

GENDER, KINSHIP AND LIFECYCLE RITUALS IN CUBA

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ABSTRACT

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This report discusses the efforts of state powers to inflict large-scale societal transformations on local gender and kinship by exploring the relationship between matrifocal gender and kinship structure and the socialist state in Cuba. Cuban gender and kinship relations are approached not only by examining the kinds of daily social interactions that took place amongst 'lower-class' Havanian informants, but also via the types of lifecycle rituals celebrated in Cuba: Catholic baptism, girls' *quince*-party, weddings and funerals. The report indicates an intriguing contrast between the, in-practice, very mother-centred gender and kinship relations, and the revolutionary state symbology manifesting an idea of a metaphoric patriliney.
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Keywords: Cuba, gender, kinship, matrifocality, life-cycle rituals

Introduction

One of the most important themes in recent anthropological kinship studies has been the changes brought about by modernisation to gender and kinship systems, often mediated by state initiatives (e.g. Hutchinson 2000; Wardlow 2006). Socialist states, Cuba included, offer an especially interesting case in point since they have been conspicuous in their efforts to inflict large-scale societal transformations via powerful state practices that also reshape gender and kinship relations. The aim has been to build a completely New Man, an embodiment of communist virtues.¹ A quest for a more egalitarian society has often been central in these efforts. On the political level the Cuban socialist state circulates a symbolic notion of the revolutionary state as a metaphoric patrilineal succession of heroic founding fathers, with Fidel Castro the 'father' or 'grandfather' of the Cuban nation (see Borneman [ed.] 2003), a view that contradicts the strongly matrifocal and matrilineal tendency prevailing in actual Cuban kinship. Furthermore, the revolutionary state's attempts to promote engaged fatherhood, family stability and responsible sexuality seem a poor fit with the Caribbean matrifocal kinship system. My research during nine months of fieldwork in Havana in 2007 and 2008 focused on the interplay between these two systems by examining three specific areas: day-to-day gender and kinship relations; lifecycle rituals that can be seen to represent the basic social divisions in any society (see van Gennep 1960 [1909]; Barraud et al. 1994); and the revolutionary state itself.

In Caribbean anthropology, the term 'matrifocality' has been used in a way that refers to a wider scale of social relations than mere household arrangements.² Raymond T. Smith defines Caribbean matrifocality as "a form of family life" (1988: 7) and "a social

process in which there was a salience of women—in their role as mothers—within the domestic domain” (ibid.: 8). According to Smith, matrifocality is a structural principle that has to do with the weakness of the conjugal relationship and with the dual marriage system whereby legal marriage tends to be a middle and higher-class union type while the lower classes prefer consensual unions. A main feature of Caribbean matrifocality is the strong relationships between a mother and her children (Smith 1996a, 1996b [1957]). Due to the strong centrality of mothers in terms of kinship relations as well as household arrangements, my informants’ gender and kinship relations and the type of social system formed by them can be characterised as matrifocal following R.T. Smith’s wider definition of the term. Caribbean matrifocality has conventionally been characterised as an exceptionally unstable family form because it comprises unofficial sexual relationships, marginalisation of men in the family, and considerable numbers of children born outside of wedlock (Clarke 1974 [1957]: 76–180).³ However, this supposed fragility of the matrifocal family form when confronted by larger social and economic changes makes Caribbean matrifocality a particularly interesting case for the examination of the relationship between gender and kinship relations on the one hand and large, state-level transformations on the other.

In Havana my fieldwork took place primarily in the urban neighbourhood of Centro Habana and in the eastern suburbs where I lived with a family I had known since 2003, but I also met numerous people from other parts of the city. Almost all my informants were people belonging to the lower end of the financial scale. Most had arrived in Havana from the Eastern provinces of Cuba (mainly Guantanamo) within the last twenty years; ‘ethnically’ they were a very mixed group. My family ran a little *cuentapropista* (private entrepreneur) cafeteria and, like all Cubans, took part in ‘grey-area’ business ventures in order to make ends meet in the face of heavy state regulations and taxation. While by the summer of 2008 the legal reforms introduced by Raúl Castro had brought DVDs and even mobile phones to many Havanian homes, most of my informants still lived without running water.

