

Lydia Cabrera's African Fables from Cuba as a Text Theatre

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Abstract African-Cuban art manifests a specific African sense of the continuity of life and death; the two are magically connected and this unique perspective produces a rich creativity based on the notion that everything is related and exists in the single moment. Lydia Cabrera, who is responsible for having saved the African poetical, magic wisdom preserved in Afro-Cuban art, studied painting in Paris and gained a European perspective on the African literature. Afro-Cuban literature is imbued with a mythical shamanic diction that manifests itself in the fairy tale of that country. The African element, which is potently present in the tale, is derived from African slaves in Cuba, among whom the author Cabrera was raised, therefore acquiring an intimate knowledge of their beliefs and sensibilities. Cabrera also spent time in Spain, and in 1936 she published a French translation of *Negro Fairy Tales from Cuba*. She was not the only Cuban traveling to Europe, in the 1930s, the young painter Wilfredo Lam visited Paris and exhibited with Picasso. Lam's paintings fascinate the writer Carpentier who is inspired by them to write a preface to one of his works which becomes a manifesto on “the real-marvellous”, “lo real-maravilloso”. Afro-Cuban literature makes use of the metaphor of the mirror and water as an image of death. This literature may be interpreted as a kind of “text theatre”, a dramatic performance using the mask, the ritual and the doll — emblem of female magic and fertility — in a combination of picture and drama.

Key words Cabrera; Afro-Cuban art; a text theatre

For an African person moulded in his own tradition, the sense of a dual nature of reality is a natural state of experiencing and seeing the world. What is visible and invisible combines the integral picture of existence. It means that the scale of experiencing both life and death creates a cultural value that we could call “a magical continuity of being”. This ontological quality is without a doubt connected with a mythical model of the interpretation of culture. It is associated with religion, philosophy, art and literature. It defines not only the way of understanding time and space but it also includes a visual projection of elements and it is a condition of everlasting creativity in cultural space of archetype and symbol. “A magical continuity of being” is inseparably connected with a huge potential and a richness of creating the world at any mo-

ment and with the possibilities of the imagination of a child, a philosopher and a poet ...At the base of each of those projections there is the language — the instrument which gives a mental and powerful shape to every vision created.

Lydia Cabrera was born in Havana in 1900. She was a white Cuban woman . It is thanks to her—an excellent writer and at the same time a brilliant ethnologist—that European and American culture saved African literary aesthetics and some poetical-magical wisdom, which from the time the island was conquered up to now has been a perceptible pulse of a syncretic Cuban identity. She was a disciple of Fernando Ortiz, who was regarded as the most brilliant ethnographer and documentary writer of Cuban history and its multiple traditions (mainly Spanish, African and Chinese). Lydia Cabrera widened the area of the enormous knowledge and erudition of her master by a completely new quality of literature.¹ She saved the African oral transmission in Cuba and gave it a new form; the fairy-tale, the fable, the story and also the documentary record on the borderline of ethnology, cultural anthropology, sociology and esoteric secret knowledge.

In the history of the life of Lydia Cabrera it was essential that she went to Paris in the thirties to study painting and history of art. The closeness which connected and still connects a lot of writers and poets with painting—with artistic vision, a sense of line, colour and chiaroscuro is a characteristic feature in Cuba. Cuban literature—marked by a stamp of Spanish-American neo-baroque (the term is also owed to a Cuban writer and painter who emigrated to Paris in the early sixties till 1993—Severo Sarduy)—somehow in a natural way aims at a verbal intensification of a phrasal literary texture, at a counterpoint of a picture and a musical value of a word and at the fullness of sound, a rhythmic and visual literary sequence. This particular fullness marked by a specific sense of humour—African “picaresque”, African “mantras” — magic spells, neologisms full of magical power both pagan and sacred at the same time was discovered by Lydia Cabrera in an Afro-Cuban vision of the world and in an Afro-Cuban mythical-symbolic (the only one of its kind), poetical-shamanic diction to which the Spanish language is subjected. That diction is indeed the form of a folk African-Cuban fairy-tale, a fable or even a parable.

She was brought up amongst African slaves in Cuba—she derived motifs for her future books from them. African beliefs, their music, imagination and sensibility manifested in a deep feeling of unity with nature and the universe let her develop her own literary talent complemented by her broad range of studies, versatile knowledge and erudition. Those studies are the Paris period of Lydia Cabrera’s biography—a close contact via Europe with an archaic African art, with its aesthetics in which every line, form or a spot of colour are a sign, a magically hidden code, a symbolic language of a dream sleep, a remembrance of ancestors, an epiphany of death, a recalling of ghosts which live in all the elements.

