CUBAN FESTIVALS
An Illustrated Anthology

Judith Bettelheim

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Reviewed by Elizabeth Hanly

Judith Bettelheim has tackled a fascinating subject as it occurs on a fascinating island. *Cuban Festivals: An Illustrated Anthology* is a fine introduction to aspects of Cuban social history. I just wish it were more ambitious.

Bettelheim begins with an essay by Cuba's great pioneer ethnographer of the early twentieth century, Fernando Ortiz. Far too little of Ortiz's work is available in English. British social historian and long-time Cuba resident Jean Stubbs, who translated and annotated the essay, reminds the reader that it was Ortiz who first spoke of "transculturation," rejecting "acculturation" in favor of the far more complex paradigm. It was Ortiz who laid the groundwork for so much of what became high art in post-revolutionary Cuba, perhaps most notably the often stunning work of the National Folklore Dance Company.

In his essay Ortiz considers the popular traditions of Africa and Spain, looking for the roots of the once glorious Day of the Kings Festival last seen in Cuba in the late nineteenth century. He includes descriptions of the festival from the writings of various nineteenth-century travelers. This is rich if often racist stuff. One does get a sense of the press of Carnival, the profusion of drums and rattles, of peacock feathers and stilts and satin tulle. Even so, I was a bit disappointed. While certainly a good organizing device for the anthology, this essay covers ethnographic material by now plenty familiar to many readers. Other work by Ortiz might have been more compelling.

Two long glossaries follow. In the first, David Brown of Emory University elaborates on the terms found in Ortiz's essay with the sort of care seen in his extraordinary disserta-

tion, "Garden in the Machine: Afro-Cuban Sacred Art and Performance in Urban New Jersey and New York." In the second, two oral historians, Rafael Brea and José Millet from the Casa del Caribe in Santiago de Cuba, focus on popular Cuban festivals. Both glossaries are excellent road maps for the uninitiated. Not only that, both contain details enough to delight even the most sophisticated Cuba hand. At one point, for instance, Brea and Millet point out that the word *bastonero*, or "drum major," came to be used to designate the man in charge of pairing dancers at balls in nineteenth-century Havana.

Bettelheim next turns to Carnival in Santiago, arguably the largest and most authentic of any Cuban festival. It's here, with her own two essays, that the anthology really comes to life. Almost by definition, according to Bettelheim, Carnival is about power negotiations and reversals. Almost by definition, Carnival is subversive. She looks briefly at the festival's political history, writing of the weapons and medicines that were smuggled in drums by street musicians to the *mambises*, or freedom fighters, during Cuba's War of Independence in the late 1890s. Bettelheim focuses on women and Carnival as well, on the dancers who already seemed to know what feminism could teach them about empowerment. She writes, "Their flesh could absorb and reflect the light" of men's eyes on their movements.

Bettelheim touches on Carnival and the Revolution as well, bringing up the curious case of the *íremes*, or "little devils"; these are the central symbol of the African all-male secret society, the Abakuá, as it came to be known in Cuba. For whatever reasons this secret society flourished nowhere in the New World but Cuba. And as the Revolution searched for symbols of the island's new (politically correct, non-Spanish, non-First World) identity, it fixed on the *íremes*. What happens to the integrity of such a symbol, Bettelheim asks, when it's featured on meeting-hall banners and airline posters? What happens when religion becomes part of a tourist initiative, as is being planned in today's Cuba? Granted, as she points out, other Caribbean nations are including "religious culture" in the promotions. Yet no other island has dreamed up anything as extensive, and on no other island has a government's relationship with its popular faith been as convoluted. For even as the Revolution tried to use Santería/Palo/Abakuá culture and symbols to forge a national identity, it was trying, at least for a time, to break these religions.

Bettelheim skirts these issues, dealing with them only obliquely with references to what indeed is the uncanny staying power of these faiths. Neither does she actively address the fact that the cancellation of Carnival in the last few years probably has as much to do with concern for its subversive potential as the lack of resources in an increasingly desperate economy. Still, the material Bettelheim presents is so intriguing and so pregnant, that most of these issues can't help but present themselves, even if they remain in subtext.

In the final essay, comprising personal memories of Carnival by Cuban writer Pedro Perez Sarduy, the anthology comes full circle. Once more we have the press of Carnival, but this time from the inside, as Sarduy writes of his adventures before and after the Revolution. The essay is vivid—troubling too. Perhaps not intentionally, it underlines once more the ambivalent relationship between the Revolution and Cuba's soul. □