

Zurich's Miami

Transethnic relations of a transnational community

by

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1 Introduction

The collapse of the communist bloc at the end of the eighties meant the end of "friendship prices" for Cuban sugar and the disappearance of entire sales markets. As a consequence, the economic situation in Cuba became more and more bleak. The early nineties saw various waves of people leaving the country; the best-known form of departure being mass exodus on self-made rafts. These rafts were then mostly intercepted by United States marine patrols, who transported the hapless refugees to the American military base of Guantanamo. Another, less spectacular flow of emigration is going in the opposite direction of the tourist influx into Cuba. Tourism and emigration are closely linked, since a relationship or – ideally – marriage to a foreigner is a prized way for Cubans today to flee the increasingly depressing conditions at home. Switzerland has experienced the growth of a small Cuban community over the past few years, whose members have nearly all obtained the right of residence thanks to marriage to a Swiss partner¹.

About three years ago, I was, by coincidence, invited to a party among Cuban emigrants in Zurich. I soon became a regular guest at such events, fascinated by their characteristic Caribbean intensity. Contact with the Cuban community in Zurich has since turned into a sort of ethnographic hobby of mine; it helps to soothe my homesickness for Latin America that has plagued me on and off ever since I spent eighteen months in Mexico on a research project ten years ago.

In this paper, I would like to present a few provisional and rather speculative hypotheses on the cultural dynamics underlying the relations between the Cubans and

¹ Absolute numbers are still comparatively small. The number of marriages between Cubans and Swiss residents of both sexes was 65 in 1996, the last year for which data from the Swiss Office of Statistics are available.

the Swiss. I shall restrict myself to two aspects: an analysis of gender interaction between Swiss and Cuban men and women on the one hand, and a description of the public arena in which this Cuban-Swiss community convenes. As any ethnographic work, this sketch needs certain conceptual tools. An important aim is to show the adequacy of the tools used here; used for the description of the dynamics of interethnic contacts and cultural transformations that can be observed among the Cuban diaspora in Switzerland. The core focus is on a certain understanding of culture and of cultural change.

2 Principles of the theory of cultural transformation

According to social anthropology's traditional creed, each culture represents a clearly defined unit, a historically lasting and integrated whole. Culture comprises all non-biological aspects of the life of a group of people, ranging from their technology, social organisation and religion to their typical personality traits. These various cultural fields are integrated by a series of values and norms and so constitute a comprehensive, organic whole (cf. Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). In their thoughts, feelings and plans of action, individuals more or less follow the rules prescribed by their respective culture. They are – figuratively speaking – the clay from which culture forms its creatures by enculturation and socialisation. From this point of view, the human world looks like a patchwork of clearly discernible cultures (cf. Malkki 1992). The relations between these cultural entities are comparable to the interaction of biological organisms. Cultural contacts that have been taking place in European immigration societies or in colonial situations are looked upon as a problem-prone interaction of such cultural organisms, and cultural conflicts are interpreted as a logical consequence of such meetings of incompatible units (cf. Hoffmann-Nowotny 1992; Tobler Müller 1993).

In the course of the last two decades, a new consensus has formed in the anthropological debate on what culture is, and it marks a turning point, a turning away from such a substantialisation or objectification of culture. The focus has now shifted to questions of individual and sub-cultural variability, to the process character and the strategic adaptability of cultural practice.²

My mini-study on Cuban-Swiss relations is situated within the confines of this consensus. It should underline the illuminative potential of this new understanding of culture, in showing how individuals equipped with differing cultural baggage can relate to one another and form an understanding. The proposition I am putting forward here is

² This new consensus is documented for instance in the collection *Assessing Cultural Anthropology* edited by Robert Borofsky (1994). As far as German-language social anthropology is concerned, the contributions by Kaschuba (1995) should be mentioned (cf. also Wicker 1996; Wimmer 1996a).

the following: The formability, transformability and strategic adaptability of the cultural production of meaning enables us to form bridges linking very differently structured world views, and to synchronise them by generating new cultural forms.

At this point, let me go a bit deeper into my understanding of the term "culture", by introducing you to the notion of cultural compromise that I have developed in a number of recent publications (cf. 1995a; 1996a; 1997a). Culture is understood as an open and unstable process of the negotiating of meaning. Three closely related aspects need to be discussed in this connection. First, the internalised culture of an individual as a precondition for this negotiation process; secondly, a generally binding world view, thus a result of this process; and thirdly, the cultural practices that mark the boundaries of the social group within which the negotiating process takes place.