In the thirties the writer lived in Spain—there she met, among others, Federico Garcia Lorca and Gabriela Mistral. 1936 was an important year for her—the Paris publishing house Gallimard published her French translation of *Cuentos negros de Cuba* (*Negro Fairy Tales from Cuba*). That book was the first literary written record of Afro-Cuban mythology in Cuba. In 1940 it was published in the Spanish language and

was preceded by a preface written by Fernando Ortiz. With an absolute certainty the stories included in that volume and also other literal fictions of the Cuban writer belong to the stream of “a marvellous reality” (“lo real-maravilloso”) in the literature of Spanish-America and the Caribbean. According to this idea—a human is part of the universe, is subjected to its laws. The universe and human individual are one. The reality of a human is not divided, neither in a physical plan nor in a mental one. A human thought includes—through numerous forms—a form of evolution, transformations and experiences which has changed the stream of energy into our present. All those changeable forms of existence comprise both the past and the future at the same time; they are both the reminiscences and potential realization of the future.

Lydia Cabrera and her Afro-Cuban world of literal creations is thus written into such a conceptual structure and at the same time into a creative constellation of three outstanding artists—a writer, a painter and a philosopher—whose fortunes are inseparably connected with both Cuba and with the European artistic avant-garde of the thirties and forties of the 20th century. We are talking here about a Cuban writer, the creator of a concept of “lo real-maravilloso”—Alejo Carpentier, a Cuban painter who left Cuba at the same time and blended into the European stream of adventure with surrealism in Paris—the author of one of the most famous paintings of the 20th century—the famous *The Jungle* (*La Jungla*)—Wifredo Lam and an essay writer and a French philosopher—Pierre Mabille, the author of *Le miroir du merveilleux* (*Les Editions de Minuit*, Paris, 1962, with a preface by André Breton).

The years of Lydia Cabrera's European adventure include significant dates closely connected with discovering African morphology through the filter of the European avant-garde:

In 1928, thanks to the help from French poet Robert Desnos, Alejo Carpentier left Cuba, arrived in Paris and was introduced to Parisian Bohemia of the 1920s.

In 1938, Wilfredo Lam arrived in Paris—a young Cuban painter completely unknown in Europe, two years older than Carpentier, a son of a Chinese man and a Mulatto. Thanks to Manolo Hugue's letter of recommendation, he came into contact with Picasso. In his Paris studio at the old Grands—Augustins street near the Seine he met his future friends: Victor Brauner, Hans Bellmer, Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp. A year after his arrival in Paris, Lam exhibited his works together with Picasso in Pearls Gallery in New York. One of the most significant African metaphors expressed in painting and seen with the eyes of a Cuban is focused in the famous Lam's painting, “La Jungla”.

In 1948, Carpentier was fascinated with Wifredo Lam's painting and inspired by it to write the “Preface” to his own novel *El reino de este mundo*. The Preface is regarded as the first literary manifesto of “lo real-maravilloso”—the tendency and poetics so close to the syncretic identity of Spanish-American, African and Caribbean culture.

The work of Lydia Cabrera is also included in that artistic outlook. A question arises—what would Cuba and Africa have meant for her if she had not seen them from the perspective of that “European shore”? How much did her writing influence Cuba, which, thanks to her became a form of a mythical projection, a Cuban “Mirror of

Marvel” (“Le Miroir du merveilleux”) in the words of Pierre Mabille (Mabille 191)—a French researcher of that concept from the European perspective could call it (he was also a searcher of myths and cultural traditions, an essay writer and comparatist).

Lydia Cabrera tried to grasp and understand Cuba in her writing with all the process of integration of so many traditions and so many voices of African cultures present on the Island.

The mirror mentioned here can function in two ways: it can be comprehended in a philosophical way—as an instrument of a “baroque” conceptual game with the visible world and as a looking-glass which is used by Wilfredo Lam, Carpentier and Mabille in their worlds of painting and writing. This is the symbol of the American continent with its syncretism of Nature, Culture and History. It is on the other side of the jungle—the mirror where shamanic drums are heard calling gods from the pantheon of Cuban “santería” through primeval rhythms. Similarly to *Alice on the other side* of the mirror, on the other side of the jungle-mirror people and gods unite thanks to the symbiosis of the catholic religion and African beliefs. This is where Papa Legba—the god of all the journeys opens all the roads for us and Ochún Fai—the ruler of the hurricane makes slaves win their uprisings.

