

Girls' 15-Year Birthday Celebration as Cuban Women's Space Outside of the Revolutionary State

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Abstract: This article examines the Cuban tradition of la fiesta de los quince años – the often over-the-top celebration of a girl's fifteenth birthday. Quince is approached as a puberty ritual that marks girls' transition into potentially reproductive women and connects in significant ways with the matrifocal kinship structure strongly prevailing in Cuba and the Caribbean. More importantly, the ritual is examined in the context of the revolutionary discourse of the Cuban socialist state. In Cuba, the revolutionary state strongly promotes a central value of equality, and favours, in the name of this, practices that are seen to represent the popular culture of the formerly oppressed groups. In this context, quince is seen as a Spanish colonialist tradition, as opposed to the ritual practices pertaining to the Afro-Cuban religions or to the 'authentically Cuban', mixed Creole traditions, both of which are endorsed by the socialist state as national culture. By emphasising wealth, luxury and relations between women, quince's symbolism displays characteristics that are very different from those favoured by the official revolutionary state discourse. I suggest that the ritual's great popularity amongst Cuban women relates to the fact that it allows Cuban women a symbolic space outside of the revolutionary state that for long has aimed to be all embracing.

Keywords: gender, matrifocality, cuba, socialism, ritual, coming-of-age

Introduction

In the Cuban tradition of la fiesta de los quince años, a girl's 15th birthday is celebrated with a lavish, luxury-laden puberty ritual that marks her transition into a woman.¹ Since

¹ This article is based on ethnographic data gathered during altogether 15 months of anthropological fieldwork conducted in Havana since 2003, with the majority of fieldwork taking place over nine months in 2007-2008. My informants, many of whom were originally from east-Cuba, came predominantly from lower income groups. Everything stated in this article without citing a specific source draws on my field material. The examples are drawn from distinct periods of my

there is no comparable ritual for boys, it is important to look at quince in the context of the Cuban kinship system to understand why growing up to be a woman is of such significance in Cuban society. Furthermore, when examined in the context of the socialist state discourse, quince as a Cuban women's ritual displays symbolism that is highly dissimilar from those favoured by the official revolutionary principles.² This article examines the quince ritual on the one hand in the context of the Cuban kinship system and, on the other hand, the socialist state, in order to understand the interplay between individual Cuban women's lives and the revolutionary state, as well as the significance of such ritual opulence in contemporary Cuba. Therefore, while anthropological literature on puberty rituals is vast, the analysis of the actual ritual process in the light of this research as such falls beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I will focus on the ritual's symbolism in the context of Cuban kinship relations and the socialist state discourse.

Ritual practices can provide a point where the large-scale, social and economic forces of the state, intersect with the lives and desires of concrete individuals (see e.g. Kapferer 1997: 7-35, 182-184, 273; Meyer 1999: Xix-Xxiii, 93-111, 175, 207-216; Wardlow 2006: 99-133). Rituals can act as a veiled criticism of the activities of those in power by conveying meanings and engaging in practices contrary to the interests of the current authority.

fieldwork. The year from which each material dates is given in brackets as a reference. If no year is given, the same information has been repeated in different years. The material – Cuban women's quince photos, videos, statements and interviews made available by my Cuban informants – date from various years ranging from the 1950s through to 2008. The translations from Spanish to English are my own. In cases where I take the informant's Spanish statement to have special importance, it is included in the text in brackets. The names of my informants have been changed throughout the text.

² I define the term discourse following Gregg Urban's use of the term: discourse is the social form of an individual's private experience, coded with socially shared sign vehicles. Discourse has both a noumenal and a phenomenal side; it is composed of a form and a meaning. Discourse allows the social circulation of culture and the passing of culture from one person to another. A fully cultural discourse circulates widely and gets passed on through generations. (1996: 66, 71-72, 147, 245). To refer to the Cuban state in this article, the terms 'the Cuban socialist state', 'the Cuban revolutionary state' and 'the Cuban revolution' are used interchangeably, since at the time of writing (March 2011), Cuba is still governed by the revolutionary government installed in the Cuban revolution of 1959 by Fidel Castro, even though Raúl Castro has now replaced his brother as President. Due to the one-party nature of the post-1959 Cuban regime, the term 'Cuban state' in this article refers to the Cuban revolutionary government, including the values and the policies promoted by it. My Cuban informants also used these terms interchangeably, speaking about "the state" (el estado), "the government" (el gobierno) and "the revolution" (la revolución), as all referring to the socialist rule that has been governing Cuba since 1959. At the same time, while a detailed discussion of state power as such is not the intention of this article, it is understood that the 'Cuban state' consists of multiple actors that may at times engage in contradictory practices. However, I concentrate here on examining the Cuban quince ritual in the context of the socialist state approached as a somewhat unitary actor producing 'state discourse'.