The division of labour amongst my informants followed in many ways a gendered ‘inside’/‘outside’ divide (see Smith 1988: 135–136; Safa 2005: 327).⁴ Women in general took care of work done inside the house, while men were responsible for most outdoor work and chores considered dangerous or heavy such as repairing machinery. When something had to be bought further away than in the immediate neighbourhood, it was often men who went to get it. The Cuban state has, since the beginning of the revolution, widely encouraged women to join the workforce (see e.g. Castro Ruz 2006 [1962]: 79–86; Safa 2005: 324), and my female informants were either working in day jobs or retired from them.⁵ Some of the younger men were periodically without jobs and sustained mostly by their mothers and siblings during this time but all other male informants worked in at least one day job, even those who were retired. Men were expected to have money and to be able to provide for women and children, whereas women were not expected to provide for their partners in the same way, though they always had money of their own. Women spent their money predominantly on their mothers, siblings, children and their own needs, while men, in addition to this, had to have money to give to their partner.

During my fieldwork in Havana I collected information on gender and kinship relations by observing the daily social interaction of my informants as well as making

19 taped interviews with Cuban men and women on the subject and a further 59 on subjects connected with lifecycle rituals. In addition to this kind of 'outward orientated' speech (see e.g. Briggs 1986 on the interview as a specific speech genre), I concentrated on noting conversation in everyday situations, accompanying my informants on their daily business and helping my family in the cafeteria, something that offered a good chance to get to know a wide array of people from the neighbourhood. To examine Cuban lifecycle rituals, I participated in baptisms, girls' *quince* (fifteenth birthday) parties, weddings and funerals, documenting them in notes, photos and videotapes; I also examined media, popular culture and educational items that dealt with the subjects. The Cuban state and the revolutionary stand on gender and kinship were approached by means of media observation (newspapers, magazines, TV-programs, educational bulletins), participation in state rituals (such as May Day or Fidel Castro's birthday) and formal interviews with persons perceived as state agents, such as a representative of the Cuban Women's Federation (*Federación de Mujeres Cubanas*) or the director of an elderly people's home. I also documented the small daily encounters that my informants had with state agents, and collected a wide array of Cuban academic literature dealing with gender and kinship relations.

In this report, I will first examine in greater depth matrifocal kinship and gender relations amongst my informants. After this I will proceed to explore the kinds of lifecycle rituals practiced by my informants, and the relationship of these both to the matrifocal kinship form as well as to the revolutionary state. At the end of the report I will discuss the possibilities offered by this type of ethnographic material in terms of further research. The aim is to examine the interplay between, on the one hand, matrifocal gender and kinship relations at the local, practical level, and on the other, the abstract ideals and practices of the powerful revolutionary state. On a more general theoretical level this allows exploration of the myriad ways in which gender and kinship relations are situated at the heart of larger, state-level and even globalised, transformative processes (see Hutchinson 2000; Wardlow 2006), and also permits an understanding of these processes in other contexts.

Caribbean matrifocality and Cuban kinship relations

As already noted, kinship relations in Cuba are characterised by a strong matrifocal tendency, whose central principal is that the woman in her role *as mother* is at the centre of family relations (Smith 1996a). Since these are based on the relationship between the mother and the child, fathers often have children in various different households, whereas the women usually have all their children living with them (Olwig 1996: 138). Men are often seen as marginalised as fathers, but the strength of the consanguine bond makes them loyal as sons, brothers and uncles (Smith 1996a). The fact that the father is often 'missing' from the family structure emphasises matrilineal kinship relations (see e.g. Clarke 1974: 172–174) and a person's most important kin are usually the matrilineal grandmother and the mother's siblings and their children;⁶ my Cuban informants often drew attention to this by quoting a proverb: 'the mother is only one and the father whoever'.

