



SANTERÍA AND CUBAN IDENTITY IN HUMBERTO SOLAS' *MIEL PARA OSHÚN* AND CREMATA MALBERTI'S *VIVA CUBA*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper tries to explore the role of mythology in the cinematic practices of Cuba in two movies by two renowned filmmakers, *Miel para Oshún* by Humberto Solas and *Viva Cuba* by Juan Carlos Cremata Malberti. The triumph of Cuban revolution brought with it isolation and scarcity of resources. The unfulfilled promises of revolution created discontent among the Cubans who tried to migrate from the country for the promising land of the United States of America. The present movies invoke the symbol of Oshun and Yemaya for calling the attention of migrants and inhabitants reminding them of their unique ancestral past that binds them together and the need for solidarity in time of crisis.

Keywords: Santeria, Yoruba, Viva Cuba, Miel para Oshun,

The word 'myth' offers a large semantic range – from a blatant lie to a set of unique and essential characteristics that define and grant identity to a culture and civilization. It is an extremely complex cultural reality which can be approached and interpreted in multiple and complementary perspectives. The reductionist approach foregrounds the extrinsic nature of myths. According to Malinowski, myth has social functions – to foment solidarity in a community against vicissitudes of life and arrangement of codes for social behaviour. Mythology in a society forms a stratum and gives each individual of a community a common root. This approach gives importance to society and not to the individual. A common root makes an individual a social being. Malinowski suggested that all myths are “pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom” (199). Kluckhohn adds that the function of myth is to achieve solidarity and unity in society (Penner 7). The role of mythology is paramount in a society for it promotes solidarity and gives uniqueness to a culture.

Cuban history is witness to process of acculturation that started since the arrival of the Spanish and augmented with subsequent entry of the Africans on the island as forced labour. The three centuries of arrival of Africans as slaves to work on sugar plantations resulted in birth of hybrid races. Miscegenation took place in cultural and religious areas as well. “Whether it is religion, dance, music, or film, the aesthetics of Cuban nationalism are African” (Otero 117). The arrival of



Africans fastened the phenomenon of acculturation in Cuba and gave it a unique identity.

When Africans arrived on the island as slaves, they were required to practice Catholicism and leave their traditional religious rites. They, in order to evade from torture and mutilation by the hands of Spaniards, invented a practice that would hoodwink colonizers and at the same time would help them conserve their deities and rituals. They started with identifying their African deities with Catholic saints; this hybrid practice came to be known as Santeria in Cuba.

Once in Cuba, [enslaved Africans] happened to be property of a man who forbade them to practice any kind of ritual related to their religion, forcing them, however, to take part in the Masses and prayers prescribed by the Catholic religion. This situation forced the slaves to develop a simple and effective trick: to give a name of a Catholic saint to each of the gods of their religion, so that when the master of the plantation arrives to check the approach to Catholicism of his slaves, he would find worshippers praying to Santa Barbara, San Juan or San Antonio, without actually realizing that, in fact, the prayers were directed, respectively, to Chango, Osún or Elegguá, the divinities African associated with these saints. Well what draw to the attention of masters were the number of saints being revered by the slaves and the fervour they professed to some, usually well above the attention they gave to Jesus Christ Himself; it is from here that the word Santeria is born which focus excessively to worship of a very large number of saints (Uxó in Minero, 89).ⁱ

It is a syncretic religion born in the Carribean islands of which Cuba is a part and is characterized by an amalgamation of Catholicism and the Yoruba religion. Santeria has been presented as a system of beliefs and religious practices of African origin who worship orishas, or deities; practices that were transferred to Cuba during the forced entry of African slaves over four centuries. These practices were later systematized from Yoruba canon to set what is now known as *Regla de Ocha* or Santeria (Caballero, 99). The hybrid culture (especially in religion) of Cuba gives it a unique identity that differentiates it from other Hispanic nations. Given the importance of syncretic religion and African folklore in Cuba, the Cuban cinematic industry uses them as source of Cuban identity (Otero 117). African religious practices represent the resistance of the slaves against the colonial regime and thus exhibition of such trait becomes all the more important.ⁱⁱ