Various anthropological works have focused on this capacity of rituals to allow those in weaker positions to display 'counter-dominant' criticism in a symbolic form, often concentrating on 'traditional' (Boddy 1989: 35,131-133; Wardlow 2006: 99-133), 'indigenous' (Bilby 1999: 284-285; Kapferer 1997: 87-88), 'anti-colonial' (Bilby 1999: 266, 283-284; Kapferer 1997: 217, 267-268), or 'low-class' (Bilby 1999: 263-266, 285) practices in the context of a modernising state ruled by a (foreign) elite. Janice Boddy (1989), in an account of spirit possession and women in Northern Sudan, describes traditional Sudanese spirit possession as rural women's counter-discourse, which is used to express a veiled critique of male-dominated every-day life. Through a myriad of self-representations – enacted in the form of a variety of Northern Sudanese cultural characters whose behaviour would be considered inappropriate for women – spirit possession allows Sudanese women to convey a critical commentary on their social position in a constrained environment where other means of protest are scarce. Boddy sees spirit possession as allowing women to express a counter-discourse without having to assume the responsibility of individual authorship for its articulation. (Ibid.). This way, rituals may constitute an idiom that permits people to display a form of protest to the current authority that would not otherwise be verbally stated.

However, the case of the Cuban quince ritual is different. Instead of displaying a form of hidden resistance in the context of the powerful socialist state, the quince ritual exhibits very visible symbolism. At the same time, the ritual's emphasis is on the ritual practice as an embodied, lived experience rather than on any type of communicative statements.³ As such, it can be designated as a performance, a framing where ideologically marked practices may be rendered ambiguous (Baumann 2005: 149). As a performance, it is a "memorable, repeatable, [and] reflexively accessible" presentation of what it is like to become a woman in contemporary Cuba (ibid.). The stress on lavish opulence in the quince ritual represents something very different from the everyday reality of the majority of Cubans. At the same time, this does not automatically mean that the quince ritual is resistance – even in the context of Cuban socialism's high degrees of state control (see Gal 1995). There is more to Cuban society than the revolutionary state power. The quince ritual, rather than representing a form of counter-dominant criticism in relation to the socialist state, is a practice that ignores the state. It is a performance that centres on

³ This is clearly shown by the central position of the quince photos in the ritual (see below), as well as by the ethnographic material I obtained on the subject; quince is not a matter of talking but of seeing and experiencing.

women's kinship connections, female sexuality and young girls' imaginings of a luxurious life regardless of the state, drawing its elements from a rich Cuban cultural history that goes beyond the revolution.

In this article, I approach the quince ritual as creating for Cuban women a symbolic space outside of the socialist state sphere, a type of an undefined area in the context of the revolutionary state, which has long aimed for high degrees of state definition in many areas of life (see Azicri 2000: 251-252 on religion; Kath 2010: 91-124 on health care; Rosendahl [1997] 2010: 41-45 on work, economy and consumption; and Eckstein 1994: xiv, 33-36, 61-71, 129-170 for a more general account). The aim will be to complement the discussion of cultural traditions in the context of the modernising/modern state especially by expanding on certain aspects that deal with gender, class, 'race' and the 'authentic indigenosity' in ritual performances, as well as on the nature of the state context in which this takes place. As will be shown, the Cuban quince ritual contains various aspects that make it an interesting case in this discussion.

Cuba's strong socialist state with its for long, relatively authoritative cultural policy (see Daniel 1991; Schmidt 2008; Wirtz 2004) creates an interesting context for the study of the interrelationship between state and rituals, since non-state rituals were for a long time seen as a threat to the revolutionary state ideology.⁴ Since the effervescence of quince celebrations in Cuba took place in the years after the fall of the Soviet Union, at the height of the poverty of the special period in Cuban economy, the ritual's increased popularity can be seen to form part of the more general opening on the part of the Cuban state towards ritual practices that took place in the 1990s. However, at the same time, this should not lead us to dismiss the internal dynamic of the ritual, as Martin Holbraad (2004) points out in relation to Ifá cults in post-Soviet Cuba. Quince's symbolism as a high-class, colonial women's ritual offers itself up as a fascinating case for exploring the way in which the egalitarian values officially promoted by the Cuban revolution (see Azicri 2000; Eckstein

⁴ There are few written sources on this aspect of the cultural policy of the Cuban revolutionary state. However, several of my informants told me about state restrictions on certain ritual performances and about vague, not straight-coercive forms of state interference triggered by some ritual practices. Rather than by explicit written statements, this aspect of Cuba's official cultural policy takes place via ideological frowning, social disclosure and discrimination for instance in terms of work opportunities. The ritual performances that my informants stated as being seen as a threat to the socialist state ideology at different points of the history of the revolutionary Cuba were: religious rituals (Catholic, Afro-Cuban and Protestant), ritual practices associated with homosexuality such as drag queen performances as well as quince celebrations (due to their bourgeois connotations).