Matrifocality was also linked to the fact that many of my informants expressed a desire to have girl children instead of boys. Girls were seen to 'continue the lineage'. While

Cubans define kinship bilaterally, the kin relation traced through the mother was seen more strongly as a true *de sangre* (blood) kinship than that traced via the father. As it was common for my informants—both men and women—to have children with various partners (see also Smith 1988), virtually all my informants had siblings with whom they shared combinations of parents. My informants saw their same-mother siblings as more intimately ‘blood’ relatives than the ones with whom they shared a father, as a comment from a male informant demonstrates: “They’re my brothers, blood brothers, of mother, *not* of father; they were born with me.” There was, however, a tendency to be closer to those siblings with whom one shared both biological parents, indicating that the father is also considered to be a ‘blood’ relative, although of lesser importance than the mother (see also Smith 1988: 37–39 for both similar and divergent ethnographic examples on the concept of ‘blood’ in the Caribbean).

Whereas my informants were usually knowledgeable about how many siblings they had on their mother’s side and maintained firm relationships with them, they were often unaware of how many siblings they had on their father’s side, indicated by expressions such as “I’ve already lost count” or “I don’t even remember”. This had to do both with the fact that they often did not know all of their patrilateral siblings due to less contact, but also with a desire to emphasise that their father was a ‘real man’ (*machote*) who had sexual potency and plenty of children scattered around like a Cuban man should. This reflects the fact that while women were expected to be nurturing, loving caretakers, men were only expected to possess the physical ability to reproduce, to be able to impregnate women (see also Clarke 1974: 96; Barrow 1996: 404). While relationships were often fragile and fathers were repeatedly ‘non-existent’ or only in very marginal contact with their offspring, having children was fundamental both to men and women (see Wilson 1973: 149–151; Smith 1988: 147; Barrow 1996: 397), and all my informants desired children at some stage of their lives.⁷

The different orientations of men and women to children and childcare were especially visible at the time of pregnancy and childbirth. While the life of the father-to-be went on as before, the future mother’s life revolved around the pregnancy. Women were the main agents when it came to children and childbirth, and the marginal position of men manifested itself in the fact that they were not expected to participate either in the actual delivery or in the care of the mother or the baby after the birth. When I asked a pregnant female informant if her male partner would accompany her to the hospital when she gave birth, she responded, both appalled and amused by the thought: “Nooo! He would have a heart attack if he saw that!! No, they [the hospital employees] don’t allow you to take anyone there with you, no one, no one.” Often the pregnant woman’s mother went to stay with her daughter for some days (if she did not already live with her) after the delivery to care for her daughter and the baby. This happened regardless of whether the new mother cohabited with a male partner or not.

A particularly interesting feature that I noticed amongst my pregnant female informants was the competitive consumption that related especially to the baby’s gender: they spent their days trying to buy clothes, toys and other accessories for their new arrival. At different stages of the pregnancy, family and friends were invited to see the progress of the collection being amassed to evaluate the beauty, quality and quantity of the different objects, and layettes were compared competitively. Pregnant women were

anxious to discover the gender of the baby, whereupon they started to equip themselves for its arrival *seriously*. Most women wished for a girl child since this allowed them to immerse themselves in a world of pastel-coloured, frilly decorations. In the month following my Cuban sister's discovery that she was carrying a girl, she bought the baby 54 lavishly decorated, tiny dresses with the money that her wealthy (in Cuban terms) partner supplied her. Another informant, who was expecting a boy, was disappointed, as she had already bought the baby a number of dresses. Later she consoled herself with the fact that having a boy is cheaper since she did not need to buy all the decorative clothes and hairpins required for a girl. She did, however, start stocking up on feeding bottles, pacifiers and the like, so as not to be completely left out of the race. Thus the baby is being gendered even before it is born, while having children also offers a means to pursue luxury and establish a competitive hierarchy of wealth and material goods, especially for Cuban women. This is of particular interest when observed in the context of the strongly egalitarian ideology of the Cuban socialist state whose official aim has been to reject all kinds of disparity.