During the colonial era, the Spanish Crown entrusted encomenderos with the task of teaching Catholic faith to African slaves and natives because they considered them as pagans.ⁱⁱⁱ The subsequent birth of syncretic religion of Santeria became a symbol of resistance. Cuba ceasing to be a colony of the Spanish Crown in 1898 became a neo-colony of the United States of America. The Cuban revolution ended the dominance of the US in Cuba. Thereafter, US after being defeated withdrew from the island of Cuba but to counter such defeat formulated



stringent policies against Cuba. The embargo imposed on Cuba by US isolated it from other Latin Republics and it sought to Soviet Union for help. Soviet Union stayed auxiliary to Cuban cause but the missile crisis of 1962 created in Cuba a situation of scarcity and deprivation. The US migration policies for Cubans attracted natives on the island. Cuba faced four major migratory waves that left the country ideologically weak (Srivastava, 39). The subsequent break of USSR broke the last of ties and hopes of the Cubans still immersed in paucity of resources. Castro coined the term “Special Period” to designate this time of crisis starting from 1990s.

These circumstances called for solidarity and strength to counter attempts of USA to beleaguer Cuba. The incorporation of the feeling of solidarity is the only solution possible to safeguard the ideology on which the Cuban identity is based. Cinema as one of the major sources of artistic appreciation and dissemination took upon itself the burden of cementing solidarity and patriotism in Cuba. The exhibition of hybrid cultures in artistic productions including cinematography served many purposes; first, to represent the singularity of the Cuban nation; second, to attract tourists who would bring with them exchangeable currency and last but not the least, it would be a show of resistance against US oppression.

The difficult situation in Cuba created by the US embargo was aggravated due to exodus of its citizens in major waves. The departure of many Cubans from the island in different periods for different reasons embittered situation in Cuba and filmmakers along with other artists, writers and creators saw the need to congeal the idea of nation through artistic manifestations. Strengthening solidarity has been the call from the start of the revolution. “[...] National self-identity in Cuba has been ongoing since the revolution started, since the new revolutionary society had always been under siege from outside forces” (Saavedra 115). The revolution counted upon the mestizo group because it promised elimination of inequalities between people of different social origin. Given these two reasons, Cuba counted upon the mestizo group of which Santeria is the icon, an attribute that makes it different and unique from other countries. “One could classify various national cultures both in terms of the tenacity with which coverage was maintained and the extent to which one culture projected an image of radical difference – defines as ‘national’ or ‘natural’ superiority- from another culture” (Snead 235). Since the revolution, cultural productions tried to establish authentic Cuban essence. African myths which are quite popular in the island gave exclusivity to Cuban identity. Minero says that this Cuban essence is characterized by its multiculturalism and its independence from the Spanish identity and could be clearly seen in the acceptance of Santeria in works of Alejo Carpentier and in his exploration of magical realism in Latin America (86). Santeria is a widespread practice among Cubans and is known since colonial times. At the same time, *palenques* and *cabildos* are communities in Cuba that highlight African attributes. “And central to the production of works that signal *cubanidad* is the incorporation, acceptance and display of African cultures as Cuban (Otero 119).



During the special period, film production like other things fell into crisis. For film productions filmmakers had to rely on external financial support. The financial support from other countries especially Spain, apart from providing resources – technology and technicians, also offered certain level of freedom to filmmakers in the treatment of subjects but demanded an exhibition of ideas and products unique to Cuba. Co-productions has its advantages, firstly it facilitates release of films not only in parent country but also in partner countries which otherwise might not be able to achieve a wider audience; secondly, the authentic exhibition of Cuban elements as demanded by foreign collaborators help promote tourism in Cuba thus increasing funds from tourism industry on which Cuba has relied heavily to overcome economic crisis, especially during the special period. Thirdly, freedom provides filmmakers to clarify Cuban image in the world breaking the monopoly of US as the sole provider of information and thus attract attention, allies and popularity for the Cuban cause. The appearance of African mythology or show of syncretic religion of Santeria besides representing touristic places like Varadero, says Malu "the best beach in the world", and other cultural practices such as dance or music, like salsa or rumba respectively, become important in film productions.