1994; Palmié 2002; Ramonet & Castro 2007) intertwine with issues of gender, class, and 'race'. In socialist Cuba – instead of practices seen as 'traditional' (Boddy 1989: 35,131-133; Wardlow 2006: 99-133), 'indigenous' (Bilby 1999: 284-285; Kapferer 1997: 87-88), 'anti-colonial' (Bilby 1999: 266, 283-284; Kapferer 1997: 217, 267-268), or 'low-class' (Bilby 1999: 263-266, 285) – other types of ritual practices may create symbolic spaces outside the state power, even those that are defined as 'colonial' or 'elitist' by their historical connotations.

In what follows, I will start by introducing the quince ritual and the central features of its symbolism, and move then to examine the ritual's connection with the Cuban kinship structure. After that, I will examine the ritual's symbolism in comparison with the Cuban state discourse, and finally, conclude by exploring the more general significance of the ritual in contemporary Cuba as a women's symbolic space outside the socialist state.

La Fiesta de los Quince Años

Grisaida sits like a queen on her throne atop the back seat of a fancy 1950's Chevy convertible, horn blaring, cruising Havana's favourite seaside promenade – the Malecón (2003). She is wearing a wide, red Rococo styled dress complemented by elbow-length white gloves. Fake diamonds dangle from her ears and form a loop around her neck. On her head sits a crown. She smiles radiantly; she is living the moment she has dreamt of for the past 10 years.



Photo 1. The mother's brother accompanies a quinceañera off the stage at the beginning of her party.

In Cuba, a girl's 15th birthday is celebrated as a very special occasion (see photo 1) and usually at great expense to her family – especially the girl's mother, who has normally had to save for years to pay for the festivities. Often celebrations include a lavish party, expensive professional photo sessions of the girl whilst the whole day is captured on video.⁵ It is only the girls' 15th birthday that is celebrated as a special, socially important occasion in Cuba. In comparison, a boy's 15th birthday passes without any of the commotion, making quince a very gender-specific ritual.

A quince party is seen as a popular social event in Cuba and can feature a guest list of up to 300 invitees; the girl's – and most importantly her mother's – family, relatives, friends, neighbours and schoolmates are all invited to attend (see photo 2). The girl's mother carefully chooses the outfits, decorations, locale, program and food and drinks for the occasion. In the most extravagant cases a court-style ballroom dance-event is organised, featuring 14 couples in addition to the quinceañera and her male dancing partner, el galán. A professional dancer has choreographed the piece and the young performers have practiced it from one to three months in the build-up to the event, often under the supervision of the girl's mother.

⁵ If the family is too poor to organise a big party, a house party often takes place at the girl's home or out in the street with all the people of the neighbourhood invited.



Photo 2. Guests at a quince party.

On the day of the party the quinceañera is paraded around the city in either an old, American convertible or in a horse-drawn carriage, wearing a wide, 18th century-style dress known as *traje colonial*.⁶ This drive ends at the location of the party where she enters accompanied by her father – or another male figure – and a little girl called *la damita*, acting as a court maid carrying flower petals and sprinkling them before the quinceañera's footfall as she advances.⁷

In the party hall on a centre stage there is a huge cake, often lavishly decorated with adornments such as running-water fountains, lights, candles, little dolls depicting the dancers on the lower levels of the cake and the quinceañera standing on the top level of the cake (see photo 3).

⁶ The girl also wears this same type of dress on the day of the photo and video shoot, parts of which often take place on a different date to that of the party due to the large monetary expense of each.

⁷ In the normative form of the *quince* ritual the girl both enters and dances the waltz with her (biogenetic) father, but in practice she often dances with some other male figure, like her matrilineal uncle (see photo 1), her mother's new spouse, or her own boyfriend. Due to the matrifocal tendency in Cuban kinship relations, the girl's (biogenetic) father is fairly often 'missing' from the kinship structure.



Photo 3. A quince cake.

The dance always begins with a waltz. Dancers performing in the formal stage of the event are wearing 18th century style outfits imitating the Spanish colonial era – the girls in puffy wide dresses similar to that of the quinceañera, with the boys in black or white suits, often tuxedos. After the waltz the dancers perform other dances such as casino, danzón or reggaeton, with the quinceañera taking the lead role.⁸ After the conclusion of the formal events, the dance-floor is free for the attendees to take over and the festivities continue into the early hours of the morning.

In addition to the party, the photos (and their more modern counterpart, video) taken by a professional photographer in specially chosen locations and scenes are important elements of the quince ritual. They are often viewed as even more important than the actual quince party (see also Rosendahl 2010: 50). In these photos the girl poses in “colonialist” settings wearing a Rococo style dress, as well as a range of more modern outfits. In some photos she wears nothing at all besides a basket of flowers or other props to cover her breasts and genitals. The photos are circulated widely in the community (shown to family, friends and neighbours, hung on the walls of Cuban homes as well as keenly presented to the foreign anthropologist especially by Cuban women).

⁸ *Danzón* and *casino* are traditional Cuban dances, *reggaeton* is a newer import from Puerto Rico, very popular amongst young Cubans.