Union forms, marriage and gender relations

In most accounts of Caribbean matrifocality, legal marriage has been described as the ideal valued above other union forms as manifesting a high class status (e.g. Clarke 1974: 74–76; Smith 1996a: 87, 149; 1996b: 44). Yet in Cuba, the only time when it seemed salient was when it came to house-ownership, with house-owning informants rejecting legal marriage on the grounds of not wanting the partner to gain legal property rights to the house—a type of individualism which is deplored by the Cuban government (see Díaz 1993: 9). My informants rarely made a distinction between legal marriage and other forms of union, and terminologically these were completely mixed in normal use; it did not matter whether a casual date was called *enamorado/a* (admirer), *novio/a* (boyfriend, girlfriend), *esposo/a* (spouse) or *marido/mujer* (husband, wife). Legal marriage was not seen to make a difference in the relationship in terms of stability, loyalty or the spouses' status.

The specific structural position of legal marriage in Cuba as opposed to the English-speaking Caribbean may relate to the fact that, in the latter, legal marriage has been promoted as the respectable ideal by the Christian church (Wilson 1973: 100; Clarke 1974: 76; Barrow 1996: 435), while in Cuba the position of all institutionalised religions is fairly weak (see e.g. Azicri 2000: 251–256). Yet in the absence of Christian churches, the Cuban Revolution has taken other kinds of action that should have increased the popularity of legal marriage in the country. In the 1960s, the government began legalising consensual unions via a nation-wide 'Operation Matrimony' campaign (Cabrera 1960: 36; see Nelson 1970: 399; Martínez-Alier 1974: vii, 140–141), with state judges and the Minister of Justice circulating cities and villages throughout Cuba, legalising consensual unions in collective events. I have not managed to locate records detailing how many unions were legalised during the campaign, but according to the Cuban press of the 1960s, there were "thousands" (*ibid.*: 36; Blanco 1960: 98). The stated aim of Operation Matrimony was to "ensure the Cuban family" (Cabrera 1960: 96); in particular to protect

women from being abandoned after years of cohabitation and to shelter widows and their children (Blanco 1960: 99). The more stable family relationships that the revolutionary government hoped to gain through legal marriages were therefore seen to profit women and children in particular. Economic motives were seen as the primary reason for the high frequency of consensual unions in Cuba (see *ibid.*).

Before the Revolution, legal marriage was limited mostly to the upper layers of Cuban society (see Díaz 1993: 5), so this was seen by the revolutionary government as a means to popularise and make widely available the status symbols pertaining to the upper classes, and in this way deprive the upper classes of their class content (Martinez-Alier 1974: 140). After the 'collective marriages' campaign ended in the 1970s, the promotion of legal marriage in the country continued via the provision of revolutionary wedding palaces where Cuban couples could marry cheaply yet with all the luxury of a bourgeois wedding. At the time of my fieldwork these wedding halls were still functioning. The Cuban government also offered state-subsidised, low-cost honeymoons to all legally married couples, and presented them with the opportunity of purchasing food and drink for the wedding party at state subsidised prices. Yet despite these incentives, legal marriage was not popular amongst my informants. It was most often pursued for practical reasons only (for instance, to get the three-day honeymoon offered by the state at a subsidised price). Consensual unions were favoured since this allowed both partners legally to retain their personal belongings and saved them—as one female informant put it—from “the mess of divorce” in case the relationship broke down. Many of my women informants preferred dating relationships to live-in partners if they had the means to do so (i.e. they owned a flat or a room or could afford to rent one), thereby avoiding the work load of cooking, cleaning and washing that came with having a man in the house, along with his restrictions on freedom of movement. Often men preferred cohabitation since they felt they needed a woman in the house to do the housework, while women were mostly less successful in restricting their male partner's freedom.

Sexual relationships amongst my informants were mostly fairly short-term in duration and informal, with frequently changing partners. Many, both men and women and particularly younger informants, had various concurrent relationships, mostly without their primary partners' knowledge.⁸ Both men and women considered active sexuality and multiple partners a normal aspect of adult life (see also Smith 1988: 137; Barrow 1996: 397). In this way the relationships of my informants did not conform to the type of legalised, more stable relationships that the revolutionary Cuban government has tried to encourage with its marriage and family policies (see also Safa 2005: 323).