The film (*Miel para Ochún*) has traces of what some see as the influence of the increasing need for foreign collaboration in recent Cuban films. While such collaboration, as noted earlier, has allowed for a certain degree of autonomy, it also makes filmmakers beholden to another kind of pressure. Filmmakers now find themselves catering to foreign tastes for the exotic in Cuba. In particular, Afro-Cuban religious culture is de rigueur in joint productions. The Cuban actor Luis Alberto Garcia puts it bluntly when he says: “[I]t is always obligatory in films made with non-Cubans to have a mulatta, salsa, lots of palm trees, and a scene of Afro-Cuban religion, which attracts most attention (Saavedra 121).

We see that the presence of African mythology in cultural productions such as movies or music becomes necessary to promote and strengthen the sense of solidarity and fraternity among Cubans. Besides the role of cinema has been to cement nationalism, “...the hegemonic Project of nationhood through art had been assumed by cinema” (Fernandes in Saavedra 116). The inclusion of mythological images intends to divert people from migrating from the country and to promote brotherhood among citizens of all social backgrounds.

The mythology of Yemaya and Oshun and its importance in the movies

Yemaya is the goddess of the sea in Yoruba mythology. She is the mother of all human beings. She is believed to be a symbol of maternity. The orisha of the sea, she guards all the riches of the sea. It is believed that you can recover the thing lost by worshipping her. Yemaya is the mother of all born on earth and is represented as a source of life, fertility and motherhood.



Yemaya is the Universal Mother, the mother of all gods and goddesses and all mortals; is deified fertility ... she is giver of life as well as death ... she resides in the stomach ... She embodies woman, the protective womb, with nourishing charisma and at the same time, ancestral mystery, the night, the womb and the grave, the beginning and the end, the good and the bad ... Moreover, Yemaya is a woman who has earned the authority and respect of the community not because she represents mother but because of her selfless serving attitude ... For her children, Yemaya is protective, this behavior is closely linked to the traditional behavior of the mother ... her role as Universal Mother, of giver of life: of contact with the other (Romeu 111).^{iv}

The film *Viva Cuba* does not make many allusions to the mythology of Yemaya but the film ends with a song dedicated to the goddess Yemaya and the disappearance of children, Jorgito and Malu in the waves of the sea. The end intends to remind Cubans of the special attributes of the goddess Yemaya. After crossing the island from Havana to Punto Maisi, Jorgito and Malu see that their parents have already arrived there and instead of giving in to the will of their parents they flee from them and take refuge in the waters of Yemaya. Their hope of staying together gets destroyed on seeing their parents fighting. Their refuge in the waters of Yemaya is symbolic of their rebirth in the utopian world where no one can get separate them.

Yemaya – the goddess of the sea protects Cuba restricting the entrance of her enemies. The absence of land borders guard the island from invasion. The island of Cuba is isolated and access is difficult because of the insularity that provides the sea besides safeguarding the immense riches symbolic of knowledge. Yemaya inspires and makes them know and value the immense wealth stored in them. Romeu says that the inhabitant of the island who is isolated and distanced forcefully is also facing the deteriorating economic and political situation in Cuba and this goddess is an essential inspirational symbol (111).

Oshun is another African orisha known as Nuestra Señora de la Caridad de Cobre – patroness of the island in Cuban culture. Oshun in Yoruba mythology is the goddess of the river. It is believed that she entered the island in 1601 and was received by three people: Juan Criollo, Juan Indio, Juan Slave in the waters of the Bay of Nipe (Cámara 26).

Oshun, the goddess of love, honey, river and all things sweet, came to know that many of her children are sent to Cuba. That there they are lonely, sad and miss her too much. So Oshun decides to go to Cuba to console them, to dance and rejoice with them.

Oshun was worried because she was afraid to travel. Driven by her fears she goes to see her sister Yemanya, goddess of the sea and said: "Yemanya, I have to cross the sea, I have to go to meet my children who are in Cuba but I'm afraid of the



long journey ... But tell me, you have been in Cuba and touched all its banks and beaches. How is Cuba, how are the Cubans? "

Cuba is much like Africa, Oshun. It's never cold, there are many coco and palm trees, the rivers are calm and the nights are long. However, not all Cubans are black like the people here, there are whites and mulattos.