Quince is a Spanish Ritual

Spanishness and representing the origin of quince as a Spanish, colonial practice is central to the quince ritual in Cuba. Although Cubans often stress Cuba to be a mixture of two cultures – the Spanish and the African – my informants connected quince only to the European side of this cultural mix.⁹

Rolando, a Cuban history student saw the origin of the quince ritual like this: “During colonialism many rich families with a Spanish origin settled in Havana. Quince comes from the representations of the girl that were made in Spain, and also in the courts in other parts of Europe, when the girl turned into a woman. [In colonial Cuba] the habanero aristocracy was invited to the celebration. [Later, during the first half of the 20th century] in the more modern form of quince parties the social class was still decisive, it was about who had the most money.” (2004).

The core features of the ritual were also seen to derive from Europe: “Because then in Cuba people lived a lot in the fashion of Europe, that’s why, these grandiose dresses. These dresses that you see now in the quince photos, it’s the same cut with a lot of lace, a lot of layers. That’s why they dance waltz, all that is a reflection of those European court representations.” (2004). The cider used for toasting in the quince-parties was also seen to be of European origin, representing Champagne.

All these elements observable in modern quince parties; European styled outfits along with horse-drawn carriages were typical symbols of the new rich class in 18th century Cuba (see Moreno Fajardo 1998). Quinceañeras appeared in outfits and environments that made them look like 18th century Spanish-originated aristocracy (see photo 4).

⁹ One of my Cuban informants also believed the ritual originated in the US, but the vast majority perceived it as Spanish in origin regardless of the informant’s skin colour or gender. Davalos (1997: 306) mentions that amongst Mexican immigrants in the US, quince is seen to derive from the Aztec habit of celebrating a young girl’s entry into adulthood. The emphasis on Spanishness in the Cuban quince ritual also creates a clear divergence from the views of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Creole high class in the Americas, who – aiming at a nationalist separation from Spain – drew from the local indigenous cultures as national culture (see Anderson 1983).



Photo 4. Two quinceañeras in the old part of Havana.

The emphasis on Spanishness in the symbolism of quince is made more explicit in the photos taken during the ritual. Almost all the quince photos I saw included an image portraying the girl as a Spanish woman of the colonial era. Spanishness was portrayed also as Catholicism in the photos. I saw this Spanish Catholic character for the first time in a quince photo dating from 1998. The girl was wearing a wide Spanish comb in her hair, she had a cross hanging from her neck and in her hands she was holding prayer beads and a little book, the Catechism. She was photographed kneeling down to pray in front of a crucifix. In later photos, dating from 2003, a church could be seen in the background. This Catholic female character represents a religious, high-class woman of the colonial era, connecting the ritual symbolically both to Cuba's history as a colony of Spain and to the Catholic Church.

In the quince photos, girls are almost always portrayed wearing the same customary objects that reinforced the Cuban image of colonial Spanishness, a high status at birth, and the ritual's believed derivation from a royal court-practice. A crown is always present, placing the quinceañera above all others, as a queen for a day (see photos 5, 7 and 8). Also the fake 'diamonds' worn by the girl contribute to signal her state of royalty together with the way she usually enters the party from an arched doorway along a red carpet. This same image of royalty is often repeated verbally during the party; the quinceañera is called the "queen of the night" (*reina de la noche*) or the "princess" (*princesa*), and the dancers

are referred to as “her court” (su corte).¹⁰ During the night she is also treated like a princess. Her mother, dance partner or a third party take care of her every need and caprice, adjusting her hair, dress, and makeup, while the quinceañera herself is never expected to do any work for the party, including its preparation. Also, when a quinceañera tours the city in her flashy car, she is usually seated on top of the back seat, which raises her higher than the driver or the people in the surrounding traffic, like a queen on her throne. In the dance she is often physically raised up, and she is normally seated above the guests on a stage at the fiesta, literally elevating her higher than others on the floor. This same symbolism of elevating the quinceañera above others is repeated atop the layered quinceañera cake, where her statue stands, not together with a man like in the decorative dolls added to a wedding cake, but proudly alone (see photo 3).



Photo 5. A quinceañera dancing with her boyfriend in her party.

This elevation of the quinceañera above others as an individual during the quince ritual differentiates quince from other Cuban lifecycle rituals.¹¹ The Catholic baptism – a very

¹⁰ Also the habit of dancing waltz adds to this portrayal of quince as a high-class ritual. According to Ismael, a Cuban art historian, during the colonial era only the Spanish aristocracy knew how to dance the waltz (2004, see also ‘el Diablo Ilustrado’ below).