Lifecycle rituals

Lifecycle rituals provide an effective means to approach the construction of gender and kinship relations since it is during these rituals that society renews the relations that comprise it, and the social categories defining kinship and other social existence become especially visible (Barraud et al. 1994: 26); in Cuba I see these to consist of the Catholic baptism, the girls' initiation ritual *quince*, weddings and funerals. There appeared interesting differences in the relative social importance of distinct lifecycle rituals, which

to my view are connected both to the egalitarian ideology of the revolutionary state as well as to the matrifocal form of Cuban gender and kinship relations. The revolutionary government wanted to transform the ritual sphere of life as a part of larger social changes, favouring some rituals while rejecting others (see also Malarney 1996), which allows lifecycle rituals to be understood as a point where gender and kinship relations at the practical level intersect with the structures and values of the revolutionary state.⁹

Because of the strongly egalitarian ethos of the revolutionary Cuban government, rituals that were seen as bourgeois or upper class fell into disfavour in the country (see *El Diablo Ilustrado 2006*: 197–206) while those seen as cultural practices of previously ‘oppressed’ groups were encouraged. Recently, certain Afro-Cuban cultural practices have been highlighted as representative of Cuban national culture (see also Benitez-Rojo 1999: 197–198) and showcased in various ways: rumba performances are held in the streets; the dances of the *santería* gods are taught in schools and Afro-Cuban religious characters appear in the carnival parade. According to my informants, the disfavouring of certain ritual practices has taken place in much more subtle and tactful ways, for instance via ideological and social pressure. A Catholic Cuban informant told me that during the early years of the revolution in particular, the policy of the regime was to replace lifecycle rituals previously celebrated in the Catholic Church with revolutionary state-driven rituals more suitable to the New Man. The results of this state policy at the time of my fieldwork in Cuba were fairly complex. Some lifecycle rituals were celebrated almost entirely in the state sphere (weddings), some in the Catholic Church (baptism), some in both (funerals), and some in neither (*quince*).¹⁰

By far the most popular life-cycle ritual amongst my informants was the girls’ fifteenth year birthday party: *la fiesta de los quince años*. I see *quince* as an initiation ritual where girls are transformed into women: celebrated as sexual, potentially reproductive seductresses, immersed in luxury, vanity and eighteenth-century colonial high-class symbolism. Essential to the ritual are the *quince* photos, where the girl poses in various different outfits as well as nude. My informants judged *quince* to be a more important occasion than a wedding since “you can divorce and remarry but *quince* is just once in a lifetime”. Celebrating a showy *quince* is especially important to the girl’s mother, since it adds to her honour to have brought into the world another potentially reproductive woman who can extend the matrifocal kinship form; hence it is the *girls’* initiation that is of importance in society. *Quince’s* attractiveness to Cubans might also relate to the fact that it takes place almost entirely outside the state sphere¹¹ though it also occurs outside the Catholic Church, giving ritual agency to the individual family, most importantly to the girl’s mother and her matrilineal female relatives.

Weddings in Cuba were most often celebrated in the revolutionary *palacios de matrimonios* (wedding palaces) or simply in the *bufetes colectivos* (collective legal offices). The wedding ceremony is effectuated by a state lawyer, lasts about ten minutes and requires two witnesses in addition to the couple. The lawyer reads the wedding formula and a passage from the *Código de la Familia* (family law), the couple and witnesses sign their names in the wedding register and the newlyweds exchange rings and a kiss. The couple can invite family and friends to witness the ceremony, but small ceremonies featuring only the couple and their witnesses were also common during my fieldwork. Sometimes a family feast—where up to sixty guests were invited—in the wedding palace party salon



A *quinceañera* in a photo shoot

(or elsewhere) followed the wedding ceremony. As in *quince* parties, the female is the centrepiece of the celebration, the ritual offering her a chance to dress up and show her beauty, though in a less accentuated way than during her *quince*. Rare to start with, weddings were normally not preceded by long-term preparations and planning as with *quince* celebrations. Arrangements often were made on the morning of the wedding day, and the whole tone of the event was informal and unceremonious. My informants were also unwilling to spend large sums of money on weddings.¹²