Oshun responds, with passionate voice, to Yemanya "Yemanya, what you have told me of Cubans I am concerned that it is something new to me, so would you give me two boons? Soften, smooth and brighten my skin a little by your ocean waters so that when I reach Cuba, I am neither black nor white and loved and adored by all Cubans; blacks, mulattos, whites, all of them will be my children"

Yemanya with her majestic and maternal gesture gave her the boons; Cubans were graced with Oshun, a mother who physically embodied the characteristics of all her children ... The Virgin of Charity ... Oshun" (Cámara 26).^v

Independence from Spain gave Cuba the status of a nation. The newly formed state needed a mother that could accommodate and represent all her children equally (Cámara, 25). Only a mestiza could love all her children equally and bring together people from different social backgrounds. The incarnation of Oshun in a mulatto shows the desire to foment the solidarity among different races in the island because only a mestizo could identify with the Cuban racial diversity. It also follows that this mythological narrative aims to resolve harmoniously racial differences in the island.

In the film, *Miel para Oshun*, we see since the starting of the film allusions to the syncretic culture of Cuba. Roberto on meeting her cousin comes to know that Pilar has no news of his mother. Roberto gets frustrated and loses all hopes of finding her. Pilar says to encourage him, "Have faith, great faith, something tells me we're going to find her". The beginning of the film states its objective – faith in oneself and faith in God. Later Pilar takes Roberto to Miriam, a woman who tells the history of Roberto and predicts that he would find his mother at "the house of Yemaya and Oshun". This gives a hint that Roberto's mother would be a mulatto and at the end we find that indeed she is. The search for Roberto's mother is an allegory for search of traditional values that marks the Cuban identity. Roberto's mother symbolizes the mulatto goddess Oshun. Cámara says that the symbol of a mulatto is an insignia of racial and cultural syncretism that characterizes and informs Cuba as a nation (26).

When Roberto is searching her mother, he meets many people and we see that people remembered her and loved her, there is no person who did not cry at her mention. We read in the popular myth about Oshun that she changed her colour of skin so that she is adored by all. Roberto's mother incarnates this goddess. When they reach Baracoa, they come to know that his mother has gone to Guantanamo to



take care of an old man who is sick and then from there she would go to Arrendara to look after the children of a woman in labour. The old woman informs them that Roberto's mother spends her life taking care of everyone. We read that Ochún came from Africa to Cuba to take care of her children. Life of Robert's mother passes the same way.^{vi}

The syncretic religion in Cuba is a measure to show solidarity among Cubans. Pilar on knowing that Roberto is not a believer says that she used to be like that before but now she believes in the charity of god. US embargo and disjoint from USSR left Cuba devastated, the prosperity Santería achieved in the following years of the Cuban revolution, especially during the 'special period' is a manifestation of the crisis that Cubans felt. Instability and uncertainty that defined Cuban life sought for religious canons to compensate for the ills generated by the situation.

No doubt that in situations of crisis when dissatisfaction, disorientation and feelings of vulnerability reign religion is enhanced, falling for meta-social or supernatural explanation, support, hope, and retort to the unknown prevail. In our case, religion went on to express and reflect the impact of changes giving them new meanings arising from the realm of faith (Perera and Cruz 139).

The destination of the protagonists of *Miel para Oshun* and *Viva Cuba* promises their unification and emancipation from the crisis. Roberto's meeting his mother relieves him of his lost identity. The refuge in the waters of Yemaya by Jorgito and Malu fulfils their desire to be together. Yemaya, the goddess of water protects the Cubans from outside and the goddess Oshun from within. The fulfillment of the desire of Cubans depends on the mercy of these two goddesses. Pilar says, "Charity never fails" when they finally arrives at the place where they could meet Roberto's mother. Religion serves as a refuge and mythology supports in consolidation of a civilization in crisis. People seeking refuge in religion are distracted from existential crisis following the pragmatic models of myths. The characters of myths serve as models for action in predicament. The use of mythology and mythical figures in films brandish solidarity in times of crisis enhancing feeling of belonging and loyalty towards nation.

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Translation mine