

## A cinema of beliefs. The presence of Yoruba religion in Cuban filmography

*Un cine de creencias. La presencia de la religión yoruba en la filmografía cubana*

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### Abstract

The ethnic groups brought to Cuba by slavery carried their traditions. In the barracks of the island, the Yoruba religion germinated, but this culture did not remain static; quickly, there was a syncretism of the African and Catholic pantheon. Cinema in Cuba has seen religion as a fertile subject. But the influence exerted by foreign productions has led to two fundamental aspects: the copying of globalized canons and the search for a national aesthetic. The present text notes that in the audiovisual language, the Afro-Cuban rites are conceived as a resource for the construction of a cultural physiognomy where contemporary trends and Cuban roots converse. Based on the review of the main bibliography of the area and audiovisual documents, a descriptive study with a qualitative approach establishes relevant conclusions regarding the analyzed historical process. It is understood that in the audiovisual, treatment of religion of African origins has mutated: while some have approached with prejudices and stigmas, others have stereotyped it and some have chosen to explain, without mysticism, the Yoruba worldview. From every perspective, Cuban filmography contains signs of the Afro-Cuban culture, being a mirror of the Cuban imaginary. This magical-religious system is the basis of Cuban customs and culture.

**Keywords:** Cuba, religion, Yoruba, Afro-Cuban, cinema, audiovisual

### Resumen

Los grupos étnicos llevados a Cuba por la esclavitud acarrearon sus tradiciones. En los barracones de la Isla germinó la religión yoruba, pero esta cultura no quedó estática, rápidamente se produjo un sincretismo del panteón africano y católico. El cine en Cuba ha visto en la religión un tema fértil, pero la influencia que ejercen las producciones extranjeras ha provocado dos vertientes fundamentales: la copia de cánones globalizados y la búsqueda de una estética nacional. El artículo observa que en el lenguaje audiovisual los ritos afrocubanos se conciben como recurso para la construcción de una fisonomía cultural, donde dialogan tendencias contemporáneas y las raíces de la cubanidad. Partiendo de la revisión de la principal bibliografía del área y documentos audiovisuales, mediante un estudio descriptivo con un enfoque cualitativo, se establecen conclusiones relevantes respecto del proceso histórico analizado. Por lo cual se entiende que en el audiovisual, el tratamiento de la religión de orígenes africanos ha mutado: mientras unos se han acercado con prejuicios y estigmas, otros la han estereotipado y algunos han optado por explicar, sin misticismo, la cosmovisión yoruba. Desde toda perspectiva, en la filmografía cubana se encuentran signos de la cultura afrocubana, siendo espejo del imaginario cubano. Este sistema mágico-religioso es base de las costumbres y la cultura cubana.

**Palabras claves:** Cuba, religión, yoruba, afrocubano, cine.

## 1. Introduction

The different ethnic groups brought from Africa as slaves carried with them different deities and traditions. In the barracks of Cuba, the Yoruba religion was born,<sup>1</sup> but this new culture did not remain static. It rapidly produced a syncretism of the African and Catholic pantheon. From it emerged “a culture full of sugar and sweat to give way to the honey that the *orishas* would drink” (Álvarez Díaz, 2009). Art has been one of the most used methods of exploring the hidden sectors of Afro-Cuban culture; and has awoken a special interest in those that explore the audiovisual language.

Ever since the 7th art began in Cuba, cinema has seen fertile ground in the Yoruba religion. Numerous films have been made concerning Cuban beliefs, its faith and rituals, but always centered on the diverse angles of this confusing issue. There have been many approaches, and according to the different theories offered, cinematographic art and the documentary or simply folkloric aspect has been spotlighted; each one of them also responding to conditions like the context of filming (time periods, socio-political, economic) and the interests of the film studio (national/ foreign co-production).

Throughout the history of Cuban cinema, the influence of foreign productions has caused two main courses of creation: on one hand, the copying of models (or worldwide canons) and, on the other, an alternative route in search of its own aesthetic, identifiable and national. The Afro-Cuban rights are conceived as a recourse for the building of this unique language and a cultural physiognomy where the most contemporary tendencies and Cuba’s deepest roots converse.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This research proposes an approach to Cuban film production, highlighting the films where the Afro-Cuban phenomenon is identified (whether as a main theme, background of the context or only represented by a character), with the aim of systematizing, describing, analyzing and contrasting the religion representation strategy; as well as the influence of foreign production and aesthetics in national films.

