
Popular religiosity. Its treatment from the perspective of Cuban history in basic secondary education

Popular religiosity. Its Treatment since the History of Cuba in Basic Secondary education

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Recibido: 15/03/2025

Aceptado: 18/05/2025

Publicado: 05/11/2025

Resumen: La religiosidad popular posee carácter histórico con múltiples influencias en la enseñanza de la Historia de Cuba. Sin embargo, ha sido poco tratada en los planes de estudio en el nivel Secundaria Básica, aunque los contenidos lo permiten. De ahí que el objetivo consista en caracterizar los elementos de la religiosidad popular en la enseñanza de la Historia de Cuba en Secundaria Básica. Los métodos empleados fueron, investigación-acción-participación, el cual favorece abordar el problema desde aspectos metodológicos multidisciplinarios, lo que permite elaborar orientaciones metodológicas para su tratamiento en la enseñanza de la Historia de Cuba en el nivel Secundaria Básica.

Palabras claves: Religiosidad popular; Nacionalidad; Identidad; Sincretismo religioso; Cosmovisión

Abstract: Popular religiosity has a historical character with multiple influences on the History of Cuba. However, it has been little treated. This epistemic gap allows us to address as a problem: What elements of popular religiosity characterize the teaching of Cuban History in Basic Secondary School? The objective is to characterize the elements of popular religiosity in the teaching of the History of Cuba in Basic Secondary School. The methods used were research-action-participation, which favors addressing the problem from multidisciplinary methodological aspects. The contribution is the development of methodological guidelines for its treatment in the teaching of Cuban History.

Keywords: Popular religiosity; Nationality; Identity; Religious syncretism; Worldview.

Introduction

Investigating the universe of Cuban folk religions is crucial, as their worldview has significantly influenced the religious thought of a considerable portion of society. Their formation dates back to the early days of colonization, and thus their evolution and development bear the imprint of colonial society.

In the formation of Cuban folk religions, Hispanic, Amerindian, and African contributions were essential, helping to create a multiethnic cultural tapestry. Among the diverse ethnic contributions to these religions are their imprints on language, art in its various forms, and a vast religious worldview grounded in faith in ancestral spirits.

The clash between the two cultures after the Discovery of America led to the extinction of a considerable portion of the indigenous population; however, many of their cultural expressions remain alive. Similarly, the various African cultures forcibly introduced suffered a similar fate, as they were subjected to slavery. The difference was that the Africans were more resilient and, at the cost of sacrifice, managed to assimilate many of the colonizer's patterns and integrate into the new reality.

Despite the negative aspects that the conquest and colonization of Cuba represented in many cases, this historical process brought with it other elements that contributed to the emergence of the Creole identity and the subsequent formation of Cuban nationality. Popular religiosity played an important role in this process, leaving its mark on the formation of that nationality.

On this topic, several authors have explored it in depth from historical, philosophical and ethno-anthropological approaches, such as (Ortiz 1983, 2015); (Ramírez 2004); (Cabrales 2015) and (Guanche 2011 and 2016), among others.

However, the treatment of the influences of popular religions on the teaching of Cuban History has been insufficiently addressed from socio-educational and formative approaches that contribute to the understanding of this essential part of history from the instructive and formative roles that its teaching entails.

This research assumes the influence of popular religions as a worldview. It considers that, like all religions, those of African origin contributed to diversifying the Cuban religious landscape and constitutes an important synthesis in the history of Cuban thought.

In accordance with the problem addressed, regarding the elements of popular religiosity that characterize the teaching of Cuban History in Basic Secondary Education, the objective is to characterize popular religiosity in the teaching of Cuban History at the Basic Secondary level.

The analysis of these aspects not only allows the approach to popular religions as a worldview, but also their impact on Cuban nationality and identity, which constitute cognitive and formative aspects of Cuban history that require study and further exploration.

Development

Popular religiosity in Latin America has historically been a catalyst for wisdom. It is also approached as equivalent to popular Catholicism, as a syncretic manifestation of the cultural clash between Catholicism introduced by the conquistadors, with native (indigenous) cosmologies, and subsequently with religions of African origin that were introduced with the African slave trade (Parker, 1993).

A distinctive feature is that it flourished with characteristics colored by religious syncretism; therefore, it operates as diverse beliefs, as noted by Sanchis (2008). This syncretism of diverse beliefs was nourished by the cultural heritage of the different worldviews that came into contact during the formation of Cuban nationality.

In this sense, religions of African origin, alongside Amerindian influences, symbolized one of the most genuine aspects of the nascent creolization process, not only in Cuba but also in Latin America. This process of cultural blending significantly influenced the formation of national identity, encompassing diverse cultural aspects, including religious ones, which left an important mark on the history and evolution of thought in a society that was beginning to identify and express itself as creole.

