

Crossroads of the World - Transatlantic Interrelations in the Caribbean

Organizers: Ingrid Kummels, Claudia Rauhut, Stefan Rinke, Birte Timm -Institute for Latin American Studies, Freie Universität Berlin.

Date, Place: July 2 and 3, 2012, Berlin

Bericht von: Filippa von Stackelberg, Berlin

E-Mail: FilippaS@zedat.fu-berlin.de

The two-day conference hosted by the Latin American Institute of the Freie Universität Berlin and sponsored by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation was part of current efforts to expand the existing research focus on the Caribbean at the Latin American Institute of FU Berlin. This initiative aims to consolidate various activities in research as well as in teaching, like seminars, lectures, field trips, university partnerships, conferences and workshops in order to provide a sustainable structure for a vibrant, internationally connected and interdisciplinary Caribbean studies focus within the German academic landscape. This focus puts emphasis on understanding the heterogeneous wider Caribbean as a transatlantic region, including its mainland areas and its diasporas - based on the assumptions that regarding the region as an essential part of the Americas helps to understand current and historic developments on the continent and that it deserves more scholarly attention as it hitherto does.

The interdisciplinary conference united scholars from many different areas of expertise to assess current trends and encourage innovative approaches in studying the region, which often has been described as a paradigm of “modernity” and globalization. With its richness in religions, cultures and languages, the Caribbean have been center stage of processes of creolization and likewise, through it’s many interrelations with North and South America, Africa, Europe and Asia, has formed multiple transatlantic networks of agents, practices and ideas and forming multilayered connections within the Atlantic and Pacific world. At the conference, this influential aspect of the history and present of the Caribbean has been highlighted and illustrated by numerous fascinating papers based on empirical research.

The conference was opened by Ingrid Kummels, the director of the institute and co-organizer of the conference, and her colleagues Stefan Rinke, Birte Timm and Claudia Rauhut.

The first and keynote speech was delivered by J. LORAND MATORY (USA), “Survival/Creolization/Dialogue: How Tropes Remake the African Diaspora”. The African diaspora, and the events that highlight its experiences, can be linked to three metaphors, which are a central construct of our thinking and acting: survival, creolization and dialogue. The most interesting perhaps and the one that best reflects the interrelational aspect of the African diaspora was the metaphor of survival, which Matory substituted with the more fitting concept of “Live Dialogue”. It refers to the re-negotiation of ‘original’ cultures by different

forms of agency and power relations and the survival, negation, change and influence on the 'original' culture in the course of the Afro-Atlantic Live Dialogue. The conference focused on transatlantic mobility and on how it continues to shape daily culture and religious practices, social movements as well as national and transnational political images. Live Dialogue as the long-term weaving of connections through travel back and forth over the Atlantic reflects this focus. The multiple transatlantic interrelations are therefore not just viewed as legacies of the past, but as actively and continuously renewed practices in colonial and post-colonial contexts. Matory's research highlighted his approach of Live Dialogue by looking at religious Yoruba worship in the USA, Brasil and the Caribbean. Accordingly, Orisha worship in the USA is a reflection of the marginalization of African Americans. Their dissatisfaction has led to a "back to the roots movement" mainly to Africa beginning from the 1960s. In the 1990s, this movement began to include Cuba, which was considered a holy place of strong survival of African religions. These continuous transatlantic connections have actually led to a reinforcement of religious processes in these regions. Thus, events that are taking place in the diaspora are reinforcing "traditional" cultures in Africa. The awareness of the fact that diaspora communities often express a stronger bond with their cultural heritage or religion than the communities back home is perhaps not new, but that this devotion is reinforcing and influencing cultures in the country of origin is indeed intriguing.