However, in Lydia Cabrera’s literary fiction—in her projections of African fairytales and legends—the mirror has a very specific role—it is inseparably connected with the symbols of water, that is with the symbols of life, death and time.

In 1938 the writer returned to Cuba and devoted herself entirely to the study of Afro-Cuban culture and religion. In 1954 her most important work was published—*El monte* (*The Mount*). It is a long essay about Afro-Cuban religions, magic, esoteric knowledge and the mythology of Black Cubans. In the fifties she also wrote the essay “La sociedad secreta Abacúa” (“The Secret Society of Abakua”). It is a description of a ritual of black “masonry” coming from Africa. In 1960 Lydia Cabrera chose emigration. She never came back to Cuba. She died in Miami in 1992.

According to a structuralist canon (Propp 87), “*Los cuentos negros de Cuba*” can be defined as a “marvellous stories” (“cuentos maravillosos”). They are “*fábulas míticas*” (mythical fables), the source of which comes from the African oral tradition. In accordance with that magical-poetic vision of the world, people, animals, gods and the whole Nature coexist in one space without any distinct borderline between the world of the living and the world of dead. Their existences are one with each other. People depend on gods and gods are the integral part of one big Human Family. This is in accordance with a shamanistic rule—“everything which exists is alive”. That animistic concept is the source of African mysticism, spirituality and belief. For an African person it means his/her natural form of existence. That concept defines individual actions and also collective awareness, as well as social and civilisational processes. That concept also gives rise to a symbolic form of imagination and the mythological aesthetics of a literary vision. The language which is spoken by Lydia Cabrera’s heroes in her “*fábulas*” is in the form of phraseological sequences with a poetical character and at the same time it has a poetical strength of expression. This strength is clearly present in various versions of invocations and it is expressed by

magical mantras, prayers, songs of praise, shamanistic formulae, "primitive" African rhythms of musical instruments.

All those voices, sounds, whispers, black prayers and shamanistic spells are moved by the writer to a level of literary plot.

African fables from Cuba are characterised by a clear dramatisation of the text. The literary structure of those texts proposed by Cabrera is nearly a ready corpus of a drama performance. They can also be interpreted as an African projection of the Greek ancient theatre. For the same reason Lydia Cabrera's "fábulas" is perfect material for research on the anthropology of culture and the anthropology of drama performance. Throughout the tome of *Los cuentos negros de Cuba* there are basic elements which distinguish the drama performance in the archaic and primal concept. They appear not only on the level of the text (a specific literary diction) but also on the level of visual, symbolic and anthropological connotations of those "marvellous stories". They are both a literary sequence and a record of a potential theatrical structure. It seems that their interpretation only in the category of literary "folklore" is rather elementary and it limits their cultural projection and their anthropological originality.

It seems to me that "a new life" of the Cuban writer's stories depends on different possibilities of some new proposals for their interpretation. Perhaps, one of them could be an attempt to read those fables as "a text theatre", which would mean the Cuban writer played a deliberate game with a specific literary convention. For Lydia Cabrera—an ethnologist—Afro-Cuban beliefs were a documentary fact and provided some material for scientific research. On the other hand, for Cabrera—the writer, they presented perfect material just as a mythological-poetical record of African oral tradition. In such a suggestion for the interpretation of *Los cuentos negros de Cuba*—as "a text theatre"—it seems to me that the following elements are very important:

The presence of the mask: It is connected with an idea of a double, with an idea of a twin spirit, with a perception of dual reality, with a mystery of identity and with a metamorphosis of the protagonist. The mask is also registered in the process of spiritual transformation both of the protagonists of the text and of "the drama" which is performed there. The presence of the mask—a mask of a man, an animal or a god—includes the potential possibility of the intensification of existence. The mask is thus a symbol of the acceptance of many forms of existence in the body of one man or in a community—a tribe, a family, a larger human society... The mask is also a magical shamanistic element of a therapeutic act. Thanks to it, everything which is attacked by an illness or an evil spirit can be changed by a shaman into something that is healthy and free of curse.