Each group contributed its habits, customs, and traditions. Cuban aboriginal culture left its mark on Cuban culture, nationality, and identity, extending to various fields of social life, “in language, housing, customs, various household items, food, and others” (Guanche, 2011, p. 18).

Cuban popular religiosity, in particular, inherits a broad worldview from the indigenous population, rooted in the worship of ancestors and nature spirits. This is a distinctive characteristic of popular religious expression, as it is also present in religions of African origin, demonstrating the evident blending of cultures.

Over time, and as a result of cultural syncretism, ancestor worship is found in various forms within Cuban syncretic religious culture. Popular religiosity permeates all analyses of Cuban culture; its manifestations are present in both the purely religious sphere and in diverse cultural expressions.

“(…) the first manifestation of nationality in man is precisely in the most rudimentary appearance of the cult of those who ceased to exist” (Bueno, 2016, p. 69).

In this regard, Cuban legends and myths contain mythological elements that enrich history and help in understanding the Cuban worldview, representative of a popular religiosity that characterizes it.

Within their context, these rituals represent the way of seeing and interpreting the universe and their relationship to it by those for whom historical reality left no other recourse than to mask their traditions as a means of preserving them. For these reasons, this research adopts these socio-historical approaches to demonstrate that the culture of resistance and emancipation in Cuban history has, in its epistemological components, the ethnic contributions of the diverse cultures that comprise and converge within the Cuban socio-historical space, as highlighted by (Ortiz, 2015):

(…) miscegenation thus affects both white and black groups equally in terms of their color and genetic characteristics; even though they are altered to varying degrees with regard to culture, in proportion to the diverse potential of their cultures and the complex social factors that determine the process of all transculturation. (pp. 183-184)

This criterion deserves special emphasis because *mestizaje*, nationality, and cultural identity merge completely in the assessment that Cuba is a melting pot, where different peoples and cultures merged, establishing the paradigmatic neologism of transculturation. Fernando Ortiz's contribution to the understanding of Cuban nationality lies in his analysis of the religious components that gave rise to Afro-Cuban identity as a distinctive new element.

These positions allow us to affirm that the religious landscape that took shape in Cuban society was complex, dynamic, and diversifying. In this regard, Ramírez (2004) states:

Therefore, the concept of popular religiosity reflects a specific form of religious expression, one of its most important features being that its main bearers belong to the popular sectors of society. (p. 1368)

This concept contributes to the present research not only by highlighting the popular component in this type of manifestation of the individual's religious worldview, but also by reinforcing the experiential, emotional, volitional, and creative capacity in the subject's relationship with the divine. These aspects express the ability to interpret reality and the experience of encountering customs.

Popular religiosity presents itself in its collective character as an expression of lived experience, where elements of popular culture intertwine. The treatment of this concept by both Latin American and Cuban authors shares the view that its features are direct consequences of cultural hybridization within the symbiosis of Latin America.

In the Cuban case, popular religiosity not only characterizes the worldview of society, but also provides important points of reference for understanding the religious landscape, which is not static and whose fluidity corresponds to the more widespread religiosity. In this sense, it has left a significant mark on national identity.

Among popular religions, the Regla de Ocha-Ifá is present, with influence in the western part of the country, particularly in Havana, and in the eastern region in Santiago de Cuba. According to Navarro (2022): “The diversity and richness of these Cuban religious manifestations with a strong sub-Saharan legacy is appreciated, as is the case of Santería and other Afro-religious expressions” (p. 10).

Therefore, to understand the significance of popular religiosity, it must be understood as part of the configuration of humankind's context in terms of cultural patterns. Its origins lie in the enslavement of Africans and in the ways in which elements of Catholicism were assimilated, allowing it to mask its true rites and beliefs.

This analysis allows us to understand that within the framework of culture, manifestations of emancipation are found as resistance against colonial patterns and domination, stemming from the need to abandon or change one's identity. The enduring presence of objects, symbols, and other ritual codes bequeathed to Cuban nationality contributed not only to its formation but also to its continued existence.

In the process of shaping popular religions, the phenomenon termed transculturation by Ortiz (1983) was one of the essential contributions to the topic. Recognizing this phenomenon allows for an understanding of the process of cultural identity within the Cuban historical context.