Before going into the analysis of filmmaking and production, in order to study the topic of Afro-Cuban religion, one must be familiar with the canonic texts of Don Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera, Cuban researchers and anthropologists. De Ortiz, who was named the third discoverer of Cuba after defining the value of the African culture in its concept of transculturation, takes an excerpt from *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1983):

We understand that the word *transculturation* best expresses the different phases of the transitive process of one culture to another, because this does not only consist of acquiring a different culture, which strictly speaking, is what the Anglo-American language indicates with *acculturation*, but rather the process also necessarily implies the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be described as a partial *deculturation*, and, also means the resulting creation of new cultural phenomena that could be called *neo-culturation* (90).

His disciple, Lydia Cabrera, in works like *El monte* (1993) and *Cuentos negros de Cuba* (1940), collects fables and stories (religious and secular) of the African imaginary universe on the island. These form part of the literary baggage that brought about this research project.

In terms of Cuban films, as an area of research, there have been many texts, critiques, historic, and theoretical-methodologies that have emerged, especially in the last 20 years. Some important works for this project are: *Romper la tensión del arco: movimiento cubano del cine documental* (Sánchez, 2010) and “Las primeras seis décadas del cine cubano” (Del Río, 2017), which are used as foundation on which to build historiographical bases, since they are works recognized for their contribution to the topic, positioning both authors as representatives of the new national critique that has influenced the analysis of more contemporary Cuban film.

Upon reviewing scientific publications in regards to Cuban filmmakers that converse about Afro-Cuban religion in film, works appear such as “Cultos afrocubanos e identidad nacional en el cine cubano contemporáneo” by Patricia Valladares Ruiz, published in *La Torre: Revista de la Universidad de Puerto Rico* (2009), and the thesis of Sergio Úbeda

Álvarez, "Límites y posibilidades del cine etnográfico desde la antropología audiovisual" (2015). While the first starts with a description of Santería in Cuba and then, fundamentally, analyzes the films from the '80s and '90s, the second work proposes delving into the construction of the Cuban identity based on documentary cinema.

However, one must state that within these studies of Cuban cinema, research tends to address the filmography at the beginning of the Revolutionary Period (1960-1980); as well as on the productions in the late '90s and early 2000s; while the Pre-Revolutionary films have not had the same experience. Therefore, within the scope of this project, for the representation of Afro-Cuban religion in the cinema, one of the main bibliographic references used is the study done by Araoz Valdés, "Los negros brujos del cine silente cubano", published by *Revista Cine Cubano*; and, likewise, basic text to support theories offered is "Las señales del cine imperfecto", by Julio García Espinosa. These two works are required reading in order to address and understand the cosmovision of the films that no longer exist (those of the late 19th century) and the era of the Cuban Revolution.

### 3. Methodology

Given the nature of the material being analyzed (affected by the loss of material dating before 1959 and by the proliferation of contemporaneous production) we are never sure if we are working with 100 percent of films that address the issue. However, the corpus analyzed could respond and does correspond to the chronology represented according to the most representative bibliography of the theme and, in this sense, we can state that it is close to the total of the most significant films produced in the study period. The texts used to comprise the corpus are: "Los negros brujos del cine silente cubano" by Raydel Araoz Valdés (2017), *Cronología del cine cubano II (1937-1944)* by Luciano Castillo and Arturo Agramonte (2012); *Catálogo del cine cubano 1897-1960* by María Eulalia Douglas (2008) and "Retrospectiva histórica del cine cubano (1959-2015)" by Antonio Álvarez Pitaluga (2016).

The construction of this corpus, as a representative sample, was based on one fundamental crite-

riterion: the presence of Afro-Cuban religion (as main theme or scenario, representation of its practices or character that alludes to it). In order to carry out a detailed approach on this subject, Cuban films are divided into three significant time periods: before 1959, 1959-1990, and 1990-2017;<sup>2</sup> with the aim of defining and talking about filming in each phase and, in addition, establishing a more general link between the foreign films and their influence on domestic films. The separating of these three periods is understood and based on the changes experienced at each time, which unquestionably made a mark on the aesthetics of filmmaking, like the material conditions present to carry it out, as well as the themes addressed and, why not say it, the perception of the expectant audience. Each of these three phases has its own distinctive mark and a time of crisis that brought about its end:

1. Before 1959: Cuba as a republic, capitalism and free market. Influence and monopoly of foreign films and North American cinema. It ends with the victory of the Cuban Revolution.