¹¹ Afro-Cuban religious lifecycle rituals are not included in this statement, since that would require a more extensive account on the subject than is possible in the scope of this article.

popular ritual in Cuba related to the various Santería-rituals – is most often performed as a group ritual. In weddings it is the couple that defines the celebration, not the individuals. Weddings can also be conducted as a collective ritual in Cuba where many couples get married at the same time, and they tend to be less formal than quince parties.¹² My informants judged quince to be a more important ritual than a wedding on the basis that “you can divorce and remarry but quince is just once in a lifetime”. In the funerals I attended during my fieldwork in 2007-2008, only one person was honoured, but s/he was not revered as an individual, but rather as “a good worker” or “an exemplary revolutionary”; that is, as a representative of the official revolutionary values. The quince ritual that elevates the girl based solely on her gender and age also differs from the various state-organised lifecycle rituals, which tend to stress collectivity, like course graduation or military ceremonies.

Quince is a Luxurious, Wealth-Emphasising Ritual

The notion of the quinceañera as a queen above others is emphasised in various aspects of the ritual that stress luxury, money and wealth – and through this, class differentiation. On the whole, quince as a ritual requires a lot of money. In addition to the showy party featuring a professional dance group and a celebrity performer to host the event, the photo and video sessions – with all their special effects – can add up to an overly expensive ceremony for an average Cuban family.¹³ It is not unusual for the quinceañera and her dancers to change their outfits up to seven times during the event and the organiser is expected to pay for all this. Add to this the cost of makeup, hairstyles and a manicure and it runs into a lot of money by average Cuban standards. This display of wealth is important; no quinceañera wants to appear poor on her big day.

¹² This observation – like the one concerning the Catholic baptism – relates to data collected during various instances of my fieldwork. See also Martínez-Alier (1974: 140) on the “collective marriages”-campaign organised by the revolutionary government in 1960s’ Cuba. This campaign on the part of the Cuban government to promote legal marriages in the country, as well as the fact that weddings in Cuba take place in revolutionary, state-run wedding halls, makes the wedding ceremony a ritual taking place ‘within’ the official socialist state sphere.

¹³ At the time of my fieldwork both in 2003-2004 and in 2007, the average monthly salary in Cuba was about 260 pesos, the equivalent of \$10 USD but almost everybody had other sources of income. A quince party could cost up to 20,000 pesos. During my fieldwork in 2008 there were rises in both salaries and prices in Cuba and the changes in Cuban state economy and labour life have continued throughout to December 2010.

The importance of appearing wealthy repeats itself in the settings and the symbolism used in the photo and video shoots. Photographers often portray quinceañeras in locations and performing activities that are economically unattainable to the majority of Cubans, like sipping a cocktail in the lounge of a fancy hotel (see photo 6) or lounging by a luxurious pool.¹⁴ In quince photos girls are often acting like foreign tourists or film stars, living the high life in contrast with the socialist state's values of hard work and humility (see Eckstein 1994: 34). This appearance of wealth goes hand in hand with a level of vanity inherent in the symbolism of the quince ritual. Quinceañeras are nearly always depicted in front of a mirror admiring their own beauty. A case in point was Lisandra, who appeared in her quince-video reading an article on herself in *Vanidades*-magazine depicting her as the next big film star (2003).

In photos quinceañeras frequently appear with objects that stress their foreignness and an origin outside of Cuba. Grethel posed with a giant "Heineken Imported"-beer bottle and Yurienka was smiling with a bottle of Jameson-whisky in her hand. As opposed to the more common rum or Cuban beer, whisky is seen as a status symbol in Cuba and favoured by the new, richer class of locals that have begun to differentiate themselves – especially since the late 1990s – due to the uneven flows of tourism cash and remittances on the island (see e.g. Pacini Hernandez 1998: 123; Palmié 2002: 269; Wunderlich 2005: 68). The Champagne-imitating cider – always present at the quince celebration – also adds to this sense of luxury present at the ritual. The types of foreign luxury products that appear in the quince ritual convey status value brought about by their price and attainability.

¹⁴ Until April 2008, these activities were largely unattainable to normal Cubans also in practice. Due to the state-imposed restrictions Cubans were forbidden from entering tourist locations such as hotels. The purpose of this law was to inhibit *jinetismo*, the hustling of tourists by local Cubans. My Cuban informants told me that in order to enter these tourist locations, *quinceañeras* and the photographers, video-makers, family and friends accompanying them, bribed their way into hotel lobbies and pools. In April 2008 the Cuban government made changes to this law, allowing the entrance of Cubans to hotels and other tourist locations. However, in practice hotel (and other) doormen still often obstructed Cubans from entering and demanded bribes to enter.