The ceremonial and ritual activities: in Cuban fairy-tale like folklore—in Lydia Cabrera's Afro-Cuban fables—a ceremony and a ritual mean participating in a common collective experience. Its basis is a common "cosmovision" of the world which derives from a spiritual and religious experience, from the syncretism of the catholic religion and African beliefs of black people—"lucumi" and "yoruba". A common experience and ritual replace History here. The essence of a collective existence in Lydia Cabrera's stories is manifested through a ritual experience. The experi-

ence of a ritual is a literary projection of “sacrum”. In a mythological fable it means a literary “theatralisation” of the world. Then in Lydia Cabrera’s stories the social situation changes into a literary situation with strong Features of a collective experience.

The presence of a doll: according to African myths, dolls come from the underground world where the dead ancestors stay: one man managed to reach the land of the dead where he saw dead ancestors using dolls. When he returned to the surface he taught people how to use dolls but the spirits of the dead sent him death. African legends and myths always talk about dolls with a sacred and magical meaning. The presence of a doll is connected with fertility, sexual mystery, with the symbols of water, with the earth and with the moon (anyway, it is very similar to numerous esoteric traditions of other cultures). For example, in the Nigerian tradition—dolls come from a special village of female wizards. So they were made by women who possessed magical qualities. However, men also had the privilege of making dolls. Some attributes of a wizard were mainly ascribed to a blacksmith and in most African countries, a smith created such dolls. A magical synthesis of a doll is fetish and along with it a rich space of mythical and cultural projections. I have mentioned here just a few basic elements of the “theatralisation” of the literary convention in Lydia Cabrera’s stories. Of course there are many more, and if we assumed the suggested perspective of the research, we would need a separate and broadened scientific study. Within the suggested line of interpretation we should certainly also consider the mythological and anthropological meaning of the victim, of the ritual of clearing, of the carnivalisation of literary statement, of the symbolic projection of gesture, dance, colour and of a motif of metamorphosis.

The above remarks concern directly the possibility of interpreting the literary text. I think that Lydia Cabrera’s literary works can be analysed from different perspectives. Two of them, suggested above, seemed to me especially interesting from the point of view of their creative inspiring energy:

1. a text as a picture (a mimetic perspective) and
2. a text as a potential dramatical structure (a kinetic perspective)

Referring to the first one—a short observation concerning the paintings of Wilfredo Lam. His famous painting “La Jungla” is a synthesis of the Afro-Cuban way of visualizing the world. It fascinated people so much that excellent representatives of French avant-garde of the twentieth century devoted much of their time to it: Breton, Benjamin Péret, Michel Leiris, Philippe Soupault. The colours consist of dominating browns, ochres, luminous whites. The canvas is filled with sensual violence which refers to myths and African magical rites: sharp lines of bamboo trunks change into bars. Behind it—there are human figures—in a symbolic synthesis— changed into gods, fetish, a mask. “La Jungla” was an event which could be compared to Paolo Uccello’s discoveries in the area of perspectives. They influenced all subsequent painting as a whole as well as the sensitivity of the western world. The European perspective is expressed in the depiction of the whole composition around the defined central point. Most of the artists situated various elements of the canvas around that centre. That concept goes beyond the framework of painting—on the philosophical level it explains the general idea of picturing the world against the figure of God who

is somehow the main axis of symmetry of “the universe”.

Lam's painting denies that traditional perspective. He suggests a new perspective. It is a perspective of a different axis of symmetry within one painting.

Lydia Cabrera's work is similar as it negates the Euro-central literary perspective. The writer does not intend to be scientifically precise nor record only Afro-Cuban oral literature. However, she wants to create something she calls herself “antropoetry” —a feature connecting attributes of poetry and an essay.

The creative activity of Cuban artists—Wilfredo Lam and Lydia Cabrera—is connected by “a spirit” of the marvellous and the baroque. Both Lam and Cabrera try to capture the painting as a piece of a certain vision of the world. That world remains in a constant act of creation. Lam in his pictures, drawings and lithographies, and Cabrera in her Afro-Cuban stories and fairy-tales create art as if there is only one picture which is in constant motion. This is a formidable and uneasy picture, eternal and forever young— a bridge made of lianas connecting The Old Continent with The New World.

Note

1. The information concerning Lydia Cabrera's biography and writings is cited respectively from the following works by herself: *Cuentos negros de Cuba* (La Habana: La Verónica, 1940); *La Regla Kimbisa de Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1986); *Otán Iyebiyé Las Piedras preciosas* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1986); *Reglas de Congo Palo Monte Mayombe* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1986); and *Supersticiones y buenos consejos* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1987). The author has also borrowed some ideas from Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point. Forty Years of Theatrical Exploration, 1947 – 1987* (London: Methuen Drama by arrangement with Harper & Row Inc., 1988).

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