For the analysis of the internalised culture, I shall use Pierre Bourdieu's term of "habitus". It portrays man as a strategically competent actor, and thus replaces the over-socialised individual as construed in the theory of action that the classical notion of culture implies. Bourdieu presupposes an unequal distribution of economic, political and cultural resources, in other words a social structure. The individuals internalise their position in this structure by gradually developing a habitus tailored to this position. By habitus, Bourdieu understands a system of predispositions that determine action, perception and interpretation (Bourdieu 1992, chapter 3). It is made up of a repertoire of strategies for action and cognitive patterns that have become habitual. The term habitus can be empirically underpinned by connecting it to the term "scheme", which plays an important role in modern cognitive anthropology. Schemes are models of proto-typically simplified worlds, organised as networks of meaning. They are selectively activated in our day-to-day thinking, perception, and action.³ As an internalised form of culture, they come close to what is called "mentality" in the tradition of French history-writing as well as in everyday speech.

These schemes of cognition and action are not imposed on the individual by the overwhelming power of the educational apparatus, as suggested by the classical notion of culture. Individuals do not simply play a role designed by society, but internalise a matrix that is gradually built up from within their own life situation by means of learning processes. In one decisive point, however, Bourdieu's concept needs to be modified. It contains the idea of a person's habitus making him or her *want* what a certain social situation requires, by internalising probabilities and thus making a virtue of necessity. This leads directly into a Marxist theory of ideology (cf. e.g. Bourdieu 1991:58-61). Instead, habitus here is to be understood as being formed on the basis of a universal human competence not determined by specific cultures, namely the competence of assessing pros and cons in given situations in view of one's own interests. The perception of *what* one's own interests are is indeed dependent on primary adjustments to cultural surroundings and one's own social position. These two are, after all,

³ An overview of this research tradition is given by Strauss and Quinn (1997).

incorporated in the individual's habitus. Yet the individuals are, thanks to this universal competence that does not melt away as habitual dispositions grow, able to critically assess their own situation and develop strategies which can be at variance with given cultural patterns (cf. Wimmer 1995a, chapter 2). The thus modified term of habitus will allow us to take a mediating position between the theory of rational decision-making on the one hand and the currently fashionable theory of the power of discourse on the other; in other words to steer a middle way between the Scylla of materialism and the Charybdis of idealism.

So much for internalised culture, which forms the starting point for the negotiation of meaning. Let us now take a look at this negotiating process itself. The Various habitual schemes lead to different classifications and world views according to different social positions. Yet the individuals are also related to one another in an arena of social relations and communication. In this arena, they work out elements that all actors involved can recognise as congruent to their respective long-term interests. The result of this negotiation process is what I call cultural compromise. It is no longer a matter of internal culture; we are now concerned with collective norms, social classifications and world view patterns, in other words, with what Emile Durkheim called collective representations. Thus, a *possibility* of a concurrence of interests must be there if any binding rules of the symbolic process are to be developed. If the distribution of power is so unequal that no field of common interest exists, we don't expect a cultural compromise to develop. It happens only if some discursive elements can be related to in a meaningful way by all those involved because all can put forward some of their interests in this symbolic language. Their interpretation of the cultural compromise will of course vary according to their respective social position – a cultural compromise only "exists" in the myriad of individual and subcultural variations that are generated by those involved in the negotiation process (cf. Wimmer 1995b). This process can thus be of a very conflictive nature; the notion of cultural compromise does not imply a functionalist vision of a stable and orderly society held together by a set of values and norms.

A cultural compromise is based on the acceptance by all actors relating to one another in a communicative arena, since moral categories and social classifications have to be validated and accepted. Collective representations cannot simply be defined and declared valid by some centre of power, as is postulated in current discourse theories, for they have to make sense from the interest point of view of *all* those concerned in order to become widely accepted. Neither do cultural patterns of meaning have an existence of their own, moulding generation after generation, as is implied by various cultural theories in the tradition of Durkheim. They have to be reproduced in the symbolic practice of strategically competent individuals. Even in pre-industrial societies, people are not prisoners in the confines of their own cultural traditions or in a discursive strait-jacket. Recent studies on political rhetorics in traditional societies have shown this clearly (Paine 1981, Bloch 1975), as has a long series of studies in legal anthropology on dispute-settling procedures (latest example Caplan 1995; cf. also Strathern 1985).

