

The Raw and the Overcooked: Some Comments on Stephan Palmié's *Cooking of History*

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What does Stephan Palmié's new book offer to someone who is neither an expert on nor particularly interested in Afro-Cuban religion? The introduction on call number BL2532.S3 (under which books on Afro-Cuban religion are shelved in the Chicago University library) promises reflections on the anthropology of classification and categorization; the reference to Fernando Ortiz' pioneering essay "The Cooking of History" suggests an elaboration of his thoughts about the anthropology of globalization; while the title seems to have much in store for the student of religion and the transatlantic study of race – especially where earlier work by the author provided fascinating peeks into the rich material from which he can draw. However, *The Cooking of History* - like the *ajiaco* stew's "incessant bubbling of heterogeneous substances" to which Ortiz compared *cubanidad* (97-8) - does not advance a research question that relates these ingredients to each other in a systematic fashion. It leaves me with the feeling that the book mistakes the multiplication of ingredients (often too raw to digest or, more often, long overcooked) for good cooking.

Maybe Palmié main goal is to slay the "dragons" of an essentialized "African religion" that anachronistically persists in Caribbean modernity because it is thought to be functional for black lower class life (14). But even in the Caribbean, this is largely yesterday's news. (I'd rather read Ortiz's classics about it). I did not find an explicit analysis of whether and how the category "Afro-Cuban religion" differs in form and social content from other forms of cultural

classification (such as "religion" or "race"). *The Cooking of History* never explicitly addresses the debate about the anthropology of globalization opened up by the likes of Appadurai, Ferguson, Hannerz or Tsing. Neither does *The Cooking of History* employ a recognizable vocabulary for advancing our understanding of religion – especially where it studiously avoids the two most momentous innovations in the anthropology of religion of the past decades, the turn to material culture and the turn to secularism and the political theologies of the modern state. Finally, it does not theorize race (except by repeating Palmié's earlier argument that blackness is different from Africanity). It ignores how religion and race are globally related in the first place, and why one needs an analytic of the modern state to understand that. I believe that *The Cooking of History* remains so undertheorized because of Palmié's commitment – not unusual in the politically correct climate of much American anthropology – to a radical symmetry in analysis. In Palmié's case, this symmetry – which many copy from Bruno Latour's mistaken attribution of it to his own project – suggests that arguments from divination procedures are equal to arguments from empirical research (220, 262). The book thereby throws the baby (or maybe the toddler) of social scientific theorizing out with the bathwater instead of trying to teach it to stand on its feet.

The introduction to *The Cooking of History* poses the problem of classification: doesn't the category "Afro-Cuban Religion" confront the same irreducible variability in the real world that any typology faces (6)? Do not all people make their world inhabitable by generalization, and subsequently act "as if" their concepts are real (7)? Or is "Afro-Cuban religion" a special kind of classification? Palmié poses, but does not answer these questions. He does not even analytically distinguish between them. Yet the problem of essentialism (applicable to the

categories “Afro” and “Cuban”) is surely not the same as the problem of anachronism or ethnocentrism (that is, when we apply the word “religion” to places and periods that lack the meanings the concept carries now); nor does the problem of inclusion in a class (are you a Santero or an anthropologist?) seem identical to the problem of turning (anthropological) texts into (Afro-Cuban) lives (or vice versa). Yet Palmié seems to think there is a way out of all those dilemmas at the same time by the recognition of the fact that some ethnographic objects begin to *do* things in the world and that we who fashion and circulate them should be honest about that (7). Palmié’s hardly novel strategy is to acknowledge that anthropological classifications fashion what they describe, just as much as the practices they describe provide categories with which to do so. The thing called “Afro-Cuban religion” is a “heteroglossic hybrid” (11; 251) resulting from an “intersubjective praxeology” (256) that is made up of what scholars want to discover and what the people studied want them to find.

Such an “ethnographic interface” can be apparently be found in most anthropological work (although Palmié refrains from explicit comparisons). This turns all problems of classification and categorization into problems of the social relations of ethnography. It implicitly exaggerates the importance of the academic anthropologist. Worse, it ignores all those other studies of the colonial and postcolonial ways in which various forms of ethnography have molded the definition, situations and subsequent histories of what they tried to describe, just as these situations molded the content of the ethnographies they produced, whether by indigenous informants and ethnographers, travelers, missionaries, colonial administrators, traders or academics. In fact, I doubt whether the concept of the “ethnographic interface” that Palmié introduces advances our understanding: it is too abstract and timeless for my taste (at least