2. 1959-1990: Socialist Cuba, communism and nationalization of foreign companies. Influence of European cinema and the rise of large domestic productions. It ends with the fall of the Eastern Bloc.

3. 1990-2017: Cuba in economic crisis. Beginning of the Special Period, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, increase in the commercial and economic embargo between the United States and Cuba. Beginning of the "low-budget cinema" aesthetic, domestic-foreign co-productions.

### 4. Before 1959

To approach cinema of this era, one must confront two fundamental limitations: first, "the physical inexistence of that cinema", given that many of the film archives of the first years were lost in the fire at Enrique Díaz Quesada studio in the Calzada de Jesús del Monte and secondly, "the prejudice of diminishing all that in regards to Pre-Revolutionary cinema" (Araoz Valdés, 2017).

As for a little history, in the late 19th century, before Cuba was a republic, cinema arrived to the island. It was Gabriel Veyre, representative of the Lumière, who filmed the first work: *Simulacro de incendio*, on February 7th, 1897. This event not only marked the beginning of Cuban cinematography,<sup>3</sup> but also, like Christopher Columbus, the European aesthetic raised its flag in victory on the Antillean soil.

The Cuban director, Julio García Espinosa would say:

The Europeans contributed to the development of the cinematographic language based on their great cultural heritage. They wanted to make cinema that was closer to paintings than literature. For them, cinema was about image and, therefore, cinema should be fed by plastic arts. An image was worth more than a thousand words, they said. Today we know that intelligent words are worth more than a thousand silly images [García Espinosa, 2007].

From early times, Cuban cinema (like art in general) was inclined to following foreign trends. Perhaps at the beginning, it was due to lack of experience and in order to find a perfect model; later it was to legitimize itself via authorized voices and thus find more easily a space in the international market. It is understood that the incorporation of Afro-Cubans beliefs and rituals was not a characteristic that would define the first 50 years. But neither would it be correct to state that these topics were totally ignored in the films of the era.

One must remember that Cuba had recently won its independence from Spain (1898) and although the road from colony to republic was rather quick, it did not happen in the same way as in the cosmopolitanism of the native colonists. In the first decades of the republic, there was still a distrust of the black race and a fear of all that related to blackness (culture, language, religion), which was also apparent in the audiovisual language. Based on this perspective, and always from the perspective of the filmmaker and unawareness of the topic, myths were created on the Yoruba religion and were carried on screen. Embarrassingly, due to lack of knowledge, to this day the Yoruba and African religion in general is associated to a condition of race and not as a cultural expression or one of identity.

Despite a strong vanguard movement on the island in the last century to study the African origins of the religion, no films of great impact on the Yoruba religion were produced in the first phase. Among other things, this was mainly due to the fact that this profile was not one of the interests of the cinema production companies of that era that considered the idea of race and racial identity to be a tool used for classification, an obligation, a natural destiny.

Such is the case of the film *La hija del policía* or *En poder de los ñáñigos* (Enrique Díaz Quesada, 1917), which the film critic Arturo Agramonte has classified as "Cuban cinema's first attempt at approaching Afro-Cuban folklore". It is followed by *La brujería en acción* (1920). Both demonstrate how religion and blackness was understood in Cuba: the films portrayed popular archetypes because: "speaking about the black man is dangerous, and it can only be done on the sly" (2001).

The "mysteries" of the Afro-Cuban religion were not taboo for filmmaker Enrique Díaz Quesada, who is recognized by critics and historians as the founder of Cuban cinematography. Already in this recently-born cinematography, there are films that confirm it, such as *El cabildo de Ña Romualda* (1908), which brought about *La zafra o Sangre y azúcar* (1918-1919), and *La hija del policía o En poder de los ñáñigos* (1917).

Overall, the films that dared to touch on this topic achieved a partial approach that was mocking, full of picturesqueness and exoticism. Specifically, the plot of *La hija del policía...* focuses on the problem of "the increase of associations to ñáñigos and in the effectiveness the secret police to exterminate them" (Araoz Valdés, 2017). This film showed the ideology of that time and reflects the taboos and the lack of knowledge that surrounded the Abakuás Societies. Since the end of the 19th century, the ñáñigos were suspected and persecuted for the crime of "theft, grave robbing, abortion, and, especially for offenses such as holding unauthorized gatherings, unauthorized practice of the medical profession, profanation of cadavers and cemeteries, leaving dead animals on public property, with the resulting confiscation of the objects that they use for their tricks and fortune telling" (Roche & Monteagudo en Araoz Valdés, 2017), which continued and extended to all religions of African origin (like the complex Ocha-Ifá and el Palo Monte).