By introducing his concept of transculturation (Ortiz, 1983), he highlighted the foundations of emancipation, based on the premise of the fusion or assimilation of cultural elements within a transcultural framework. The preservation of the culture of the dominated in the face of colonial imposition—acculturation, understood as adjustment to specific cultural models—gave rise to a distinct culture. This, in turn, becomes the antithesis of deculturation , or the loss of the original culture, and consequently, a culture of resistance.

For this reason, it is understood that religious factors were among the elements that contributed to laying the foundations of the Cuban nation. Within the diversity of beliefs, religious syncretism became the form of resistance for enslaved people against the imposition of colonial Catholicism.

Religious syncretism manifests countless religious beliefs and experiences that flourished during the colonial era. Within this cultural symbiosis, Santería and Palo Monte emerged due to the influences of the Yoruba and Bantu ethnicities, respectively.

This process was also influenced by various forms of syncretized spiritualism, as well as the Franco-Haitian legacies resulting from migrations from Haiti after the 1791 Revolution. Popular religions, as a consequence of religious syncretism, are not simply a juxtaposition of characteristics from the gods of different worldview pantheons. Above all, they represent the emergence of a hybrid worldview that expressed the ideal of resistance of the enslaved.

In this regard, (Deschamps , 1990) argues:

Religion has been present since the beginning of the system of exploitation, widely used by the ruling classes to keep the workforce on sugar plantations and coffee farms in servitude. The official church, that is, Catholicism, advised the servants to be meek and obedient to the orders of their masters, but this was also used in the opposite way by the enslaved masses, which turned to their ancestral religion. This was especially true of the Lucumí or Yoruba slaves, due to the nature of their religion, and since they were the majority in Cuba, their influence was felt throughout the island. (p. 101)

Among the forms of resistance employed by enslaved Africans, marronage , leverage, and uprisings constituted resistance strategies in which their emancipatory ideals were intertwined with their underlying religions. According to La Rosa (1991), enslaved people reacted and adopted attitudes

based on their conditions, personal and ethnic characteristics, and level of development, and social awareness, which allowed them to direct their actions toward different objectives.

The cultural expressions of Africans, which are also part of the Cuban national identity, were a decisive element in the struggles for emancipation. They also constituted a qualitative reference point in the evolution of Cuban thought.

The Carabalí Izuama was founded by a family surnamed Nápoles and nicknamed Baracoa, whose sons became commanders in the war of independence, while Quintín Banderas and Guillermon Moncada were among the best musicians, dancers, and singers of the French tumba, whose most outstanding composers were from Maceo's troop. (Cabrales, 2015, p. 228)

Another important element to highlight within the practices of folk religions is the role of women. Their presence and active participation as priestesses reflects the emancipation achieved by women, especially within religions of African origin, whose patriarchal structures previously denied them access.

The massive participation of Africans and their descendants in the liberation struggles is also noteworthy. In fact, “the term mambí itself is of Bantu origin and had a much greater impact on Cuban popular speech than the term insurgent” (Guanche, 2016, p. 105).

Taking into account the Third Improvement of Cuban Education, initiated in 2014, the implementation of new educational approaches is proposed in accordance with economic and sociopolitical changes. In the teaching of History, new perspectives on historical knowledge, previously little explored, were introduced.

Given the importance of addressing the theme of popular religiosity in Cuban history, this research presents a methodological analysis of the contributions of African peoples to Cuban culture. In this regard, it begins with an analysis of the curriculum for the subject "History from the Ancient to the Medieval World," seventh grade, specifically Unit 5, "The Uneven Development of the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and America," which proposes an analysis of the cultural development of sub-Saharan African peoples and, within that context, the important role of religion as a worldview.

This criterion is supported by taking into account what is endorsed in the methodological guidelines of the subject, where the cognitive strengths of these contents are emphasized, because it allows

students to approach our indigenous and African traditions, an important basis of our nationality and Cuban identity.

In this case, the uneven development of Africa will be addressed to highlight that between the 5th and 16th centuries there were peoples with different levels of development, such as the Yoruba cultures: Ife Oyo and Benin, which became important city-states that extended their influence from the Niger River to a part of present-day Ghana, while the Bantu people constituted a confederation of tribes.

The study of the cultural diversity of these peoples is carried out from the cultural perspective of their contributions to universal culture, Cuban culture and nation. “The treatment of religion in these peoples cannot be reduced solely to beliefs, as that would lead to ignoring elements of the identity and idiosyncrasies of the civilizations...” (Dávila, et al 2023, p. 123).

In this sense, popular religiosity, as a phenomenon inherent to the religious syncretism that arose in Cuba during the colonial period, will be addressed considering the resistance and emancipation that enslaved Africans championed in their religious and cultural practices. Therefore, through the interdisciplinary relationship between World History and Cuban History, didactic and dialectical connections are established that allow students not only to acquire factual knowledge but also, through historical content, to cultivate a strong sense of attachment to historical memory, essential in the present day.