Cultural compromise also defines the borderlines between those taking part and those outside its scope of validity. This leads me to the third aspect of culture. The finding of cultural compromise is connected to a process of social closure, to use a term of Max Weber's (1922:23ff.). Social closure means excluding those who are not felt to belong, drawing a dividing line between the familiar and the foreign. Social closure processes can lead to the formation of nations (Wimmer 1996b; 1997b), ethnic groups (Wimmer 1997c), classes, sub-cultures, or gender-defined groups. The borderlines between "us" and "them" are often marked by distinctive forms of everyday cultural practice, for instance by wearing a certain costume for a Sunday market at which members of different ethnic groups meet, or else by "good taste", which helps distinguish traditional members of the upper class from parvenus, or else by the use of a certain jargon that only anthropologists will understand.

I have distinguished here between three closely related aspects of culture. Internalised culture is the basis for the negotiation of meaning; it is a system of habitual dispositions, or mental schemes. This is culture on the individual and cognitive level. On the collective and symbolic level, we find notions on the set-up and workings of society, on just and unjust, on sacred and profane; in other words we find the collective representations. A cultural compromise is achieved if all actors relating to one another in an arena can formulate aspects of their long-term interests in a shared symbolic language. Finally, as a *consequence* of cultural compromise, there are the elements of daily life that show up and reinforce the distinction between insiders and outsiders – between those partaking in the basic compromise and those remaining on the outside.

Trying to summarise what has been said so far in a short formula, we could define culture as an open and unstable process of negotiating meaning, which has cognitively competent individuals of differing interests and aims relating to one another and, in the finding of accepted compromises, leads to social closure and corresponding cultural boundary marking.

At the heart of this concept, there is the proposition of a universal constant in human behaviour: what connects all human beings is the ability of bringing meaning and personal interest to concur in the quest for compromise. I would like to call this the pragmatics of cultural production. Whether it is in our cacophonous media marketplace or at a relaxed gossip under the village oak in West Africa; whether in the babble of voices at a an Indian community meeting in Mexico or in the lecture series of an academic conference, there is always at least one discernible motive: the attempt to establish one's own view of the world as a valid perspective and thus to form the world in accordance to one's own notions. As this can only be achieved if others come to accept and share one's world view, the negotiation of meaning is obviously of fundamental importance.

3 Caribbean patterns of family and gender relations

In other publications, I have used these conceptual tools in order to understand processes of social and cultural change among Mesoamerican Indians (Wimmer 1995a). In the following, I would like to demonstrate that, thanks to the universal pragmatics of cultural production, persons of very different cultural dispositions can relate to one another and develop a cultural compromise – provided they both see a purpose in this from their respective points of view. My example will of course be the interethnic relations between Cubans and Swiss. To show the starting point of their negotiation process, I shall have to point out some habitual dispositions of Cuban emigrants. These will be limited here to such aspects as can be interpreted as adaptations to the current gender and family structure in Cuba's predominantly black underclass. I would like to enlarge the geographic scope by claiming that such family patterns are features not only of the social strata most affected by poverty in Cuba, but also of the Afro-Caribbean population on other Caribbean islands. Some official figures on divorce rates, the percentage of single mothers, etc., recently published in Cuba, can underpin this hypothesis.⁴ This is to say, I am not taking into account the peculiarities of the Cuban social structure that were generated by the revolution and are, to some extent, effective to this day.

Family and gender relations among the poorer layers of Afro-Caribbean society are since Raymond T. Smith characterised by the term of matrifocal family system.⁵ This system comprises the following elements: the decisive solidarities with reciprocal obligations are those between mother and children on the one hand, and among brothers and sisters on the other. By contrast, the links between husband and wife, as well as between father and children, are more likely to be of secondary importance. The cornerstone of the kinship system is therefore the matrifocal family consisting of an elder woman, her daughters and some, if not all, sons. Mother and children together form a stable decision-making coalition (Smith 1973).