While in the English-speaking Caribbean weddings have been described as the socially primary lifecycle ritual, I suggest that the *quince* ritual holds this position in Cuba. In the English-speaking Caribbean, church weddings in particular have been depicted as a mode for the marrying couple to demonstrate their elevated class position with conspicuous ceremonies (see Clarke 1974: 74–76; Smith 1996a: 149). However, in Cuba where the revolutionary government has made it possible for everybody to have a bourgeois-style wedding, the sumptuous *quince* parties have instead become an important arena for showing wealth in the country. Moreover, Christian church weddings are very scarce in Cuba. During my fieldwork, the weddings taking place in the Catholic Churches numbered between zero and ten per year, depending on the popularity of the church in question; the revolutionary state has been successful in taking over a ritual domain previously—at least to a certain degree—controlled by the Catholic Church.¹³

However, there is one ritual sphere where the Catholic Church is very strong in Cuba: the baptism of children.¹⁴ Unlike any ritual offered by the Revolutionary state, Catholic

baptism offers the parents a chance to dress up, to celebrate the child—and themselves as parents—and establish ritual kinship links through god-parenting outside of the state sphere. The age at which a child is baptised depends predominantly on the financial situation of the child's parents and god-parents (who are often picked on the basis of their wealth), that is, when the parents or godparents can afford the lavish ensemble required for the occasion, with perhaps enough for a small family party. I see this material side of the ritual—a competitive display of wealth via fancy clothes and accessories—to be very significant to Cubans and more important than the religious meaning of the ritual, for while it also had the latter significance for my informants, it was not exactly the one propagated by the Catholic Church. Amongst my informants, Catholic baptism was much sought after because it granted them the opportunity to later take part in Afro-Cuban religious rituals. To be able to undergo a full initiation in Afro-Cuban *santería*, one has first to be baptised by the Catholic Church. Baptism was also seen to bring a general protection and blessing to the child, but in a more 'magical' sort of way than the Catholic Church would have liked. It was, for example, usual for Cubans to say that a child has to be baptised so that he or she would not be 'a Jew' (*judío*). Baptism was sought after so that it would bring the child health, wealth and good luck in life.



A little girl in her baptism dress

The most important part of the baptism-ceremonies I observed was the photographing (and videotaping) of the child with its parents (or often just the mother), godparents and possible other relatives or friends in front of the statues of the different Catholic Saints (most of which have a more important meaning to Cubans as Afro-Cuban *santería* gods). The photographing and videotaping was so important that it frequently disturbed the work of the priest, with people pouring over to the altar to take photos and standing in front of him while he was trying to spill the holy water over the child's head. Announcements made by priests that photographing was allowed *only in a discreet manner* that would not disturb their work were invariably ignored.

Catholic baptisms are most often performed as group events in Cuba with up to forty children being baptised at once. In the most popular churches there are two rounds every Saturday (the day on which baptisms take place in Cuba), since all the willing cannot be fitted into one session. Frequently the churches that are associated with the Afro-Cuban *santería* gods are also the most popular baptism churches, often because of their beauty. However, despite the great popularity of the ritual in Cuba, only very rarely does this lead to practicing the Catholic religion later in life; first communion and confirmation were rituals with few participants during my fieldwork.

On the occasion of funerals, however, Cubans again find their way to the Catholic Church. Funerals are the only lifecycle ritual bringing together the revolutionary state and the Catholic Church. Wakes take place in the state funeral homes which have been stripped of the Catholic religious symbols prevalent in pre-revolutionary times.¹⁵ These funeral homes are numerous in Havana, and in keeping with the equality ideal of the revolutionary government, the services offered by them are very low-cost, some of them even free. The 24-hour wakes are most often quiet, simple occasions where no religious symbolism is in evidence. Yet after the wake, during the actual burial when the body is taken to the cemetery, it is most often blessed by a Catholic deacon before being laid in the ground. At the main Havana cemetery, *Cristobal Colon*, there is a Catholic chapel that has remained the property of the Catholic Church despite the annexation of the rest of the cemetery by the state.¹⁶ Sometimes the blessing evokes heated arguments amongst the funeral escorts, with part of the family wanting to have the body blessed and others refusing because of the anti-revolutionary implications of religious blessings. A Catholic deacon told me that persons categorised as *heroes de la República* (heroes of the republic) due to their notable socialist achievements, were never brought to receive a blessing in the Catholic chapel.¹⁷

