This book is an outstanding work on the construction and reconstruction of obeah as a discursive category and legal artifact. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in Afro-Caribbean religions and spiritualities and in Afro-American religions more broadly.

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References


Of the various arguments presented in *Religion in the Kitchen*, two seem to stand out. Elizabeth Pérez, a renowned expert in Afro-Atlantic religious formations, uses her ethnography of Lucumi—a form of Caribbean and Latin American religion of West and Central African origin (popularly called Santería)—in the southern communities of the city of Chicago to interpret its historical meaning, detail its practices and rituals, and describe the processes of incorporation of a religious form that has a dimension of political resistance. Pérez explains the foundations of this complex practice, which is often considered a subaltern cult because it is somewhat obscure, illogical, and grounded in a form of bodily education rather than in a major intellectual and literary tradition. In other words, the author, like other researchers, tries to demonstrate how the religious market is based on deep internal differences and produces notions of distinction based on ingrained ideas of civilizational superiority. Lucumi is not only the stronghold of a long-standing historical experience that has a fundamental dimension in slavery, the memory of which is manifest in innumerable rituals and worldviews. It also asserts itself today as a specific public space, where problems experienced individually gain a collective dimension that is shared and integrated into a small society of rights and duties.

The way in which this society is reproduced on a daily basis is the second major axis of this work, although in fact it is the fundamental theme that structures the book. The author argues that, contrary to what institutional and accepted views on the reproduction of religious institutions and activities suggest, there is a set of practices that are disparaged because of their apparent banality yet are fundamental for the construction of a religious daily life. These practices acquire an even more salient influence in these cults of African origin. Throughout the book, Pérez interprets the importance of what she calls ‘micropractices,’ namely, those practices that develop in the kitchens of Ilé Laroye, the religious community in which she conducted her fieldwork. When attempting to interpret how official functions and prescriptions are dependent on these daily micropractices, Pérez offers us
a necessarily different look at Lucumi—not only the religious practice itself, but also the social world that surrounds and ultimately sustains it.

This research agenda allows the author to emphasize the role of individuals who are marginalized by the official history of the cult as well, due to their involvement in activities considered to be minor. These are the people working in spaces such as the communities’ kitchens, where Pérez spent a substantial amount of time. From this perspective, the ethnographic account puts women in a prominent place in the reproduction of this cult, while highlighting the importance of sexual minorities in Lucumi dynamics. In conversations in kitchens, usually in the context of ceremonial preparations, the beliefs, religious precepts, and master narratives that underpin this religious practice are instilled in believers. The centrality of these micropractices defies a ritualistic and educated notion of religious ritual, largely legitimized by religious leaders themselves. Based on her detailed investigation, the author describes how these micropractices around the preparation and consumption of food create a religious community. Thus, from the kitchen and from the table, a distinct representation of the religious community emerges.

Pérez’s ethnography contributes to the debate about how hierarchies are defined within a religious community and how daily practice is built. By deciphering in detail the inner logics of these Afro-Atlantic religious formations in a situated religious field and giving them meaning, this book reinforces their status. At the same time, it gives visibility and power to the individuals who occupy subordinate places within it. While Pérez’s work enlightens us about this little-known religious world and challenges the external representation of its power relations, it delves less into the relation of these individuals to the world beyond the religious community. The book describes the historical role of churches in the integration of the African populations in Chicago—especially the formation of the ‘Black Belt’ of the South Side—as the result of waves of migration from the country’s Southern states. The churches offered spiritual and material support and provided social capital to individuals in a situation of discrimination and segregation. They thus created a public, civic, and political space in the middle of the modern ghetto and worked to maintain the historical memory of this population.

Considering this social background, some questions could be raised about the role these communities have in a large public and political arena. If Pérez’s book makes hidden practices and individuals visible, if they are justly ennobled through her ethnographic account, it is not clear how this nobleness reverberates outside the religious community. The hierarchies that prevail both within and between religious communities are widely reproduced outside the religious arena. Kitchen practices might have the power to solidify social bonds and even to create a practical and symbolic space that is politically and historically significant—a singular idiom of gestures and meanings. But this specific power, this singular social capital, must exist within the streets of Chicago, where an omnipresent penal state (Wacquant 2008) works as a powerful social regulator.

The ennoblement of the domestic space is an extraordinary political gesture, but this does not eliminate the structural subordination of the domestic arena in a wider social and political space, especially because the power obtained in the domestic realm is historically linked with insufficient participation in public affairs. What is the voice of these people? How do they relate to political power in the face of a public space necessarily characterized by the presence of institutions other than religious ones, especially those that involve the foundations of democracy and the rule of law? Can they have a voice beyond that which refers them to the political and public discourse of their religious leaders? How do religious communities today politicize the problems that afflict their believers—maladies that are described in this
book (p. 100) as the result of unhappiness, illness, or misfortune?

These questions, which probably go beyond the author's main objectives, do not detract from the enormous achievements of this work. In examining the apparently banal micropractices that take place in subaltern spaces of daily life such as the kitchen, Pérez provides a valuable analysis of the invisible modes of reproduction of a religious cult.

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References


In post-revolutionary Cuba, religion has attracted considerable research. While earlier scholarly attention centered on the island's institutionalized churches (Crahan 1985; Kirk 1989), more recently the focus has shifted to popular spirituality. Not only Afro-Cuban religions (Holbraad 2012; Ochoa 2010; Wirtz 2007), but also spiritism (Espírito Santo 2015) have been the objects of a vibrant scholarship. In her book, *Cachita's Streets: The Virgin of Charity, Race, and Revolution in Cuba*, Jalane D. Schmidt, an assistant professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia, combines these diverse strands of Cuban religiosity by focusing on the Virgin of Charity from an ethno-historical perspective. The Virgin of Charity—Cachita—has previously been examined as a symbol of Cuban national identity from a local historical perspective (Portuondo Zúñiga 1995), as well as among exiled Miami Cubans (Tweed 1997). However, a comprehensive account that explores the Virgin's multiple meanings in Cuba, both now and in the past, had been missing until Schmidt's study.

Schmidt's main argument is that the Virgin of Charity is a potent, multi-vocal symbol through which Cubans have created notions of nationalism, race, and politics that have helped to make sense of their lives in the midst of historical turmoil. The book describes how such diverse actors as eighteenth-century slaves, Catholic clergy, ordinary Cubans, and even socialist political authorities have used the Virgin of Charity to create contested and competing notions of Cubanness. Paying detailed attention to a broad range of historical records, Schmidt shows how Cubans have debated the Virgin's race and political implications from the seventeenth century up to the present. She also provides an account of the changing political meanings that both ordinary people and colonial, republican, and revolutionary state authorities have given to streets and street processions as sites of Cuban popular culture throughout the island's history. While the book geographically crosses over the entire country, its emphasis is on the eastern Cuban village of El Cobre, the birthplace of the Virgin's cult.

Through her focus on the Virgin of Charity as the central figure of popular Catholicity that both draws elements from and contributes elements to Afro-Cuban religions and spiritism, Schmidt builds a historical account of the changing landscape of Cuban spirituality, avoiding artificial categorizations when describing the island’s various religious influences. She also situates the Virgin in a wider national, social, and political context, showing the changing relationship between the state and the Catholic Church. The book reveals their at times tension-laden and at other times more amicable relationship throughout the colonial, republican, and revolutionary periods.

Through the careful analysis of varied historical records, the author creates a detailed description of Cubans’ devotion to the Virgin