Analyzing popular religiosity from the epistemology of historical knowledge facilitates the understanding of the cultural values of African peoples studied in the subject of Ancient and Medieval World History in seventh grade. At the same time, it becomes a necessary tool for reaffirming the indigenous values bequeathed to the universal Latin American culture within which Cuba is situated.

Various celebrations that are characteristic of the religious beliefs of these peoples are an inherent part of popular culture and traditions. This indicates that the formation and consolidation of these beliefs are fundamentally based on the meanings and practices of this past, which students will explore in this unit, and which continues into the present, having been transmitted through several generations. (Dávila, et al. 2023, p. 123)

To address the influences of the sub-Saharan African world on Cuban culture, the ethnic origin of the slaves brought to Cuba is taken into consideration, as a way to identify the various religious worldviews established after the slave trade.

The Santería religion in Cuba originated from the ethnic groups known as Lucumí or Yoruba, who came from Nigeria. Similarly, the Palo Monte religion in Cuba developed from the slaves brought from the Congo-Zaire region, who represented the Bantu ethnic group. The Carabalí people, from whom the Abakuá religion in Cuba descends, came from the Calabar region.

These elements of historical knowledge allow the student to understand the complex phenomenon of Cuban religious syncretism, from which popular religiosity arises. In this way, they will be able to identify the syncretism that occurred between Yoruba and Palo deities and the Catholicism imposed by the colonizers.

In this way, one will understand cultural hybridity, such as the relationship between the names of various syncretized deities, such as: the Catholic Niño de Antioche, with Elegguá of Santería and Lucero of Palo Monte; the Catholic Santa Bárbara with Changó of Yoruba and Siete Rayos of Palo Monte; and the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, patron saint of Cuba, with Ochún of Yoruba and Mama Chola of Palo Monte.

The Spanish Virgin of Regla with Yemayá, queen of the sea and motherhood among the Yoruba, with the Mother of Water deity of Palo Monte. Saint Lazarus, the Catholic with Babalú-Ayé of the Yoruba and Arará with Coballende of Palo Monte.

The importance of this historical knowledge benefits students not only by enabling them to identify how enslaved people from various ethnic groups named and related their ancestral deities to Catholic saints, but also by exploring aspects of religion as ideology and culture through the lens of the unequal development of African peoples.

This will better prepare them to understand, in ninth grade, content related to the origins of enslaved people, their cultures, and religions. Emphasis is placed on the fact that religious practices and other contributions to history, culture, and national identity, such as Creole cuisine, music, and dance, are rooted in the cultural heritage forged around the batey (workshop settlement) during the plantation system.

These contents also allow for the establishment of educational approaches that address individual and group differences, taking into account the psychological characteristics of the students. It is necessary to recognize that classrooms contain students with diverse cultural backgrounds resulting from their family and community ties. Therefore, the school, as part of this triad, has the role of preparing them to engage with these contents in an educational and formative manner.

To strengthen the operational element of the content for the establishment of formative educational strategies that foster respect and recognition of cultural diversity. This criterion is adopted taking into account that, in Cuban classrooms, even though Cuba is a secular country, there are students with diverse beliefs and others who do not profess any beliefs at all.

Therefore, the teacher's role in the classroom should focus on utilizing the potential of different historical knowledge skills: identifying, characterizing, exemplifying, arguing, demonstrating, and evaluating, so that students not only deepen their understanding of these cultures and their contributions to history and national identity, but also foster values such as respect, equality, and recognition of cultural diversity.

Taking into account the cultural and religious aspects of African peoples addressed in the teaching of the History of the Ancient to Medieval World in the seventh grade, where the student is introduced to the knowledge of universal culture, its analysis is focused from a dialectical, didactic and developmental conception.

This conception allows for the reinterpretation of the ancestral legacy of African peoples to Cuban culture and ethno-nation, from an anti-discriminatory perspective, respecting the values of identity (unity and diversity of men), in contrast to the Eurocentric vision and in defense of a philosophy from the perspective of cultural decolonization.

The incorporation of these cognitive elements in ninth grade in the subject History of Cuba is evident from the methodological clarifications, which in the author's opinion is pertinent because it allows highlighting the value of emancipation from the knowledge and influences of African cultures and peoples in the development of Cuban culture and nationality.

In this sense, methodological guidelines are proposed for the understanding of Cuban popular religions from a multidisciplinary perspective.