Treatment of Afro-Cuban beliefs is constantly associated to the colonial prejudices that existed. Despite these religious practices being already rooted in the Cuban culture and that the socio-political system revolutionized, after the separation of church and state and upon having established freedom of religion, they continued to be dominated and conditioned by the power of the Catholic Church. Thus, according to the legal constitution of that era: "There is freedom of religion, as well as freedom to practice any religion, without any other consideration except for respect for Christian morality and public order" (Pichardo, 1965: 79).

However, after the first years of the Republic, where there were still vestiges of the previous system and Cuban cinematographic production was just beginning and poor, yet unable to compete with European models, there came a phase in which film production increased considerably and film studios was established and consolidated. Only that now, with the establishment of the Neocolonial Republic, the power was in the hands of the North American market. American companies came up with a new model of filming in Cuba, a more popular cinema, that brought opposite (or distant) realities closer, created by an international company as a cultural product of consumption and aimed to entertain the public at large.

During these decades, there is a noted dependence on Hollywood companies that arrived like a monopoly to disseminate the "supported" tendencies, thus being able to establish worldwide uniformity, both in terms of film budgets and audience acceptance. Thus, the aesthetic of the republican Cuban cinema fell within the collective imaginary and within the patterns that Hollywood imposed.

This was a period full of comedies and melodramas, that while still following the guidelines of entertainment cinema brought as a result the massive growth of popular culture. Just as in other latitudes and times, the media influence caused the folklorization of the culture and identifiable traits. In Cuba, the very massive popularity of the productions caused a "jump from regional to national and from national to universal, that would become an option just as authentic as any other to amuse the soul... to be universal without losing its national quality, or losing its popular quality" (García Espinosa, 2007).

Movies with sound arrived in the '30s and, continuing along these lines, cinematography was plagued with picturesqueness: the solution to define the authentic "Cuban" film was to give priority to the music, song and dance. Therefore, there also came about character types like the a "Chinese-Cuban" detective, Chang Li Po, and Arroyito, "a sentimental outlaw who had a rudimentary sense of social justice: who stole from the rich to give generously to the poor like a crazy millionaire" (Bianchi, 2017, p.112). Meanwhile, the black man continued to be the figure to play "the characterization of a witch, ñáñigo, Santería worshiper or rumba dancer".

From the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th century, Cuba had changed from colony to republic. Cinema was not only well-known but also disseminated and produced on the island, silent films had given way to mega-productions with sound. The government was constantly subject to political and socioeconomic changes, but the 7th art continued to be the reflection of a universal conflict: civilization and barbarity.

Despite many studies having referred to the significant change in regards to the treatment of Afro-Cuban religions by the institutions<sup>4</sup> that took place in the 20s and 30s, in films these practices continued to be associated with barbarity. By way of a foreign and inexperienced perspective the national identity and its discourse were made based on dichotomies: city/country, science/superstition, education/ignorance, white/black, law/religion, Catholicism/African beliefs, among others. Despite these circumstances, the seeds of a national cinematography were planted. The insistence of exploring subjects, characters, environments and native rhythms emerged as a way to create an alternative to the established patterns.

## 5. The Birth of New Cinema (1959-1990)

The victory of the Cuban revolution brought about radical changes for the island, as the change of regime, from capitalist to socialist, was not just a gradual process, it was immediate. The political, social and economic system witnessed its effects, and all the arts were made to serve the new ideolo-



gy, as well as the communication media. In regard to the role of cinema in this new phase, Julio García Espinosa stated:

The filming proposed was a less complacent and a more irreverent cinema. It was a critical cinema, that would represent history and would show the most contemporary contradictions. (...) In fact, it was a fatal blow to folklore and most extreme nationalism. It was perhaps the most advanced step on the road to modernity for Latin American cinema (García Espinosa, 2000).

Together with the explosion of both radio and television, cinema became one of the main tools for the new revolution. It became one of the main media in which to communicate its doctrines, depicts the anxieties of this generation and legitimize itself in society. In an era that made controversy out of the creative will and the aesthetic of art in relation to revolutionary principles, the new government found an ally in cinema, because it didn't have to "go to great lengths to revolutionize everything, to change and transform anything for the simple reason that it practically hadn't inherited anything" (García Espinosa in Fowler, 2004, p. 49).