Relationships between the sexes on the other hand are unstable and subject to frequent changes. As a rule, they last for as long as there is mutual liking and erotic attraction, or as long as immediate economic interests are served. In scientific literature, this is called the principle of serial monogamy. One of the consequences of this arrangement is that men rotate, so to speak, between stable matrifocal units.

⁴ See Varios autores 1991. An overview of the literature on Cuban women and family relations is given by Bengelsdorf (1997).

⁵ According to Smith 1973; Moses 1977; Gussler 1980; Gonzalez 1970; Smith 1962; Sutton and Makiesky-Barrow 1977; and excellent overview including some of the most important original texts is given by Barrow (1996).

From the women's point of view, the multiplication of marriage-like relationships represents a sort of risk aversion strategy,⁶ since the chances of one man making sufficient and lasting contributions to the support of the family are very low in view of the high unemployment rates and the irregular job opportunities in the informal sector.⁷ The rate of women earning an income is correspondingly high in all Caribbean societies, including Cuba (cf. the figures in Momsen 1993:12).⁸

What dispositions regarding gender relations correspond to such a family structure? What patterns of thinking and acting are developed in adjustment to the given facts of this social structure? Three points are of special interest in this context. First of all, there is a woman's far-reaching independence of her husband and her father, as well as her self-confidence, especially in the case of mature women with a certain number of children, in her role as focal figure of a matrifocal unit. Second, according to the volatile relationship structure and the principle of serial monogamy, a lot of attention is paid to sexual matters. Insofar as men are felt to have less binding obligations towards wife and children, they are, correspondingly, more focused on as lovers (Sutton and Makiesky-Barrow 1977; Orozco 1993:644f.). And nevertheless, as a third point, two different yardsticks are applied when it comes to questions of fidelity. As an obligation, it applies far more stringently for women than for men, whose extra-marital affairs are more easily tolerated and, at least in the eyes of men themselves, count as special evidence of virility (Gussler 1980:199; Sutton and Makiesky-Barrow 1977:312f.; Orozco 1993, chapter 19).⁹

⁶ This theory is just one amongst many attempting to explain the development of these family structures. Older research explains them historically in connection with the matri-lineal families of West Africa (Herskowitz); others ascribe them to the collapse of kinship and family structures in the circumstances of slavery (Frazier); feminist theories interpret them as an effect of the strong position of women due to West African cultural tradition, to the equal treatment of male and female slaves by slave owners, and finally to the polarised class structure in Caribbean societies which impeded the diffusion of the European patriarchal gender role model (Sutton and Makiesky-Barrow 1977).

⁷ Cf. R.T. Smith 1971; M.G. Smith 1962; the theory has also been formulated for North America, for instance by Hannerz or Stack (references in Fonseca 1991; further literature on Mexico and emigrants in London in Moses 1977:152).

⁸ It is worth mentioning that the revolutionary government has been conducting an intensive campaign against the "machismo" attitude since the mid 1970s. At the same time, the ideal of the Northern European core family has been propagated by the media and in schools as an example of revolutionary virtue. Living this core family pattern, however, seems to remain largely restricted to better-off families and especially to members of the intelligentsia. For a large part of the increasingly impoverished population living in the *barrios malos* this ideal hardly makes sense. And it is this segment of Cuban society that the majority of Cubans coming to Switzerland originate from.

⁹ As a fourth point, boys are brought up very indulgently by their mothers, getting special attention bestowed on them, not least so that they may maintain the link as adults and thus extend the matrifocal

4 Swiss-Cuban relations: a reciprocal exchange of unequal goods

Let us now return to this side of the Atlantic Ocean, with a brief word on the development of family and gender relations in Western Europe. For a long time now, family sociologists have been observing a gradual dissolution of the stable core family with a married couple's relationship at its heart. I do not want to go into the causes of this process here; it should just be noted that divorce rates have now reached almost Caribbean levels. An even clearer symptom of this process is the growing number of single mothers and the corresponding development of new partnership forms. It can be established that serial monogamy now characterises many relationship biographies in Western Europe, too, and that the number of single mothers is on the rise especially among well-educated, middle class women on the one hand, and the marginalised sectors of society on the other hand. To put it pointedly, one could speak of a Caribbeanisation of European patterns of family and gender.