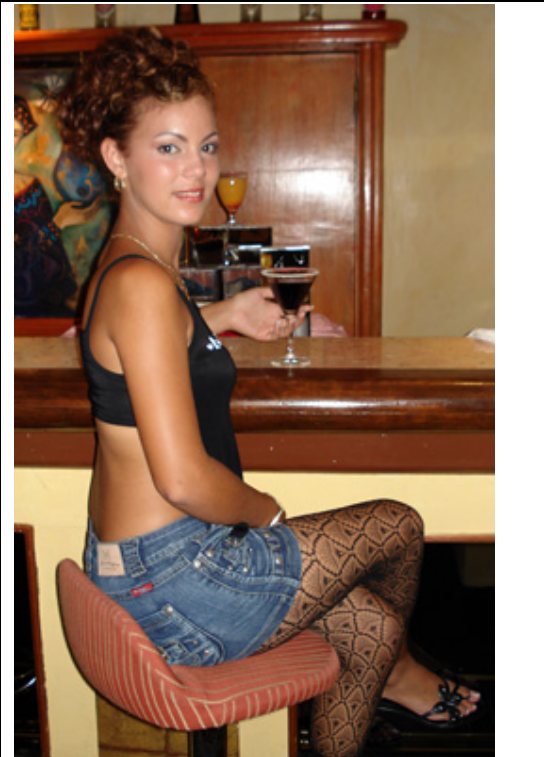


Photo 6. A quinceañera in a photo shoot in a five star hotel in Havana.

Cubans are surprisingly willing to spend their hard-earned money on a girls 15th birthday celebration – much more so than for example on weddings.¹⁵ When talking about weddings, Cubans often complained about the price of the party and claimed cost as a major contributing factor for not getting married themselves, but when it came to quince, women especially were prepared to save for years to organise an over-the-top celebration. Youmara, a Cuban sociologist observed: “The parties now can cost up to 20,000 Cuban pesos, it’s the party of the parents, of the grandmother, they are parties to show off; ‘the more I have the more I value’. There are families that lose [sell] the most important domestic equipment of their house to make a party for a day to their daughter for her quince. It is more important to the mother than to the girl.” (2007).

¹⁵ This marks a difference in the position of weddings taking place in Cuba and many other parts of the Caribbean since weddings have been depicted by anthropologists as the ostentatious ritual representing the marrying couple’s high class position in the English-speaking Caribbean (see Clarke [1957] 1974; Smith 1996a).

Quince is the Mother's Ritual

Quince is very much a women's tradition and especially important to the girl's female relatives (particularly on the matrilineal side, see photo 7). Even though the whole family often collaborates in the organisation of a girl's quince, it is the mother who usually bears the most important ritual responsibilities over the celebration. Among my informants, the girl's mother was also the first person a girl thanked for making her "beautiful dream come true" (la realización de un lindo sueño) on the occasion of her quince celebration. The girl's mother is usually in a very central ritual position during the festivities, for instance, walking around the stage with her daughter at the beginning of the celebration. Moreover, the mother was the most likely person to consent to be interviewed regarding her daughter's quince and was sometimes more eager to show me her daughter's quince photos than the girl herself.¹⁶

A Cuban sociologist remarked that both the girl's mother and matrilineal grandmother especially, often wield great power when deciding the makeup of the whole quince celebration: "When I ask her (a quinceañera) why did you have the photos taken, the girl says: to please my mother, my grandmother. And that's why they have the party." (2007). Even if a girl would rather spend the money on new clothes and a night out with her friends – although not very common amongst my informants – her mother tends to insist on a formal fiesta with colonial-type dresses and a large number of invitees. In the context of the precarious financial situation that the majority of Cubans experience, the quince ritual is a huge investment on the part of the girl's mother, requiring enormous amounts of time, money, energy and attention. Marisa, the mother of 13-year old twin-girls stated this particularly clearly: "I'm the one who is going to celebrate quince and I'm alone, I don't have father nor siblings, I don't have a husband [to help me]." (2004).

¹⁶ This is further stressed by the fact that Cuban men were very reluctant to speak about their daughter's or sister's *quince*, not to mention about their own 15th birthday, since celebrating turning 15 was seen strictly as a "girls' thing".



Photo 7. The mother's sister sets the right pose for a quinceañera in a photo shoot.

Quince is a Sexual Ritual

The celebration of quince is of such significance to Cuban women because it marks the girl's "moment of beauty" (2007) and reaching of sexual maturity. The statements that Cuban girls gave on how quince changes their lives emphasised the ritual's role as marking a transition "from childhood to adolescence". Many said that after the celebration of their quince they got more freedom and their parents allowed them to stay out late at night. Anaisa, a mother who had recently celebrated her daughter's quince, reflected on the subject: "They feel themselves a little [...] like adults, they look different. A little more responsibility is on her because one already has to start telling her that she has to take care [of herself] and all the things that can happen to her starting from then. You know that everybody starts to see her as a bigger person. He who did not see her as... a woman, starts to leer her because she is fifteen, and he starts to see her differently".

Sexual symbolism is emphasised throughout the ritual and can be seen in the outfits, the nude-photographs and the performances that take place during the quince-parties. During the photo sessions a girl's female relatives often urge her to show more skin, and sometimes the girls are photographed dressed up in lingerie, hanging off a stripper's pole. In Yolanda's quince party the choreography of the dance show emphasised female agency and sexuality: girls danced alone on the stage gyrating their hips whilst the song in the background stated "Women! Watch your man's body and dance!" (Mujeres! Ve al cuerpo

de tu hombre y baila! 2004). After this, boys came to the floor, kneeled down and the girls sat on their back while a song titled "Love without clothes" (Amor sin ropa 2004) began to play. The girls' role on the dance floor was one of a male-objectifying sexual dominatrix. Sometimes this stress on female power/agency was made very explicit in the ritual: Maribel was photographed as a 'Girl power' -type superhero with a sword in her hand.