The history of Cuban cinematography grew alongside the revolutionary changes, together with the creation of government institutions that dictated the new norms and aesthetic. With this purpose, in 1959 the Institute for Cuban Art and Cinematographic Industries (ICAIC, acronym in Spanish). In the words of Julio García Espinosa: "the ICAIC, from its origin, paved a plural road for similar purposes. It never saw popular culture only as cultural of tradition or of folklore, but rather as culture where identity should grow in contemporaneity".

Thus, cinema grew to be socially committed. Some of the films that emphasized these reforms were: *Historias de la revolución* (Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1960), *El joven rebelde* (Julio García Espinosa, 1962), *Por vez primera* (Octavio Cortázar, 1967), *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1968), *El brigadista* (Octavio Cortázar, 1977), *Retrato de Teresa* (Pastor Vega, 1979), and many others.

In addition, with the arrival of these transformations, there came a new perspective in regards to prejudices and social conflicts. Afro-Cuban race

and religion became a *leitmotiv* for filmmakers during this phase, with which they explored other areas of the cultural identity. This promoted the foundation of the Department of Popular Encyclopedia (1962), used to promote the production of short documentaries during these first years, always based on an Anthropological perspective, straying farther and farther from the picturesque and folkloric stance that Cuban cinematography deployed in the decade of the '60s. Some of the works were: *Tambor batá*, by Oscar Luis Valdés, *Solar habanero*, by Sara Gómez, *Congos reales*, by Nicolás Guillén Ladrián, and in 1963, *Abakúa*, by Bernabé Hernández" (García de la Fé, 2014: 3).

A milestone in terms of filming, before and after the revolution, was the documentary *Historia de un Ballet (Suite Yoruba)* by José Massip. Until this moment, all the complexity of the rituals and dances of African origin had been synthesized as exotic. Massip showed a true *wemilere*<sup>5</sup> with dancers from Teatro Nacional. This event demonstrated the intolerance, racial discrimination that still existed and the double standard that took place. Jorge Luis Sánchez states:

The documentary must have worked as a sledgehammer on the small bourgeois mentalities. The orishas, that arrived in shackles and lived on the outskirts of the society in Cuba, took to the theater stage and appeared in cinema, in this way reclaiming their forgotten participation in the identity of the nation which they shaped (Sánchez, 2010, p. 29).

In 1969, Cuban filmmaker and theorist Julio García Espinosa gave his definition of "imperfect cinema", in which he states:

We shall no longer portray folklore with demagogic pride, with celebrative character, rather we shall show it as a cruel denouncement, as a painful testimony to the level on which people obligated to detain their power of artistic creation. The future will be, without a doubt, about folklore (García Espinosa, 2007).

This thesis proposed the search and exploration of the deepest roots of Cuban identity (the African), now from processes like the transculturation, the syncretism and the apprehension of a culture, this

time far from stigmatizations, snobbery and exoticism.

Within this inquiry comes *Lucía* (Humberto Solás, 1968). This film marked a milestone, among other aspects, by considering the Afro-Cuban world. More precisely, it is the first story (1895) where a parallel is established between the two cultures (Catholic=Spanish / Yoruba=Afro-Cuban). The beginning of the plot shows Lucía restrained in the ambiance of the Christian Church, and later, in the final sequence, shows the character's progression into the world of the rumba sound and folkloric dances. This is a different Lucía, a wild and out of control one.

Other films that stand out thanks to their perspective on Afro-Cuban religion are *Cecilia* (Humberto Solás, 1981), *Una pelea cubana contra los demonios* (1971) and *La última cena* (1976), the latter films being directed by the father of Cuban cinema, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (Titón). *De cierta manera* (Sara Gómez, 1977) brought a new dialogue to the big screen among old beliefs (Yoruba religion) and the new ideology (socialism). This time, seen from another perspective was the issue of the ñañigos and the Secret Abakúas Societies, but that now enters into conflict the projection of the "new man" and the Afro-Cuban religion, characterized by a worker and teacher of middle-bourgeois class. Separating itself from the stereotypes and folklores of turn-of-the-century cinema, *De cierta manera* performs a deep analysis of the origins and rituals of the Abakúas, as well as serving as a reflection of the reality that existed in Cuba during the first years of the Revolution, where often a character debated the age-old conflict of to be/appear to be: trying to join the new revolution without giving up himself, without giving up his roots and religion.