Bi-national marriages are also most commonly found in a middle-class setting (cf. literature in Waldis 1996:74). Their number is on the increase throughout Western Europe; in Switzerland, they now make up roughly one third of all newly concluded marriages. In Swiss cities such as Geneva, their proportion has risen to over one half (on the development of endogamy and exogamy in Switzerland, cf. Arend 1988). A second, not very surprising insight gained by specific research is that the native partner within a bi-national marriage often stands at a distance to his or her mainstream cultural surroundings, and thus belong to a specific subcultural group (cf. again Waldis 1996:75). One of the characteristics of the sub-group in question is fascination with non-European cultures. Its adherents can be found, for instance, working in the tourist industry, among teachers or social workers, also among second-generation immigrants to Switzerland from Southern Europe (almost half of all marriages with Cuban men, according to official statistics).

In the following I shall limit myself to the discussion of relationships between Swiss women and Cuban men. The life stories of these women often do not conform to the standard biographical model of Swiss middle-class. For different reasons, they have set aside the traditional West-European relationship patterns with their, all-in-all, subordinate role assigned to women. Many already have a previous marriage or marriage-like relationship behind them and are mothers. According to the ca. 30

family by another loyal male member. This mother-son relationship helps entrench the Caribbean form of machismo (Moses 1977:150) and contributes to the instability of marriage relationships and thus the continuation of the matrifocal family structure.

answers given to a short questionnaire, most Swiss women of the Zurich region married to Cubans belong to this middle-class, xenophile subgroup.

How do they actually relate, such Cuban men and Swiss women whose respective habitual dispositions have now been outlined using a rather rough anthropological typology? Before their partnership structure is placed on the drawing board of anthropological analysis, let me say this: according to statements made by the protagonists themselves, the main factor in their relationship is love. For a long time, writing about love was a prerogative of poets. In more recent times, it has become a research field for the humanities, too, which has generated, for instance, Niklas Luhmann's analysis of love as "a codification of intimacy" (1987), Ulrich Beck's unmasking of love as "a meaningful pattern of subjective self-administration" in highly individualised societies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1990:253), or Roland Barthes's semiological approach to the discourse of love as "a swarm of figures ... hunting one another in unpredictable order, as in the zigzagging of flies within a room." (Barthes 1984:50).

My approach here employs cruder terminological tools, but they should suffice for the overview to be given. I assume that within a bi-national marriage an exchange of differing but equivalent social goods takes place – a process that Robert Merton in a classical paper has described as a "reciprocal compensatory exchange" (Merton 1941).

¹⁰ What kind of exchange is this in the case of Cuban-Swiss marriages? What kind of concurrence of interests makes a cultural compromise possible?

In my conversations with the Swiss women concerned, they expressed an appreciation of the following characteristics of Cuban men: first of all, these men are seen to show a natural respect towards strong and independent women, a respect that is apparently rare even in the Swiss subculture mentioned. This includes the ease with which the Cubans accept the fact that their wives go out to earn their own living. Moreover, children from former marriages or marriage-like relationships are, as a matter of course, treated like their own. And, last but not least, Cuban men seem to be experienced and well versed in matters of romance and love. Evidently, all these points are connected to the structure of the matrifocal family system and the corresponding habitual dispositions outlined before.

Cuban men, on the other hand, are primarily glad that their marriage has enabled them to emigrate from Cuba to Switzerland. Secondly, Cubans have pointed out to me the ability of Swiss women to form a lasting and trusting relationship – astonishing in the

¹⁰ This model referred to marriages between black men and white women in the USA and started out from the implicit theory that women trade personal qualities such as good looks against men's positional goods such as income and status. Today, the implicit social hierarchy between men and women is seen as only one of several possible arrangements. The dimension of hypergamy and hypogamy has thus been extended by a dimension of homogamy and hererogamy, which, as we shall see, makes particular sense in the case of the Cuban-Swiss marriages.

eyes of these men, that is, since they are used to such relationship aspects mainly with their mothers and possibly their sisters. Finally, Cuban men appreciate the fact that a partnership with a Swiss woman from the described social milieu does usually not bring with it any obligations of financial support. They are free, at least for the first few months or years, to pursue the kind of activities within an informal economy that they already practised in Cuba, for example the exchange of favours, casual labour, and small-scale trading, until they have become successfully integrated in the Swiss job market.