To this end, the disciplinary approach and vision of the subject are taken into account, which

(...) is based on the philosophy of the Southern approach, which delves into the analysis of historical processes from a Third World perspective, in which the history being analyzed highlights the extraordinary historical and cultural heritage bequeathed by the peoples of Asia, Africa, and America, while also understanding their great contributions and their limitations. (General Directorate of Basic Education, 2024-2025, p. 2)

In consideration of the aspects discussed above, it is believed that the subject of Cuban History in ninth grade has potential for addressing popular religiosity. For example:

- In class 17: The process of transculturation: Development of plantation slavery and the slave trade. The aim is to incorporate knowledge of the religious forms and cultures introduced through the slave trade, emphasizing that this led to the process of transculturation between the Spanish and African components.

To contextualize for the student that this transcultural process took place between the Cuban aboriginal people and the Spanish. Therefore, this knowledge allows for the strengthening of concepts such as freedom, equality, fraternity, and society, which were forged first among the aboriginal people and later among Africans—values forged as resistance against colonial exploitation.

- In classes 18, 19, and 28: Origin of the slaves: Congo, Angola, and Nigeria. African customs, religions, and cultural expressions. Their reflection in the formation of Creole society and the differentiation between Creoles and Peninsulars.

Knowledge about the various components of Cuban nationality can be explored from linguistic, culinary, musical, religious, and other aspects, under the prism of cultural identity and historical memory.

Taken together, these classes become elements for understanding popular religiosity as a factor of resistance. Their development involves exploring emancipatory options that manifest themselves in concrete actions in all spheres of society; the process of seeking genuine individual liberation can even lead to social revolution.

- Classes 33 and 34. First independence conspiracies. The Aponte conspiracy (1812).

They allow us to highlight the differences between a culture of domination, which manipulates people's capabilities and subordinates the social sphere, and a culture of resistance that places liberation at the heart of the matter. Therefore, the African element must be considered in discussions of emancipation.

This is why approaching popular religiosity within the framework of historical knowledge favors the understanding of emancipation strategies based on the ability of the enslaved to readapt to the prevailing conditions and perpetuate their values and traditions.

Taking into account the analysis of the aforementioned methodological orientations, it is considered that they are based on epistemic criteria within the paradigm of decolonial philosophy, within whose broad movement the various forms of popular religiosity are inscribed. From this, the relationship between the culture of resistance and emancipation emerges.

The safeguarding of one's own identity and the resistance against any form of encroachment that affects human dignity (elements inherent in emancipation) are fully realized to the extent that the true liberation of the individual can be achieved. In this respect, the cultural practices of popular religions have contributed to the true liberation of the individual because they constitute a belief system that does not conform to dogmas or elite norms.

By addressing emancipation from a conception of popular religions and resistance as a worldview of opposition to exploitation, the historical-concrete manifestations of this thought are taken into account depending on the contradictions of the historical moment.

Therefore, a multidisciplinary approach from the Social Sciences is necessary to understand contemporary Cuba, its nuances and cultural diversity, whose nuances include African cultural and/or religious contributions in the creation of a worldview that has lasted uninterruptedly for six centuries.

The African presence in Cuban culture is evident in art—including music, dance, literature, visual arts, and musical instruments—as well as in the Cuban way of life. In the perception of reality, problems, and expectations, and even in ideas about life and death, it is easy to identify a specifically African, Indigenous, Spanish, or other origin, which imbues Cuban national sentiment with a "mixed whole," as the national poet Nicolás Guillén put it. This is one area where the African influence is clear and undeniable.

Conclusions

The manifestations of popular religiosity in Cuba constitute cultural practices that synthesize contributions bequeathed by the different hybrid cultures in the process of forming Cuban nationality.

In their ontology, Cuban popular religions not only explain the nature and essence of the spiritual world, but also reveal elements that denote contributions to the emancipatory ideal .

Cuban popular religions, made up of religions of African origin, have contributed elements inherent to the nationality, such as the varied forms of cultural identity that survive today and, in turn, constitute historical contributions to the ideal of emancipation and, consequently, to Cuban philosophical thought.

The history of Cuba, due to its complex social elements, bears the indelible mark of Africans and their Creole descendants. They contributed wisdom and values deeply ingrained in the Cuban psyche, and in the Latin American psyche in general, as they share a common identity shaped not only by the contributions of enslaved Africans, but also by the broader Latin American cultural landscape.

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No existen conflictos de intereses entre los autores

Contribución de autores

Luis Alberto Pérez Leyva: Originó la idea, sistematizó, actualizó información y gestionó la publicación.

Claudina Esther Martínez Vignón: Sistematizó, actualizó información, gestionó la publicación y revisó la redacción final.