In this phase, the Yoruba religion was not associated to the race concept, but rather was understood as a sign of the marginalized sectors of society: the man was still controlled by nature, he can change his residence, his environment, but not his conscience, or his way of life. Sara Gómez uses a fiction story to recreate scenarios and ceremonial rituals of the Abakuás,<sup>6</sup> a subject shrouded in prejudices and secrets. Although the filmmaker could not finish it, this film, his first full-length, *De cierta manera* is one of the best attempts in achieving to bring an ongoing conflict in the first years of the revolution before au-

diences, among the inherited habits of the Yoruba religions, contrary to the social changes that motion. In the work, ethnic marks are syncretized and the religious motives are combined with symbols of the revolution, to emphasize a new multicultural combination, product of the social transformations.

Aimed at debunking prejudices of the Yoruba religion, comes *Demasiado miedo a la vida* or *Plaff* (Juan Carlos Tabío, 1988). Here, attention is drawn to prejudices that existed in the new Cuban society in terms of religious rituals and "evil eye". Concha, played by Daisy Granado, frustrated by family conflicts and out of the fear that someone was performing witchcraft on her, turns to the Afro-Cuban religion in search of protection from spirits. With a humoristic tone, the work ironizes the fears that still exist of the African religion.

Now in the decade of the '80s, the new cultural policies promoted a cinema far from the Hollywood mega-productions, that would contemplate and reflect the reality of Cuban life and Latin America in its wholeness, putting emphasis on the perspective of social movements that it raised. Based on three essential premises the idea and aesthetic of creating the New Latin American Cinema was born:<sup>7</sup> the reservation of Latin American and Caribbean cinematographic and audiovisual memory; the view of cinema as a cultural industry; and the development and integration of cinema in Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>8</sup>

The vision of an integrating cinema came from this, not only in terms of organizing festivals and shows, but also in building an identity, that is no longer national, but Latin American. A cinema that does not exclude the foreign, but rather makes it its own, that also includes tendencies from European schools and Italian neorealism and the French *nouvelle vague*, where many times techniques of the documentary and fiction cinema mixed.

This New Cinema laid to rest the international ignorance that still persisted in regards to Latin American films, their aesthetics and themes. It brought contemporary and regional stories to the worldwide spotlight, making them universal. This caused a conflict between the production of films by large monopolies and this tendency to promote cinema that would bring reflection and contribute ideas to the passive spectator.

In summary, this period of Cuban cinema was dominated by the political assumptions of the ICAIC which, from its founding in 1959, stated in Law 169 that: "cinema must preserve its concept as art and, free from petty limitations and useless practices, naturally contribute to, with all its technical and practical resources, the enriching of the new humanism that inspires our Revolution".

## 6. A Special Cinema (1990 - 2017)

The decade of the '90s would bring great changes for the island. With the fall of the Eastern Bloc, a golden age of economic aid between Cuba and the old Soviet Union ended, giving way to a new time of economic crisis that would be called the Special Period<sup>9</sup>. These tensions also influenced the country's political and social life, cinema, in its mimetic effort, making way for the new themes that circulated.

However, in addition to addressing the severe situation that Cuba faced in those times, the films of the early '90s also involve a national dilemma: promote experimental or commercial cinema. In these times, this conflict was also analyzed from its political dimension, given that many understood them as complete opposites. It was impossible to create and promote the creation of an experimental cinema (that would represent the national identity and follow the institutional norms of ICAIC) and at the same time commercial (according to the canon of large film studios). According to scriptwriter Ramón Pérez Díaz:

No country makes art cinema (...) The ideal is not anti-commercial, but rather the consubstantial of the two values. Making artistic and commercial cinema is the idyllic dream, because it is very difficult to conjugate the two values. It is a good thing that the laws of ICAIC promote these ideas. The experience will teach it many things, one of which, the economic impossibility of making anti-commercial cinema (García Borrero, 2008).

Evidently, film production on the island was included within the commercial dependency that the Cuban government had on the Soviet Union. Although

the themes and directing responded to national requirements, the techniques: "cameras, lighting, laboratories, virgin reels, color developers, sound, depended on equipment supply by the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe" (Fernández, 2008). Thus, it is understood that this crisis was the main cause of many political and administrative changes that gradually happened in Cuba in attempt to alleviate the difficulties that existed in the '90s.