According to the thesis presented here, it is the overlap between the respective interest spheres and the habitual systems of a black Cuban underclass and a specific Swiss middle-class group that enables relations between the two, and presents advantages from the points of view of both sides. In other words, the concordance of interests leads both sides to search for converging points and bridges between the different concepts on gender relations and family. The mutual connectability of the two habitual systems can be seen as a motor of the current Cuban emigration process, at least if my point holds true.

It is interesting to note that the relationship structure described above changes in the course of time. This could be interpreted as the development of a new cultural compromise, a creolisation, so to speak, of Caribbean and West European subcultural forms. Two such changes shall briefly be mentioned. First of all, the Cuban men are increasingly guided by the ideal of a stable and emotionally intimate relationship that they find as a leitmotif in the subculture of their Swiss wives. It seems that the social security that these men gain after having spent a certain time in Switzerland enables them to assimilate the ideal – propagated by the Cuban government as well – of a stable couple relationship as the heart of a core family. In other words, the cultural element of a stable partnership makes sense for them in their new situation; and albeit just for the fact that, for the first five years, their right of residence in Switzerland depends on their successfully practising this model. A second aspect of this re-orientation is that the men develop an *expectancy* of solidarity and intimacy towards their Swiss wives; an expectancy they earlier had towards their sisters and mothers in Cuba.¹¹ Some of my Cuban acquaintances have let me know that they are able to discuss serious matters with their wives, as well as share their own personal experiences and difficulties with them; something they were accustomed to doing with sisters and mothers rather than their female partners at home. On the other hand, the appreciation of the stable partnership form does not mean that the Cubans fully adapt their extra-marital behaviour to this ideal, as I have been told by some wives concerned. This fact frequently leads to conflicts and has contributed to the break-up of

¹¹ Cuban-Swiss marriages are therefore a form of mixed cultural arrangement in accordance to the typology of cultural arrangements in Tseng et al. (1977:93-103).

a number of relationships.¹² It seems that Swiss women have either to accept or to systematically overlook this aspect of life with their Cuban partners. Interestingly enough, even those severely disenchanted by previous experience seem to remain in the Swiss-Cuban scene and continue to look for a partner there – a clear sign of the fact, that something like an acceptable cultural compromise between Cubans and Swiss has developed; the women try to find a counterpart who shares their specific interpretation of this compromise.

The combination of a Caribbean concept of masculine fidelity with the West-European ideal of an emotionally stable and lasting partnership thus forms the basis for a new marriage structure that can be deduced from numerous first-hand accounts by the men and women concerned. A still rather unstable mixed form, constantly subject to transformations; and yet a mixed form that – both in the eyes of the Cuban men and the Swiss women – enables an ongoing relationship, or at least a platform from which the partnership can regularly be re-negotiated. If we would like to go further than this sketchy ethnographic outline, we would of course have to describe the social and cultural background of the partners in each relationship, then have a closer look at the negotiation processes that take place in the dyads, analyse the streams of information and meaning that circulate within the social networks of those involved and try to show that all these different accounts and developments can indeed be interpreted as being variations on a new (sub-)cultural compromise.

5 Rum, drum and dance: the production of Cubanity in exile

So far, I have discussed the internal dynamics of the partnerships without mentioning the fact that they evolve within a specific social field. So I would now like to turn to the third aspect of cultural production: the practice of cultural distinction as related to a process of social closure. A small subculture has formed around the Cuban-Swiss couples, adding a further colourful stone to Zurich's multi-cultural mosaic. The highlights of this specific group's cultural life are seen to be the Afro-Cuban dance parties that take place once a month and on whose significance I shall concentrate on in the following.

¹² Some interesting questions can be raised in this connection. Is the power balance between Cubans and Swiss not tipped so much in favour of the latter that they can have their way even in matters of fidelity? Or do Cubans not simply hurt their own interests by having extra-marital affairs, since their right of residence is linked to the continuation of the marriage? And if this is the case, does this not bring us to the limits of the model of cultural compromise, in which cultural practices running against the gist of one's own interest are not foreseen? Are humans to a greater extent prisoners of their own cultural set-up than the theorem of cultural transformation postulates? Only long-term research on the development of bi-national marriages will provide us with answers to these questions.