On the whole, lifecycle rituals offer an interesting setting against which to reflect on the relationship between gender, kinship and the revolutionary state in Cuba; they also offer a fascinating field in which to study the recent changes in Cuban state policy and the ways in which these are reflected in the lives of ordinary Cubans. Starting with the fall of the Soviet Union but taking place predominantly during the last few years, there appears to have been a remarkable increase in the popularity of all lifecycle rituals in Cuba, in particular those that offer Cubans a chance to activate kinship networks outside the powerful state sphere (like *quince* and Catholic baptism). This can be interpreted as a rejection of the state's egalitarian ideal and a quest for competitive hierarchy.

Another interesting observation relating to lifecycle rituals amongst my informants is that they appeared to be predominantly a part of the women's domain. Women were

frequently the most active organisers and bore the most important ritual responsibilities for the successful outcome of the ceremonies. There were also differences in the rituals through which men and women passed, with only girls going through a socially significant initiation ritual. Moreover, men's and women's positions were different in the rituals in which both took part in (such as weddings), with women often being the ritually more central participants.¹⁸ I see this as relating to the fact that women are, on the whole, more strongly associated with family relations than men in the country, and to the matrifocal form of Cuban kinship. Yet, whereas women were more dominant when it came to the family, men were often more prominent in the multiple revolutionary state lifecycle rituals, such as in course graduation and the communist organisations' yearly anniversary ceremonies.

Conclusion

My ongoing research examines the interplay between gender, kinship and the strong communist state in Cuba. What interests me especially are the ways in which the revolutionary Cuban government has tried to reshape gender and kinship relations in the country, and how this relates to the lives of Cubans at a practical level. In its quest for an egalitarian society, the Cuban government set out to introduce massive transformations in the society that were played out against the—possibly long-term—structures of gender and kinship relations in the Caribbean (see Smith 1996a: 98; Barrow 1996: 181, 439; Safa 2005: 314–315, 332–335). The situation can be compared not only with the Caribbean and the socialist world but also, on a more global scale, with the ways in which state-mediated modernity has brought changes to local gender and kinship relations (see e.g. Hutchinson 2000; Wardlow 2006).

In Cuba the interplay between gender, kinship, and the revolutionary state manifested itself during my fieldwork in myriad forms and contradictions. Despite the Cuban state's efforts to promote more stable family relationships, my informants placed little importance on formalised unions or fathers' responsibility for their children. For the most part, my informants' family and gender relations conformed to descriptions of Caribbean matrifocality from other parts of the area, reflecting similar features to those described in anthropological accounts from the 1950s (see Clarke 1974; Smith 1996b). In the field of lifecycle rituals my informants manifested a strong commitment to the celebration of the girls' *quince* ritual—closely connected to the matrifocal kinship form in Cuba—at the expense of the politically more favoured wedding ritual. Moreover, lifecycle rituals clearly demonstrated an inclination to seek out competitive hierarchy in the context of state egalitarianism. Cubans' recently-found enthusiasm for the celebration of certain Catholic lifecycle rituals in the context of the socialist state ideology is also worth noticing. A particularly interesting field of inquiry is proposed by the contrast between the strongly matrifocal and matrilaterally stressed tendency prevailing in Cuban kinship relations in practice, and the state-level symbology that stresses the idea of a metaphoric patriliney with Fidel Castro as the quintessential father of the Cuban nation. Taking into consideration the socialist government's self-conscious efforts to inflict complete societal makeovers, the Cuban situation offers insight into exploring the relationship between

large-scale politico-ideological structures, and local gender and kinship relations also in other contexts.

NOTES

¹ On socialist states' efforts to inflict large-scale social transformations, see Wolchik 1979 on Czechoslovakia; Malarney 1996 on Vietnam; Friedman 2005 on China. On the New Man, see Dfaz 1993: 5; Guevara 2005 [1965] and Ramonet and Castro 2007 on Cuba. On socialist state egalitarianism, see Dfaz 1993: 5–9; Randall 2003 [1981]; Guevara 2005; Ramonet and Castro 2007 on Cuba; Wolchik 1979 on Czechoslovakia; Fidelis 2004 on Poland; Friedman 2005: 313 on China.