Panel 1 "Protagonists and Practices of Transatlantic Live Dialogue", was opened by CHRISTINE HATZKY (Germany) with her presentation on "Cubans in Angola: Renewed Practices in Post-Colonial Contexts". Hatzky based her presentation on research she conducted in Angola focusing on the long-lived Cuban engagement, mainly in the field of education, in Angola between 1975-1999. Central was the question whether Cuba's engagement was indeed, as Castro put it, that of the "good cousins", or rather that of the "good colonizers". To understand this unique south-south cooperation between two former colonized nations is to trace the colonial routes that led to this renewed interaction.

The next presentation was given by FÉLIX AYOH' OMIDIRE (Nigeria), "The Position of Chávez's Socialist Venezuela within the Yoruba Atlantic Diaspora: New Perspectives on Ifá/Orisa Identity in Contemporary Latin-America and the Caribbean". Primary focus was the recent, renewed Africanization or *Yorubanization* within Latin America and the Caribbean in countries of the region not traditionally associated with African diaspora identity. Ayoh' Omidire focused especially on Venezuela, where recent political and economic ideologies and transatlantic networks of "Yoruba religion" have led to the emergence of a Yorubanized identity which interestingly is not primarily followed by Venezuelans of African decent.

Panel 2 "Weaving Identities and Belongings, Creating Diaspora", included several engaging presentations. HAUKE DORSCH (Germany), spoke about "Trans-Atlantic Rites of Passage? Mozambican Students in Cuba and their Reintegration at Home",. The educational migration program between African nations and Cuba has existed since 1961 and is seen as part of the country's internationalist missions towards African nations. Dorsch primarily focused on the agreement

between Mozambique and Cuba in the 1970s and 1980s and the effects this agreement had on Mozambican education migrants as seen in terms of “rites de passage” of separation, integration and re-integration. The most interesting part of this relationship, as revealed by the presentation, was the economic and race related problems that emerged between the African students in general and the Cubans. Mozambican and Angolan students were considered wealthy and seen as privileged as they had access to foreign currency, causing tension between locals and the migrants. On the other hand, many Cubans perceived Africans as backwards and primitive underlining their sense of superiority in terms of Socialists development achievements.

Panel 3 “Making History: Interrelations of Race and Nation” refocused the conference on historic events that shaped the Caribbean of today. STEFAN RINKE (Germany), “The Day of Guanahani in Global Perspective”, reintroduced us to 1492, and the global significance of Columbus’ entry into what Europeans began to consider the ‘new world’. MELANIE LAMOTTE (USA), “Colour Prejudice in the Early Modern Guadeloupe Archipelago, c.1635-1759”, gave insight into a scarcely researched subject of early ‘colour prejudice’ in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French empire. Lamotte traced the gradual emergence of this prejudice and related it to specific demographic, political and economic factors. BIRTE TIMM (Germany), “Transnational Roots of Anticolonial Nationalism in Jamaica” reviewed crucial but hitherto neglected factors that lead up to Jamaica’s independence in 1962. As is the case in many freedom movements, the Jamaican independence received its first impulses from the diaspora. Timm focused on the migration experience and presented a portrait of the Jamaica Progressive League (JPL), a transnational organization founded by Jamaican immigrants in New York in 1936 that lobbied for an end of colonial rule in Jamaica. KATRIN HANSING (USA), “Rasta, Race, and Revolution: The Rastafari Movement in Socialist Cuba”, drew a portrait of the globalization of the Rastafari movement and its arrival in socialist Cuba. Technology, music and consumerism have been the driving forces behind the globalization of this movement. It has become a travelling culture and been diffused as a religion. In Cuba, its impact has been in large part due to persisting racism in the country. The equality rhetoric and policies have failed to address racism. The anti-racist and more inclusive ideals of the Jamaican Rastafari movement have been a major aspect of its emergence in a socialist context.

