

BOOK REVIEW

Henry B. Lovejoy. *Prieto: Yorùbá Kingship in Colonial Cuba during the Age of Revolutions*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. xv + 219 pp. \$90.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1469645384.

When the soldiers carrying the arrest warrant knocked on the door at his house in Havana, Juan Nepomuceno Prieto was in bed, easing the pain caused by an old festering fistula. Until that mid-July day in 1835, the sixty-two-year-old Prieto had been a compliant citizen and, what is more, a collaborator in Cuba's colonial political system. In his youth, he had joined the military, served in Florida during the Napoleonic Wars, and secured Havana's harbor while ships unloaded enslaved Africans. However, for someone like Prieto, a Black man born in today's nation of Nigeria, no compliance or collaboration was sufficient to guarantee safety in colonial Cuba, a slave society organized around racial lines.

Thanks to historian Henry Lovejoy's decade-long archival research, Prieto's trajectory is now part of our historiographical repertoire. The paper trail that Prieto left behind is sparse, encompassing mostly the legal case in which he was involved. Yet, by combining these documentary bits with a diverse and broad range of ecclesiastical, judicial, military, and mercantile sources, Lovejoy sketches the biography of Prieto—a former slave, soldier, and religious leader—from his enslavement in the Bight of Benin to his legal trial in Havana in 1835.

Lovejoy's fertile imagination compensates for the paucity of sources on Prieto's life, as manifested in the book's first four chapters. In Chapter One, "Badagry," Lovejoy speculates on Prieto's experiences in his homeland, his Yorùbá background, and his eventual enslavement. The author attempts to determine, albeit somewhat arbitrarily, the vessel that might have carried Prieto to the Americas, as the *Golden Age*, which is the title of Chapter Two. Chapter Three, "La Habana," imagines Prieto's experiences in Cuba's capital while significant socio-economic changes associated with the expansion of the plantation system were occurring in the city. In the late eighteenth century, Prieto joined the Batallón de Morenos, a colonial militia of free black and mixed-race men. As a soldier, Lovejoy explains in Chapter Four, Prieto defended Spanish interests in

Florida during the Napoleonic Wars, repressed the Aponte Conspiracy, and helped to police Havana.

Whereas the first four chapters abound with Lovejoy's assumptions about Prieto's actions, thoughts, and even feelings, the subsequent sections are the book's core, it is here that the reader will find the most relevant historiographical contribution. After his retirement from the Batallón de Morenos, Prieto was elected as the king of the *cabildo de nación* *Șàngó Tè Dún*, dedicated to Santa Bárbara, aka *Șàngó*. Meticulously, Lovejoy connects Prieto's Yorùbá upbringing with his role as the *Cabildo's* king. By blending his native faith with Catholic beliefs and rites, Prieto emerged as a concrete example of the historical process that Fernando Ortiz once identified as transculturation, also known as syncretism, a subject studied by scholars such as Ivor Miller, Stephan Palmié, and Jesús Guanche. As Lovejoy convincingly argues, the process of transculturation did not start in Cuba but rather in Africa, where multiple spiritual universes had already collided.

The contribution made by the Lucumí people to forging Afro-Cuban culture is the centerpiece of Lovejoy's monograph. Chapter Six, "New Lucumí from *Òyó*," explains the correlation between the collapse of the kingdom of *Òyó*, the subsequent arrival of more enslaved Lucumí on the island, and the increase in rebellions in Cuba led by Africans who had undergone military training in their homeland. In the "Lucumí War" (Chapter Seven), Lovejoy joins historians like Manuel Barcia and Matt Childs in linking changes within Africa with slave uprisings in Cuba. In the context of Lucumí's unrests, Prieto, as the leader of a Lucumí religious association, was thought by colonial authorities to be a natural suspect. In 1835, Prieto was interrogated after a street brawl in his neighborhood involving free blacks, *emancipados*, and slaves, which colonial officers presented in exaggerated tones as a rebellion. After that event, Prieto vanished from the records. In Chapter Eight, called "Prieto's Disappearance," Lovejoy offers his speculations about what might have happened to him.

Unlike José Antonio Aponte, the abolitionist Black leader, Prieto was not a fighter against slavery. Instead, he went from being a former slave to becoming an active participant in Cuba's slavery machinery, as his role in suppressing Aponte's conspiracy demonstrates. The stark contrast between both figures offers glimpses of possible ideological, inter-generational, and provenance tensions within Havana's Lucumi community and, broadly, the black community as well, a topic that is not thoroughly explored in the book and deserves further attention by historians.

Lovejoy's monograph encompasses more than one man's biography; Prieto is the thread the author uses to narrate the broader story of the Yorùbá diaspora in Cuba during the age of revolution. As the king of the *cabildo de nación* *Șàngó Tè Dún*, Prieto was pivotal in keeping alive the African heritage in the Americas, and by doing so, he was among the

forced diaspora of millions of Africans who resisted complete acculturation.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2021.134

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- Trotman, David V. 1976. "The Yoruba and Orisha Worship in Trinidad and British Guinea: 1838–1870." *African Studies Review* 19 (2): 1–18. doi:10.2307/523560.