A large part of Zurich's Cubans – except most of the intellectuals – meet at these events, as do their wives and husbands and a handful of other cubanophile Swiss. The highlight if the event is a presentation of dances, which are carried out accompanied by percussion music and a capella singing. Music and dance are of the same type as are performed at the Santería rituals in Cuba. Santería is a syncretic religion in which Yoruba gods such as Ochun and Omayá are worshipped, and it has gained many new adherents in the past few years of economic crisis and ideological disorientation in Cuba.

However, the dance presentations in Switzerland differ from their Cuban counterparts in an interesting manner, as their role as cultural markers has been transformed according to the new cultural compromise. Even Cubans who were never interested in Santería back home, or even rejected it as primitive or counter-revolutionary, take part here. Dance and music have been transformed from a symbol of Afro-Cuban counter-identity in Cuba to an expression of Cuban national pride abroad. This went hand in hand with a radical secularisation of the ritual. Whereas in Cuba and among the large exile community in Miami the dances and chants are orchestrated by Santería priests, and both priests and spectators often fall into a trance in order to establish direct contact with their gods (cf. Palmie 1991), such trance-inducing performances would be completely out of question in the Calvinist atmosphere of Zurich. Instead of trance and religious experience in general, the music and dance here is meant to generate or enhance a feeling of identity among the diaspora community. The performances are also meant to demonstrate to a Swiss audience the vitality and attraction of Afro-Cuban music and dance, and finally to integrate Swiss partners and friends in a symbolic community which is evoked by these happenings. One element in this new construction of community is that the ubiquitous bottle of rum is passed around not only among dancers and singers, as would be the case in Cuba, but also among the first three or four rows of spectators. Swiss friends are drawn into the act by this, and also by the polonaise-like rows of dancers that weave their way around the premises in a simple two-beat rhythm and allow even the stiffest of Swiss to join in.

Once the dancers have reached exhaustion point, the percussion instruments fall silent and the part of the event begins that, in its structure of social interaction, is easily comparable to other Cuban dance parties such as taking place in private apartments. A whole row of possibilities for trans-ethnic interaction open up. Cubans – men and women – who have recently arrived from the island can get in touch with potential partners; small favours are exchanged, business transactions initiated or concluded, job and housing options passed on, news and rumours traded, and life in Switzerland and the difficulties to understand its inhabitants are discussed as are holiday experiences in Cuba and the characteristics of its people (cf. Burnand and Pedrazzini 1997).

6 Conclusion

Such parties are the core events of a small, subcultural world and, as transformed practices of distinction, they mark the boundaries of a group that has grown around the Swiss-Cuban cultural compromise. They make visible the closely knit network of marriage, partnership and friendship relations that bind the group together. These musical events present also a sort of bazaar of meaning in which the various actors, with their different social positions and biographical experience, try to convey and to generalise their particular view of society, of life in Zurich and Cuba, and of the specific chances and difficulties of Cuban-Swiss relations. It is this form of communicative process, the negotiation of meaning among actors, on which cultural dynamics are based; not only in the Cuban-Swiss subculture, but all around the world.

As the reader will have noticed, we are now taking mental leave of the dance floors of Zurich's Miami, with their odour of sweat and rum, and returning to the loftier regions of academic reflection. With this rather speculative ethnographic outline, I have tried to give an example of a process of cultural transformation in an interethnic context. Such processes can be observed among other transnational communities or in different situations of interethnic contact. What the Cuban-Swiss subculture demonstrates particularly clearly is the fact that even with considerable differences in cultural habitus at a starting point, situational and even longer-lasting forms of cultural compromise can be achieved if this is in line with the individuals' personal interests. Around the converging points and the bridges between the various systems of collective representations, an inter-cultural consensus can be built up. It is, in my opinion, due to the dominance of the traditional understanding of culture that such processes have not yet received very much attention in migration research, for instance, or in research on ethnicity. The ethnography of diaspora communities can make an important contribution to the understanding of a late modern, globalising world by focusing on such cultural crossover zones, by examining the ongoing creolisation processes between different cultural traditions. In order to avoid the reinvention of closely bounded, historically stable and culturally homogenous communities (cf. Werbner 1990) – this time deterritorialized and transnational ones – the focus should lie on such transethnic processes of the negotiation of meaning.

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