Upon drastic reduction of the ICAIC filming budget, and as an attempt at recovery and continuity of films, co-productions emerged, the majority being with "Spain, France and Mexico, which often imposed scripts or directors or actors resulting in poor addressment of Cuban topics" (Fernández, 2008). Some results of this new phase of co-productions are the films *Maité* (Eneko Olasagasti and Carlos Zabala, 1994), *Kleines Tropicana* (Daniel Díaz Torres, 1997), *Un paraíso bajo las estrellas* (Gerardo Chijona, 1999) and *Hacerse el sueco* (Daniel Díaz Torres, 2000).

But as critics and experts on the history of cinema in Cuba claim, the economic crisis that the Special Period brought also had some positive aspects for filming production. By seeking and obtaining financing by foreign institutions, greater creative freedom was achieved (Fernández, 2008). In this way, a certain independence was obtained from the norms and cultural policies set by the ICAIC. The cinema at the end of the 20th century was a product of the times, contemporary and national themes appeared on the big screen, as well as uncertainties about the crisis.

In general, some topics already addressed in other Cuban films, remained but given the new circumstances, the majority of the films were focused on themes that were controversial at the end of the century: "Emigration, housing, increasing material poverty, bureaucracy, the impressive rise of African and Catholic religions, corruption, Existentialism and conflicts of identity in times of difficulty" (Álvarez Pitaluga, 2016).

The '90s vision of Cuban cinema is defined by the representation of the economic crisis (Special Period) and its consequences and experience. It can be observed as a main theme, context of the film or via personification. At the end of the '90s and the beginning of the millennium, Cuban cinematogra-



phic discourse is marked by the economic crisis and as a result of it, there are characters that portray disenchantment, scarcity and frustration. Some of the films from this phase that are highlighted for their '90s vision are "*Hello Hemingway* (Fernando Pérez, 1990), *Madagascar* (Fernando Pérez, 1994), *El elefante y la bicicleta* (Juan Carlos Tabío, 1994), *Reina y Rey* (Julio García Espinosa, 1994), *Pon tu pensamiento en mí* (Arturo Soto, 1995), *Amor vertical* (Arturo Soto, 1997), *La vida es silbar* (Fernando Pérez, 1998), and *Las profecías de Amanda* (Pastor Vega, 1999)" (Álvarez-Pitaluga, 2016).

In the third phase analyzed (1990-2017), there is the film *Fresa y Chocolate* (Titón & Tabío, 1993). Despite the closeness to the time period and to have the same director as *Plaff*, both films address the theme of the Afro-Cuban religion using different focuses. The film *Plaff* satirically addresses the fears and prejudices that surround the Yoruba rituals; meanwhile the second film desacralizes the relationship between the believers and Yoruba deities; the dialogues with the orishas are no longer in the Bantú language, but rather are communicated in informal Spanish. Thus, Nancy (Mirta Ibarra) asks Oshún for Diego (J. Perugorría): "Help him, girl, you won't be sorry".

Although the film surge as a critique of the system that governed the island and spotlights the homophobia and fears and ignorance that still exist in Cuba, other subtopics enrich the main plot like the case of religiousness. Various symbols that allude to this constantly surround the photograms of the film: from the sunflowers that Diego carries to his apartment the first time that he presents his "Guarida" to the spectator, direct reference to the Our Lady of Charity, to the altar of Cuba's patron saint, the blessed *guano* cross and the eye behind the door, talisman to protect one from evil eye and gossips, symbol also of the syncretism that the African religions have suffered.

In addition, the sequence of the prayers of Nancy (Mirtha Ibarra) to Saint Bárbara (Shangó) is associated to the film *Cecilia* (Humberto Solás, 1981), specifically to one of its first scenes where the character Cecilia (Daisy Granado) takes a spiritual bath, ritual where, dipping in honey, she asks the Virgen de la Caridad (Oshún) for protection.

Another production that reflects the intriguing

mystery of religion in Cuba is the film *María Antonia* (Sergio Giral, 1990), based on the theater production of the same name by Eugenio Hernández Espinosa. In this film the Yoruba religion was underlined as a mark of marginalized sectors, distinguishing a class structure. It puts a spotlight on conflicts that continue in the contemporary Cuban reality of the last days of 20th century: racial prejudices. Religion is perceived as a *fatum*, a type of fatalist destiny, because "if you stray from the saint's path, the saint asks for blood", the godfather says to María Antonia (Alina Rodríguez).

