

**Changing History: Afro-Cuban Cabildos and Societies of Color in the Nineteenth Century**



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enabled the white dominant mercantile elite to establish social control of the free black population right up to the 1960s, through its law-making powers and its economic strength. When it became unsure of the loyalty of Bahamian residents to maintain strict control, it peopled its constabularies from as far a field as Barbados.

The opposite of the mercantile elite is carefully detailed to both in- and out-migration from the islands. Looking at the several different ethnic groups, which now form parts of Bahamian multi-cultural society, Johnson traces their emergence and their economic activities. He evaluates out-migration in the context of resistance to the various systems of domination that had controlled the lives of the working class. While migration had served the purposes of the working class in the short, in the long term, it led to the underdevelopment of the islands. It depopulated the Out Island communities and it created dependence on imported food from the United States.

*The Bahamas from Slavery to Servitude* is a well-researched and written work, employing extensive documentary evidence with reasonable support of statistical information. It was somewhat disappointing that four tables were placed in the penultimate chapter without any significant analysis. There were no discussions of the incomes of workers or their costs of living based on price statistics available for the colony.

The study has indeed examined new and original themes in a scholarly fashion. It has illustrated the struggle facing the former enslaved Bahamian population through slavery in the eighteenth century into servitude in the twentieth century and how the enslaved effectively resisted efforts to consume their freedom by entering the area of self-hire. This was continued during the operation of the "truck" and "share" systems. The book will certainly interest scholars in numerous areas of history, and forms a guideline for further specialty research on other Caribbean islands.

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*Changing History: Afro-Cuban Cabildos and Societies of Color in the Nineteenth Century.* By Philip A. Howard. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1998. Pp. 280. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. \$35.00.)

Mutual aid societies, such as *cofradías* and *cabildos*, have often been cited as important institutions that facilitated the cultural and social sustenance of blacks in Latin America, while adding a meaningful dimension to their political lives. However, few studies have systematically examined the workings of these institutions in ways that trace how these ends were actually reached. Philip A. Howard offers a major contribution towards understanding black life in Latin America, particularly in Cuba, by intricately marking a century's worth of institutional evolution within the context of important political processes. Based on a careful selection of archival material and a comprehensive reading of the secondary literature, Howard examines

how debates over independence and slave emancipation provided fertile ground for gauging the contributions of mutual aid societies in altering the shape of Cuba's political dialogue. This allows him the opportunity to assess the impact of these organizations towards the improvement, and even integration of blacks into the mainstream of Cuban colonial society. At the same time, it offers Howard insight into how a black "consciousness" evolved over the course of the nineteenth century.

Two types of mutual aid societies attract Howard's attention. First are the *cabildos*, which differed from *cofradías* with respect to the greater degree of autonomy they enjoyed from the Catholic Church. Secondly, Howard highlights the activities of what he calls "Pan-Afro-Cuban societies," or *sociedades de soccoros mutuos*. Gaining prominence after the 1850s, these organizations differed from the *cabildos* in that they attracted members regardless of ethnic, national, or linguistic ties. *Cabildos*, by contrast, were noted for maintaining their membership exclusivity on these grounds.

The book opens with a detailed look at the internal functioning of the *cabildos* within a broader historical context. Specifically, free-black life and slavery are surveyed; the links between *cabildos*, *cofradías*, and African secret societies are underscored. Howard even traces connections between the *cabildos* and Cuba's free-colored militia. The result is a highly textured picture in which *cabildos* are seen as an intersecting part of rich, multi-dimensional lives. What also surfaces is the institution's role as a psychological coping mechanism for blacks to deal successfully with both the travails of slavery and their status subordination in a caste-structured society. Howard further pursues the African contributions to *cabildo* development by dedicating material in two chapters towards explaining the parallels between African belief systems and those of Afro-Cuban *cabildo* members. All of this is interwoven with discussion of the mechanical structuring of *cabildos*, as well as their offices and daily responsibilities. The attention to the African component of *cabildo* life and the search for connections to other institutional aspects of the black existence offers a powerful statement that will be valuable to scholars working on the African Diaspora. Indeed, these portions of the book offer ready comparisons with mutual aid societies throughout Latin America.

After providing a solid foundation on the institutional and African background, Howard proceeds to illustrate the political roles played by these organizations. This is accomplished by studying the positioning of *cabildos* during rebellions, such as the Aponte conspiracy of 1812 and the Escalera conspiracy of 1842-1844. Howard argues that it was partially due to the reprisals following the Escalera conspiracy, as well as the declining economy of the 1850s and 60s, that led to the initial appearance of Pan-Afro-Cuban societies. *Cabildos* continued to persist in this period, but their prominence was challenged by these new organizations which petitioned more clearly for black integration into the social mainstream. The individual and collective appeals of Pan-Afro-Cuban societies constructed an agenda that pressed for better access to education, the abolition of slavery, relief from discriminatory legislation, the desegregation of public spaces, black suffrage, and the elimination of

caste categories. This agenda developed in stages. Howard steers his readers through the complexities of the 1868-1886 period, which witnessed the Ten Years' War, the Little War, and the formal abolition of slavery. In the process we see moments where a distinct, Afro-Cuban political program was radicalized. We also witness a gradual maturing of the Pan-Afro-Cuban societies' lobbying skills. Howard notes poignantly that with the loss of key Afro-Cuban leaders in the years following the Ten Years' War, the petitioning power of both the *cabildos* and the Pan-Afro-Cuban societies lost some of its edge. The same occurred after the abolition of slavery in 1886, which eliminated a key demand on the Afro-Cuban agenda. However, with the return of exiles such as Antonio Maceo, Juan Gualberto Gómez, and Martín Morúa Delgado, new accomplishments were attained by these organizations in the 1890s.

In short, Howard builds a convincing argument, which posits that among the main achievements of Cuba's *cabildos* and Pan-Afro-Cuban societies was the improvement of the status of blacks within the colonial system. Although these same mutual aid organizations did frequently participate in efforts to replace the colonial regime with a more equitable structure, in the interim, they managed to alter the condition of black life so that by the middle of the 1890s, Afro-Cubans were fuller participants in society than ever before.

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*Afro-Brazilian Culture and Politics: Bahia, 1790s to 1990s.* Edited by Hendrik Kraay. (Armonk: M. E. Sharp, 1998. Pp. xii, 208. Illustrations. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. Cloth \$61.95. Paper \$24.95.)

This fascinating new book on the African diaspora in Brazil which covers the last two centuries is a collection of eight short essays by a young generation of "bahianistas" based on their respective original research on Bahia as the "center of Afro-Brazilian culture" (p. 4). It is exciting to note that many of these pieces come out from the contributors' recent, yet unpublished doctoral dissertations. The book itself grew out of a conference panel on Afro-Bahia in 1995. Robert M. Levine, a distinguished historian of Brazil who served as a commentator for the panel, writes in the forward for the book: "This collection of essays explores the rich heritage of Afro-Bahian culture that provides the basis for the region's distinctiveness" (p. xi).

The historian Hendrik Kraay demonstrates shrewd professional skills in gathering and editing all the essays (and translating some of them from Portuguese) in history, sociology, and anthropology, which deal with diverse spheres of the complex Afro-Bahia (political, religious, cultural, and intellectual) in a unique region which extends from the major Atlantic port city of Salvador to the rural areas of Bahia, namely the sugar and tobacco producing Bahian Recôncavo and the cacao-producing southern frontier named Illéus.