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Tradition and the Politics of Blackness in Twentieth-  
Century Panama*

Michael Donoghue

Marquette University, michael.donoghue@marquette.edu

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

***History Faculty Research and Publications/Department of History***

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*Review of **When the Devil Knocks: The Congo Tradition and the Politics of Blackness in Twentieth-Century Panama***

Michael Donoghue

Department of History, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

Renée Alexander Craft has written an excellent ethnographic study that centers on performance analysis of the Afro-Latin Congo celebrations that are a part of, though distinct from, the Carnivals held every year along Panama's Caribbean coast. Craft carefully examines the larger geopolitics, the intra-regional, and transnational elements of these collaborative rituals and their subversive resistance to centuries of first Spanish, and more recently, upper-class Panamanian dominance. These elaborate dances, music, and religious role-playing incorporate creative responses to changing historical conditions, generational transitions, and more recently the role of globalized development, tourism, and the drug trade in Panama. Far too many studies of Panamanian history and social formation have focused on the transisthmian canal and its impact on the republic's society and politics. New works, such as Craft's, refreshingly explore other aspects of Panama's complex and diverse cultures.

The descendants of African slaves, who live along the “Costa Arriba” or northern littoral of the isthmus, have long been ignored or marginalized in Panamanian society and history. These folk have fashioned a unique cultural expression through performance art and their own syncretic religious beliefs to both defy and ridicule their Spanish enslavers through “hidden transcripts” famously elaborated by anthropologist James C. Scott among others. They continue this Congo tradition while continuously introducing important changes in their rituals. Their ancestors were the *cimarrones*, runaway slaves from sixteenth-century Spanish conquistadors. These self-liberated blacks lived in the region of Nombre de Dios and Portobelo and often collaborated with English, Dutch, and French pirates and smugglers. As a part of the African Diaspora to the Americas, they established transnational links through a long history of resistance to help form a unique Afro-Panamanian identity that has persevered through centuries of struggle and is celebrated with dance, masks, and satiric humor via Congo performance art. Craft spent many years of investigative field work in Portobelo and became acquainted with the key actors and participants, such as the famous major devils, Celedonio Molinar Ávila and Carlos Chavarría. Her interviews with the devils, kings, queens, princes, and angels of these ceremonies form the great strength of this work and show how what we think of as tradition is constantly reinvented, recalibrated, and rediscovered in light of changing circumstance. The book’s fine collection of photos gives the reader a strong sense of how powerful and engrossing these rituals are, a feat difficult to capture through words alone. Craft created her own performance pieces and artistic projects based on her experiences on the isthmus. These have been shown in the U.S. and Portobelo and originated from her view of *praxis*—that of not just observing and chronicling but also becoming and creating from her witnessing of and participation in the Congos.

Spanish colonial officials originally used the Christian faith and its notion of the devil to intimidate slaves into obedience. But after these slaves escaped and established their own communities called *palenques*, they turned the idea of the devil on its head and employed it in their pre-Lenten celebrations to parody the Spaniards, U.S. Zonians (American Canal Zone workers), local leaders such as General Manuel Noriega, and today’s global tourists. Craft delineates how the Congo festivals operate within this “double consciousness” (141–142) and how they evolved from a somewhat isolated tradition to an intra-regional one after the government constructed road links to the various towns and villages in the area. More recently, globalist contacts via cruise ship tourists who visit Portobelo and Colón comprise the main “out-group” audience. Locals depend on the “taxes,” donations, and souvenir purchases from tourists, which has to a degree altered performances to satisfy these new consumers’ expectations of the exotic. Yet Afro-Panamanians continue to hold their own “local” versions of the Congos for their own communities as the main audience/participants.

This work has great merit for expanding our knowledge of Panama “beyond the Canal” and how it fits into larger diasporic narratives and transnational histories of Africans in the Western Hemisphere. As a historian, I would have liked a little more development on the historical origins of these practices and traditions. While Craft provides a solid historical overview, more could have been done on the *cimarrones*’ impact on Panama’s colonial history and even the role of the famous slave rebel Bayano (also called Vaino) who has been fashioned into something of a national hero of Panamanian identity today. Also, the differences between the West Indian Panamanian community and that of the Afro-Panamanians who at various junctures were referred to as colonial blacks, *costeños*, or *negros nativos* might have been examined more. The complexities of racial/cultural prejudice that West Indians endured from Panamanians (they derogatorily called these Protestant, English-speaking blacks, *chombos*, a racial slur, for many decades) and their special critique of isthmian racism could add a bit

more nuance to the author's already superb racial analysis. Having attended and paid a Congo "tax" myself, when visiting Portobello in 2002, I wondered about another irony at work here. Craft does a fine job of showing how Afro-Panamanians during these rituals "played" observers such as the General Noriega, and Euro-U.S. tourists, but I wondered if she ever had any suspicions of being "played" herself? A final concern absent from this work is the appalling lack of Panamanian government spending on its Caribbean coast citizens, so many of them Afro-Panamanians mired in poverty and unemployment while the same government pours huge sums into prestige projects for its lighter-complexioned Pacific coast citizens in the capital. The marginalization of the Costa Arriba and nearby Costa Abajo has long been a sore point for local critics of Panamanian racism. But these omissions aside, Craft offers us an exciting exploration of an evolving Afro-Panamanian identity whose artistic invention continues to raise important questions about power, resistance, and ethnic affirmation in the twenty-first century.