Lately in Cuban cinema, films like *La vida es silbar* (Fernando Pérez, 1998), *Las profecías de Amanda* (Pastor Vega, 1999), *Miel para Oshún* (Humberto Solás, 2001), *Santa Camila de La Habana Vieja* (Belkis Vega Belmonte, 2002), *Entre ciclones* (Enrique Colina, 2003), *Los dioses rotos* (Ernesto Daranas, 2008), and more recently, *7 días en La Habana* (Varios, 2012), *Boccaccerías habaneras* (Arturo Soto, 2013) have been released. Although they have inquired into different themes, neither has contributed new perspectives on the Yoruba religion. Cinematographic filming today has followed the same patterns as previous times: stereotypical characters, space, the ancestral home as the favorite place to carry out rumba dancing and praying scenes, religion as a synonym of blackness or marginalization.

## 7. Conclusions

The history of Cuban cinema in the late 19th century, but it was not until the early 20th century that it came into its own. Although the first years were marked by few films relied mainly on North American studios and foreign film companies, Cuban cinema would soon mature and gain its independence. Although at one time it followed the commercial cinema trends, later, in the '60s, it sought its own personal style "mixing singular formal styles like Italian neo-realism, English *free* cinema, and French *nouvelle vague*, and Cuban topics in terms of content," (Fernández, 2008) together with the Latin American cinematographic aesthetic. Thus, used time and again were topics like slavery in Cuba, the struggle for independence from Spain and social conflicts from the republican period, combined with the issue of Cuban religions. Although in some cases these may not be part of

the main theme, it has been shown the beliefs of African origin are found in the background Cuban filmography, this being a mirror of the Cuban imaginaries.

Upon observing different periods of Cuban cinema and the religious themes in it, you can see how the audiovisual treatment has mutated and the value that it has been given: first with prejudices and stigmas, and later, stereotyping it in many films. Today there is no African religion in Cuba: It is Afro-Cuban or, as called by many, Cuban. Although its origin has been recognized, there have been processes of syncretism and assimilation resulting in a unique, identifiable manifestation. Living together on a daily basis is the Catholicism brought to the island by the Spanish and the spirituality of the deities that came with African slaves, creating Cuban beliefs, the magic-religious system that is the base of the popular customs, culture, traditions, and in summary, that which is called being Cuban.

There is no longer fear in the contemporary Cuban audiovisual to explore Afro-Cuban rituals. Although today many continue to treat this topic superficially by incorporating stock characters, other filmmakers have opted for revealing details of the Afro-Cuban world, searching for its own language, where modern tendencies and Cuba's deepest roots converse. But there is still much to be discovered and told about the Yoruba culture; this vast Cuban cultural heritage is merely waiting for new film focuses to uncover the beliefs of this island.

## Endnotes

1 The Yoruba religion is associated to the practices, beliefs, and spiritual traditions carried out in Cuba, that began in the Yoruba village in west Africa.

2 This division of periods is not random, responding not only on film production (qualitative, quantitative), but also on political and institutional changes the island experienced, and their consequences on filmmaking.

3 Other authors state that this was not the beginning of Cuban cinema, but that "the true origin should be sought in the popular shows that used vistas fijas y panoramas, at the beginning of 1894". Joel del Río: "Las primeras seis décadas del cine cubano", in *La Jiribilla*.

4 According to Raydel Araoz Valdés:

Act number 1 of the Society of Cuban Folklore, founded in the early 20s:

"...finally, the descriptive study, given the purpose of true social therapy, of certain perverted practices like acts of witchcraft and ñañiguism, in which, so expressively, the popular low life is manifested" (*Archive of Cuban Folklore*, La Habana, no. 1, 1924).

Society of Afro-Cuban Studies (30s):

[...] study with objective criteria the phenomena (demographics, economics, legal, literary, artistic, linguistic and social in general) produced in Cuba for the interrelating of different races, particularly the black of African origin and the Caucasian white, aimed at achieving awareness of the actual facts, causes and consequences, and the higher comprehension of the diverse integrating elements of the Cuban nation (*Estudios Afrocubanos*, La Habana, no. 1, 1937).

5 Celebration that is held in Santería in honor of an orisha.

6 According to DRAE: Pertaining or relative to the Abakuá society, of African origin, comprised only of men. // Member of this society.

7 In 1985, the Foundation of New Latin American Cinema was formed, comprised by 18 countries on the continent.

8 <<http://cinema23.com/trayecto23/el-cine-cubano-despues-de-la-revolucion/>>

9 The phase comprised of the late '80s and early '90s was known as the "Special Period", which was named such based on a speech by Fidel Castro, which made reference to the economic crisis that the island would experience after the fall of the Eastern Bloc as a "a special period during peacetime".

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