² For a critique of the term, see Olwig 1981; Blackwood 2005. I choose to employ the term *matrifocality* here since to my view it is representative of the main features connected to the Caribbean mother-centred kinship system.

³ R.T. Smith (1996a: 84, 98), Christine Barrow (1996: 181, 439) and Helen Safa (2005: 314–315, 332–335) have presented alternative views on this issue, and argued for the long-term presence of the *matrifocal* kinship form in the Caribbean area.

⁴ This division was by no means clear cut since both men and women engaged, for instance, in ambulating petty trade (see also Smith 1988: 147).

⁵ I had also three female informants who were living on remittances at the time of my fieldwork but had worked in day jobs before.

⁶ A person's *matrilateral* grandfather occupied a more marginal position in the family relations because men in the position of 'husband-father' were so often missing from the family structure (see also Smith 1996a: 14). Amongst my informants there was also a *matrilateral* emphasis when it came to ritual or 'fictive' kinship relations, very wide-spread in Cuba.

⁷ An aspect that might seem to be in contradiction with the great value placed on motherhood in Cuba is the—in all likelihood—very high number of abortions (the exact figures are hard to establish). Yet this does not to my view diminish the value of maternity in Cuba. Instead, I see it as having more to do with the conditions that make raising children difficult. A comment from an informant saying that "there (in Europe) it is normal not to give birth, but here everybody gives birth" supports this interpretation.

⁸ This is not to say that there were not couples—whether legally married or not—who had lived together for long and were committed and loyal in their relationship.

⁹ For examples of other kinds of ritual practices that provide a point of intersection between the local social structures and larger, state-level or even globalized forces, see Malarney 1996; Kapferer 1997: 7–35, 182–184, 273; Meyer 1999: Xix–Xxiii, 93–111, 175, 207–216; Wardlow 2006: 99–133.

¹⁰ I chose to concentrate on the kind of lifecycle rituals celebrated in the Catholic Church and leave out other religious denominations during my fieldwork. Due to its long-term presence in Cuba, the Catholic Church was the most likely to clearly display the ritual transformations brought about by the Cuban revolution. Afro-Cuban religions are another aspect of ritual life with a long-term presence in Cuba. Yet I chose not to include these in my study, since the lifecycle rituals practiced by them are, and have been, less institutionalised and more limited to the 'private' sphere of life than those practiced by the Catholic Church, and in this way were less likely to be directly influenced by the revolution.

¹¹ *Quince's* symbolism is mainly colonial and elitist and for this reason has remained marginal to state institutions. This seems to be changing. During the last few years it has been possible for *quinceañeras* to rent dresses and do photo-shoots in some of the state wedding palaces.

¹² Since my informants were from the lower classes of the Cuban society, it is possible that there are differences, for instance, in the relative importance granted to the wedding ritual in the upper layers of Cuban society.

¹³ See e.g. *Diario de la Marina* 1958 for descriptions of pre-revolutionary upper class weddings. There is some current indication of church weddings becoming more fashionable in Cuba due to the more impressive, showy format compared with the state wedding palaces.

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¹⁴ In most baptisms that I saw the children were between six months and up to ten years of age. Adults were also baptised into the Catholic Church in Cuba, but more rarely than children. Adult baptism was more complicated since adults were required to master the catechism before the ritual could take place, and this discouraged many otherwise enthusiastic Cubans.

¹⁵ Many of the funeral home companies that functioned in Havana prior to the Revolution moved over to Miami, where they continued operating with the same names as in pre-revolutionary Cuba, like *Caballero Rivera* or *Maspons*.

¹⁶ To my knowledge *Cristobal Colon* was the only cemetery in Havana where there was a Catholic chapel.

¹⁷ These persons were marked by the Cuban flag covering their coffin.

¹⁸ Only in funerals both genders were treated equally, but I would see this to be at least partly due to the fact that in funerals the person was honoured most of all as a “qualified worker” and an “exemplary revolutionary”, that is, as a representative of the official revolutionary virtues.

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