I connect this emphasis on autonomous female sexuality in the quince ritual to the fact that the ritual marks a girl's transition into a sexual adult; a woman. This is further stressed by the fact that traditionally in Cuba the meaning of a quince party is to mark the moment when a girl is officially allowed to have a boyfriend, and in the process, sexual relations.¹⁷ According to Raymond T. Smith, in the Caribbean full adulthood means participation in sexual interaction and procreation (1996b: 205). My own fieldwork in Cuba supports this view. The Cuban quince ritual represents female sexuality in a very different light than, for example, the more virginity-stressing quinceañera-ritual in many other parts of Latin America (see Napolitano 1997 on Mexico; Davalos 2003 on Mexican immigrants in the US).

In the performances of the quince ritual, the girl's sexuality is not directed to a one single man that would represent her future husband, but rather towards men in general, stressing her position as an independent, yet heterosexually-oriented seductress. The purpose of the Cuban quince ritual is not to prepare the girl for marriage, but for sexual life and via this, potentially to reproduction and motherhood. None of my informants conceptualised quince as a ritual for the purpose of 'catching a husband'. This often became evident within a year or two of the ritual as quite a few of my young informants tended to have a baby on their arms, not a husband. Motherhood does not require marriage in the Caribbean and the making of a girl into a fully gendered, heterosexual adult woman is more important than her joining a man in marriage. The mother of the girl plays a very special role in this process, the reason for which can be uncovered in the Cuban kinship structure.

¹⁷ This does not mean that all parents allow girls to have sexual relations at the age of 15 or that all parents prohibit sexual relations of their daughters that are under 15 years old. The norm and the practice are often two different things.

Quince and Caribbean Matrilocality

Quince – as a ritual made by women, and celebrating Cuban girls as potentially reproductive seductresses – is connected to the Cuban kinship structure, and to the matrilocality kinship structure largely prevalent in the Caribbean.¹⁸

Kinship relations among my Cuban informants were characterised by a strong matrilocality tendency, a feature that is seen to denote Caribbean societies in a more general sense.¹⁹ While matrilocality has often been designated as an Afro-Caribbean family form in particular (e.g. Clarke 1974: 75, 131; Smith 1974: xi), other authors see it as characterising kinship relations in the region more widely (e.g. Safa 2005). I noted no such 'racial' or 'ethnic' differences in Cuban kinship relations, as demonstrated, for instance, by the fact most families among my informants were highly 'mixed' in terms of skin colour. On the basis of my fieldwork, I view Cuban kinship relations to have a strong matrilocality tendency more generally (see also *ibid.*).

In the classical definition of the Caribbean matrilocality formulated by R.T. Smith, it is primary that the woman in her role as mother becomes the centre of family relations (1996a: 42). Since family relations are based on the relationship between the mother and the child, fathers often have children in various different households, whereas the women usually have all their children living with them (Olwig 1996: 138). Men are often seen as marginalised as fathers, but the strength of the consanguine bond makes them loyal as sons, brothers and uncles (Smith 1974: xi; Smith 1996a: 14). The fact that the father is often 'missing' from the family structure (i.e. he lives elsewhere) creates a general

¹⁸ In Caribbean anthropology the term matrilocality has been used in a way that refers to a wider scope of social relations than mere household arrangements. R. T. Smith defines Caribbean matrilocality as "a form of family life" (1988: 7) and "a social process in which there was a salience of women – in their role as mothers – within the domestic domain" (*ibid.*: 8). According to Smith, matrilocality is a structural principle that has to do with the weakness of the conjugal relationship and with the dual-marriage system (1996a: 87; 1996b: 44). In this article, I use the term matrilocality in this wider sense defined by Smith, as referring to Cuban gender and kinship relations and the type of social structure formed by them.

¹⁹ Since the first anthropologists specialising in the Caribbean, the matrilocality tendency has been noted by various writers, see Barrow 1996: 77; Brown McCarthy 1991: 16; Clarke 1974; Gussler 1996: 121; Simey [1946] 1996: 39; Smith 1996a. On Cuba, see Safa 2005: 323-325.

emphasis on matrilineal kinship relations.²⁰ That the general stress of kinship relations is on the mother is emphasised in the way in which my Cuban informants often emphasised the primary responsibility of the mother over children with a proverb stating: “the mother is only one and the father whoever” (madre es una sola y padre cualquiera 2007).

Because of the strong emphasis on motherhood, it is the girls’ puberty ritual that is of importance in Cuban society. Lifecycle rituals make especially visible the central social divisions of a society (see van Gennep 1960), and they may also represent the most important social values of a society (see e.g. Huntington & Metcalf 1979: 2). Lifecycle rituals thus connect in important ways with the construction of kinship relations, since in them the social categories and values relevantly defining social existence are rendered particularly evident.