Panel 4 “Migration, Cultural Transfers and Politics of Exclusion” was the final and most extensive of the panels. KRISTEN S. CHILDERS (USA) opened the session with a talk on “Migration Flows and the Politics of Exclusion in the French Antilles”. She applied the metaphor “crossroads” to describe a turning point in the history of the islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe when in 1946, they voted against independence to become regular departments of France. Childers focused on the much contested migration projects that were initiated following 1946, controlling migration between France and the Antilles based on the idea of “Frenchness”. HANNES WARNECKE (Germany), “Different and yet alike? The Causes of Violent Forms in El Salvador and Jamaica”, compared the history of violence in both Jamaica and El Salvador. He argued that violence was once linked to the concept of “repression” and “rebellion” but how this terminology is

no longer accurate as to exclusively describe the violence experienced in either country. The following lecture by SEAN GILL (UK), "Economic Crisis, Migrant Labour, and the Dilemma of Citizenship in the Cayman Islands", gave insight into what is known as the Cayman Island miracle, a massive socio-economic transformation between the 1970s and 1990s. The Caymanian story of 'economic success' was founded on foreign capital and workers. However, in the light of the 2008 financial crisis, authorities have tightened immigration policies and even migrants with a long standing history on the Cayman Islands were not granted the rights to permanent residency and citizenship. According to Gill, the migration policies are highly racialised and cause a massive reduction in the migration population, rising violent crime and unemployment. LIRIO GUTIÉRREZ RIVERA (Germany), "Migrant Capital Expansion, Elite Emergence, and the Transnationalized Space: Palestinians in the Caribbean Coast of Honduras", gave insight into transnational networks between Palestine and Honduras based on merchant migration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These networks have thrived on the Caribbean coast of Honduras mainly due to strong networks based on kinship. INGRID KUMMELS (Germany), "Tourism and the Transnationalization of Couplehood, Family and Friendship Relations in the Caribbean", discussed new emerging mobility in Cuba. She referred to the transnationalization of couplehood or transnational marriages, which are often under suspicion. Transnational constructs, which due to widespread Cuban migration across the globe are an intrinsic part of the countries reality, challenge traditional ideas of family and friendship ties. The transnationalization of practices was also elaborated by CLAUDIA RAUHUT (Germany), in her presentation on "Contested Religious Traditions in Transatlantic Networks in Cuban Santería". Central to her presentation was the expansion of Santería religion throughout the Atlantic region and the often conflictive re-negotiation of its authenticity as a consequence of religious globalization. Defining what is original and what is new, what is permitted and what is perceived as going against tradition is an inherent part of transatlantic practices, as Rauhut pointed out, focusing on religious agencies and power relations in present Cuba. Concluding this panel was LIOBA ROSSBACH DE OLMOS (Germany) with the subject, "CaribBerlin: Multiple Tracks in the Religious Biography of a German Oricha-Priest". In a way, this presentation complemented Rauhut's in that its core argument was the adaptability and convertibility of Santería, especially in new migration contexts. Santería has always had to adapt to the conditions of its new destinations. In this context the argument of authenticity is difficult to defend.

Closing the conference was yet another compelling key note speech. MATTHEW J. SMITH (Jamaica), questioned the concept of memory and how people choose or are shaped to remember the past. "Transient Histories: Memory and Movements within the Nineteenth Century Caribbean" gave a new perspective on migration in the Caribbean basin in relation to Africa, the Middle East, Europe and North and South America. Important events such as for example the participation of Caribbean peoples in WWII, which contributed greatly to the formation of the identities in the region, is not necessarily present in the national memory of the countries at hand. The same counts for movements within the Caribbean itself

and the impact that these have had on the shaping of identity, relations and practices.

The conference “Crossroads of the World” was not only a crossroad of different disciplines, different ideas and different reflections on the history and the present of the transatlantic interrelations in the Caribbean. It also was a stepping stone for the efforts to expand and strengthen the research focus in teaching and research on the Caribbean at the Latin American Institute of Freie Universität Berlin. With ongoing workshops, seminars and lectures we especially invite young scholars based in Germany to participate and present their research. Furthermore, we will continue to enhance direct exchange with scholars from the Caribbean in order to overcome Eurocentric research perspectives and asymmetric academic traditions to encourage not only studies on the Caribbean but to work in close cooperation with scholars from the region.