compared to the analytic of *préterrain*, ethnographic occasion and ethnographic tradition that we used earlier to introduce a selection from this vast literature). More importantly, however, I doubt whether all those phenomena that Ian Hacking grouped under the “looping effect” – when classifications are adopted by those to whom they applied so that the object (and subject) thus classified starts to mutate – can be analyzed by Palmié when looking only at himself and his Afro-Cuban friends and predecessors. We know now that in most sciences the “objectivist realism” that Palmié and his interlocutors criticize (7; 201) was only truly hegemonic between 1830 and 1870, and that after a long twentieth century of makeshift patchwork applied to the tears in the membrane between object and subject, today’s biomedicine, genetics and nanotechnology make intervention and experiment, rather than distanced representation, the epistemological norm. Anthropologists themselves pioneered such critiques shortly after 1900, when Durkheim and Mauss argued that all classifications derived from social relationships, Rivers declared indigenous classifications to be the raw material of ethnographic method, and Boas used culture to offset the naturalist objectivism of race. Of course, these founding fathers stoutly maintained their social scientific privileges, not least in the classifications of religion they employed. But judging from the pages of *The Cooking of History*, the history of the anthropology of cultural classification and its historical conditions seems irrelevant to the understanding of Afro-Cuban religion.

The same can be said about the anthropology of globalization and globalism, when Palmié seems to rest content with the statement that “the world of clearcut units is lost to us” (101), but we do not learn how or why that world seemed persuasive in the first place. While citing them, Palmié rarely argues his position vis-à-vis the theoretical insights of Appadurai,

Ferguson, Gilroy, Hannerz, Matory, Mintz, Tsing or Wolf. As a result, his Caribbean ethnography is implicitly passed off as novel, but rarely argues why. Likewise, the anthropology of religion seems to have little or nothing to add to Palmié's project. Palmié uses "Durkheimian" regularly, although when he does I have difficulty recognizing the theorist who said that religion has the function of making people worship their sociality, and that collective representations or classifications arise from institutionalized social relationships – in short, that religion does not do what believers say it does. More specifically, Palmié shows little interest in investigating what "religion" might mean to his main subjects, the anthropologists, their interlocutors and the people in between. To address this issue, he would have had to address at least two recent developments in anthropological theorizing on religion: firstly, the question of how a practice that lives by "invisible ontologies" – to quote one of Palmié's favorites, Karen Fields – can materialize itself to human beings; and secondly, how it lives on in (partly) secularized societies, divorced from state power. Both questions were addressed by Talal Asad, but Palmié mentions Asad but does not seriously engage Asad's analyses. In fact, Palmié proceeds as if the centuries of secularist speculation on questions of religious authority – academic as well as extra-academic – do not need to be addressed to understand the initiation-based religious practices he describes.

At the same time, his book constantly signals those models of religious authority and their significant others, as when Ortiz condemns Santería as "fetish-worship," when the upright Catholics (?) of Hialeah, Florida, are scared by a "black religion" in their midst, or when practitioners of Yoruba Traditional Religion and the Miami *regla de ocha* exchange accusations of Christian proselytizing and spreading "the Word," or of "degrading" initiatory practices. Palmié fails to provide an analysis of these models of authority, despite the fact that Afro-Cuban

religious rivals refer to the authority of historical Bible criticism (which, we know, many secular nation-states would still love to see adopted by their Christian or Islamic fundamentalists), that the socialist state (appropriate for a secularist regime) recognized Santería as "folklore," and US state authorities employ the category of a legalized "Church" under neoliberal governance. *The Cooking of History* limits itself to their historical effects on the believers and anthropologists in question, and as a result, rarely addresses questions of the religious structures of power, especially in relation to the state, but also in relation to why it would be so attractive to more recent Santeros to portray themselves as a "World Religion" (commercialization?). For a non-initiate like me, it therefore becomes almost impossible to judge why, when and how the classification "Afro-Cuban religion" becomes important to people. Palmié's only reference to Asad seems to use the observation that "religion is not a field of experience of which humans have always been conscious" (24) as an alibi to forget about what "religion" might mean.

Bypassing questions of power also applies to *The Cooking of History*'s discussions of race – the more puzzling since power inequalities are the very starting point of the 1976 analysis of African American culture by Sid Mintz and Richard Price that Palmié so admires. The book ignores the fact that scientific and state racism are only fully institutionalized with the rise of objectivist realism, which legitimated a bio-politics that could replace religious structures of power and their conceptions of human difference. From the Enlightenment onwards, nation-states increasingly faced the contradiction between affirming human equality and essentializing differences between citizens of the nation and their others. We know now that secularism often employed a political theology that had state sovereignty aspire to replace God – Durkheim made that (almost) explicit – and that this took the form of globally managing the differences between

first and second-class citizens, largely through a deeply ingrained discourse on aboriginality.

Palmié briefly records that Ortiz himself engaged in such a form of Lombroso-like bio-politics when denouncing *Los negros brujos* in 1906 (86). But Palmié’s lack of references to such a longer-term perspective on the (counterpoint) developments of modernity suggests he finds such a perspective irrelevant to the internecine struggles among Afro-Cuban religionists and their anthropologists – though it might have provided a good explanation for the fact that Ortiz changed his mind later on.

