron saint of the Dominican Republic, La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre is the patron saint of Cuba and Las Siete Potencias represent the voodoo practices of Haiti.

Works Consulted

- Boadas, Aura Marina and Mireya Fernández Merino., eds. *La huella étnica en la narrativa caribeña*. Caracas: Aveca, 1999.
- Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: Texas UP, 1981.
- Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. *The Repeating Island*. Trans. James E. Maraniss. Durham: Duke UP, 1996.
- Cirlot, J. E. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. Trans. Jack Sage. 2nd ed. 1971.
- Dayan, Joan. *Haiti, History, and the Gods*. Berkeley: UP, 1995.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: Minnesota: UP, 1986.
- Esteva-Fabregat, Claudio. *Mestizaje in Ibero-America*. Trans. John Wheat. Tucson: UP, 1995.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1963.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Seabury Press, 1974.
- González-Whippler, Migene. *Santería: magia africana en Latinoamérica*. México, D.F.: Editorial Diana, 1976.
- Guillén, Nicolás. *La paloma de vuelo popular*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1968.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989.
- Jackson, Richard L. *Black Literature and Humanism in Latin America*. Athens: Georgia UP, 1976.
- Kubayanda, Josaphat B. "Minority Discourse and the African Collective: Some Examples from Latin American and Caribbean Literature." *Cultural Critique* 6. (Spring 1987): 113-30.
- Roorda, Eric P. *The Dictator Next Door*. Durham: Duke UP, 1998.
- Torres, Vicente Francisco. *La novella bolero latinoamericana*. México: UNAM, 1998.
- Vega, Ana Lydia. *Encancaranublado y otros cuentos de naufragio*. Carolina: Editorial Antillana, 1994.
- Zielina, María Carmen. *La africanía en el cuento cubano y puertorriqueño*. Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1992.