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VITAL RITUALS OF THE AFRO-CUBAN UNDERGROUND

By Jean-Philippe Dedieu, JUNE 15, 2016

VIEW FULL SCREEN

L'Ireme Aberisun, a character in the religion of the Abakúa society, dances in front of the entrance to a temple in Guanabacoa, a township in eastern Havana, 2015.

In recent years the Italian artist Nicola Lo Calzo has documented members of the African diaspora in such places as Louisiana, Haiti, and the archipelago of Guadeloupe. Writing last year in *The New Yorker* about his recent series from Suriname and French Guiana, Hilton Als noted that Lo Calzo's images are concerned not so much with the look of these communities as with the legacies embedded within them: "Subjugation, slavery, survival . . . All those disappeared bodies brought back to life by their living and breathing descendants."

Lo Calzo's new and ambitious opus, "Regla," is a celebration of Afro-descended forms of cultural expression in contemporary Cuba. He photographed the elderly leaders of Carnival groups and gained privileged access to the male-only secret society Abakuá, which has its roots in nineteenth-century struggles for emancipation. He photographed the sacred liturgies of Afro-Caribbean religions, including Santería, or Regla de Ocha, along with performances by the young rap artists, or *raperos*, who are part of the Cuban hip-hop

movement , which has faced censorship by the Castro regime. Lo Calzo shows the fluidity between rituals sacred and secular, new and old, revealing how Afro-Cuban cultural forms are inherited from the past and forged anew in the present. These groups and their practices are linked in practical ways: In a statement about the project, Lo Calzo writes that "it is not an unfamiliar sight to come across a member of the Abakuá society who is also . . . a *rapero*." They are also linked by a set of values—"spirituality, oral traditions, solidarity, memory, the importance of the individual, and self-affirmation."

Lo Calzo writes that "there are two Cubas": "The official one with its myths, its revolutionary heroes and enemies," and another one, "underground and shrouded in silence and secrecy," which is "all but invisible to the naïve, foreign eye." His interest resides firmly in the second world, where marginalized groups have flourished in the face of oppression: subjugation, slavery, survival. But the strength of "Regla" is the way that Lo Calzo, whose process involves conducting extensive interviews with his subjects, finds overlap and exchange not only among Afro-Cuban cultural forms but between the official Cuban narrative and the "silent, ordinary" ones that carry on beneath the surface. In some cases, Afro-Cuban traditions find expression within the confines of state power: Lo Calzo photographs a group of soldiers who perform a daily ceremony dressed in the garb of *mambises*, the anti-Spanish *guerrilleros* who fought in the Cuban war for independence. More often, the traditions live on at the margins, acting as a crucial safety net, and a form of resistance, for Cubans living within an asphyxiating social and economic system. This "precarious balancing act," Lo Calzo writes, has existed throughout the country's modern history, from Spanish colonial times through the uncertain late years of the Castro era.

Jean-Philippe Dedieu is a CIRHUS Research Fellow at New York University and the author of the book "La Parole Immigrée: Les Migrants Africains dans l'Espace Public en France, 1960-1995" (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2012).

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