Yet, Palmié’s arguments about race and racecraft are the best part of the book: it is good to be reminded of the fact that in the USA, “blackness is not constituted on the grounds of continuities with African forms, but on the contrast with the ‘white sink’ into which it constantly threatens to disappear” (157). However, if blackness and Africanity are indeed different, it becomes puzzling why Palmié sidesteps the discussion of how race can mean different things, and how that affects the ways racial concepts are employed (which I take to be the essence of Fields’ notion of “racecraft”). He engaged in such discussions elsewhere, but the reduction of the whole Boasian legacy and its aftermath to the Herskovits/Frazier debate (121), and the single reference to the Du Boisian sociology of “double consciousness” in the whole book (156), suggests that Palmié finds the debate about racism, the meaning of “Africa,” and blackness conducted by the likes of Abu El-Haj, Appiah (who is cited but not engaged), Gates, Gilroy, Visweswaran, West and a host of others, irrelevant to understanding Afro-Cuban religion. If one marginalizes oneself in this way, one should not complain that Caribbean anthropology is not being taken seriously (228).

Halfway through the book – when the introduction already had me craving for a good copyeditor to delete the ubiquitous quadruple and quintuple clauses, rhetorical questions and double denials that make the book twice too long - Palmié finds the injunction to move beyond “naively empiricist ethnographic inscription” trivial (143). Note 45 affirms that “1980s-style reflexivity” about “textual construction” should give way to more fundamental considerations of epistemology and method (292). Yet, Palmié’s only solution is precisely such a 1980-style reflexive exercise – one meant to “subvert the ethnographer’s own authority” by divining the ethnography rather than ethnographizing the diviner. Twenty-five years ago, we were told that such textual experiments do more for the ethnographer’s career than for relationships with those described, by creating the illusion that textual reflexivity can symmetricalize out of existence the unequal relations of authority on which research is necessarily based. Unless we want to give up on the notion of scientific expertise in anthropology (or any other academic practice), a symmetrical epistemology is not possible. One hopes that Stephan Palmié’s manifest expertise, superior research skills, and analytic acumen –the reasons why he is so much better at Afro-Cuban religion than most of us – will be better manifested in a more accessible book, so that we can shelve this one under call number BL2532.S3.

See Palmié, “A view from itia ororo kande,” *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale* 14

(2006): 99-118; “Genomics, Divination, ‘Racecraft’,” *American Ethnologist* 34 (2007): 205-222.

“On Predications of Africanity,” in S. Palmié (ed.), *Africas of the Americas. Beyond the Search for Origins in the Study of Afro-Atlantic Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

We Have Never Been Modern (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), xx.

Something we have known at least since Johannes Fabian’s article, “Language, History and Anthropology,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 1 (1971): 19-47.

Peter Pels and Oscar Salemink, “Introduction: Locating the Colonial Subjects of Anthropology,” in P. Pels & O. Salemink (eds.) *Colonial Subjects. Essays on the Practical History of Anthropology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

Ian Hacking “The Looping Effects of Human Kinds,” 351-383 in D. Sperber, D. Premack, and A.J. Premack (eds.) *Causal Cognition. A Multi-Disciplinary Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (London: Zone Books, 2007).

Karen Fields, “Witchcraft and Racecraft: Invisible Ontology in its Sensible Manifestations,” 193-224 in G. Bond & D. Ciekawy (eds.) *Witchcraft Dialogues. Anthropological and Philosophical Exchanges* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001).

Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture. An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

Emile Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992).

See Peter Pels, “The Rise and Fall of the Indian Aborigines: Orientalism, Anglicism and the Emergence of an Ethnology of India,” in P. Pels and O. Salemink (eds.), *Colonial Subjects. Essays on the Practical History of Anthropology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

See Palmié’s important contributions to the topic cited in notes 1 and 2 above.

Fields, “Witchcraft and Racecraft.”

See Nadia Abu El-Haj, “Rethinking Genetic Genealogy: A Response to Stephan Palmié,” *American Ethnologist* 34 (2007): 223-226 and Palmié, Rejoinder: Genomic Moonlighting, Jewish Cyborgs, and Peircean Abduction, *American Ethnologist* 34 (2007): 245-51.

See Drewal’s Introduction to Moe Meyer and Baba Ogunda Bebe-Fagbamila, “Ifa and me: A divination of ethnography,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 17 (1997), 33 (and 220, 262).

See Jean and John Comaroff, “Ethnography and the Historical Imagination,” in J. and J. Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination and other essays* (Boulder: Westview, 1992); Johannes Fabian, “Dilemmas of Critical Anthropology,” in L. Nencel and P. Pels (eds.), *Constructing Knowledge* (London: Sage, 1991); Edward Said, “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors,” *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 205-225.