Girls’ transition into fully gendered and sexual adults is central because of their important role as mothers in the kin structure. By being transformed into a mature adult the girl is also transformed into a potential mother. This is significant to the girl’s mother since the growth of the matrifocal kin group boosts her position as a head of the kin group. She is valued since she can claim to have produced another member capable of expanding the matrifocal kinship structure. This is why quince is so important for the girl’s mother, why she is congratulated on the side of her daughter and often holds a central position in the organisation of the celebration. This rewards her fifteen years of effort in the raising of the girl and makes her at some stage in the future, a potential grandmother or great grandmother, the respected head of a matrifocal kin group.²¹

The Quince Photos as Proof of the Celebration

The quince photos play an important role in the way in which I interpret the quince ritual as reproducing the matrifocal kinship structure in Cuba. My Cuban informants saw the photos

²⁰ This is not to say that patrilineal relations do not exist and that Caribbean men are not also fathers and husbands and that *all* Cuban kinship relations are matrifocal and matrilineally stressed. My argument is that most of the social life in Cuba takes place among matrilineal kin.

²¹ It could be argued that since the Cuban population is diminishing and the number of abortions is – in all likelihood – very high in the country (the exact figures are hard to uncover), motherhood is not a role to aspire to in Cuba any longer. However, I see this as having more to do with the conditions that make raising children difficult rather than that the actual value of motherhood has drastically diminished. The comment from my informants saying that “there [in Europe] it is normal not to give birth, but here everybody gives birth” supports this interpretation. (2007).

as proof of the celebration of the girl's quince and thus as a testimony of her womanhood and potential motherhood. This is further stressed by the fact that these types of ceremonial photos are never taken of boys. Cuban women's eagerness to show me girls' quince photos and videos was a means to make the ritual public, to set the photos and videos into circulation to be seen by a wider audience. The photos also circulate widely in time; historically from one generation to another. This circulation is important to the reproduction of the matrifocal kinship structure since the photographs function as proof of the girl's maturity, her potential to become a mother, and can therefore be seen to carry 'matrifocality' in a material form.

The central position of the quince photos in the celebration of the ritual, as well as their centrality to the type of ethnographic material I was able to obtain on the quince celebration from my informants, connects to another feature of Cuban quince celebrations: quince is not so much a matter of talking as of seeing and experiencing. My informants stated that they were "happy" and that the day is "special"; something that "all girls dream about", but usually they did not start to reflect further on the ritual's meaning to them. Rather, they would fetch their quince photo album, and show me their photos. Quince's stress is on the ritual practice, and the photos as its lasting substantiation; not on communicative statements. Quince is something that Cuban women do. However, when examined in the context of the socialist state discourse, quince comes across as something that Cuban women do despite what the state professes – that is, in practicing quince they seem to be ignoring how such ritual opulence is viewed in the official socialist discourse.

Quince and the Revolutionary State Discourse

Defining Cuban state discourse in regards to the quince ritual is far from easy. Explicit official documents on Cuban state cultural policy are hard to come by, which makes it difficult to track down exact documentation that would represent the 'official state point of view' on the quince ritual. When examining Cuban social science research, quince as a topic is largely absent. Even though Cubans have conducted extensive research on ritual practices in their own country, the quince ritual represents an exception. Anthropological research in Cuba has concentrated largely on the study of the African-rooted religions on

the island or on the folklore-type research of popular celebrations.²² Lifecycle rituals have been predominantly left out of this research tradition on the basis that the amount of participants that they gather is limited to groups of family, friends and neighbours (see Feliú Herrera 2003; Morales Menocal 1998). It seems that Cuban state researchers have not studied quince because it does not meet the criteria of being a folk celebration of the masses. While it is difficult to state an exact reason for the invisibility of the quince ritual in Cuban social research, several aspects of the ritual's symbolism differ visibly from the egalitarian principles that centrally guide the official revolutionary state discourse.

A popular Cuban author writing under the pseudonym El Diablo Ilustrado discusses the quince ritual in a local best-seller book ([2003] 2006) in a chapter titled "Who has plenty inside, needs little outside" ("Quien tiene mucho adentro, necesita poco afuera"). He describes the ritual as such:

Only a leftover of the decades, even of centuries, in which the bad taste (which is wrongly called elegance) played an important role, importing certain foreign fashions. [...] The big spectacle raised for the so-called quince: changes of clothes, assemblage of a waltz – in the country of [a Cuban music genre] son – and many other elements that make – according to the budget – this (there is no room for any other word) distortion that converts the girl [...] into an object of exhibition. [...] The celebrated has disappeared in the middle of all this paraphernalia; the poor one, after she had to lend herself for this acting that is so foreign to her everyday personality. [...] Why a waltz? [...] Does it not seem suspicious to you that a music that is so distant from our roots [...] occupies the honoured place in the music of that day? [...] It results that the old Cuban bourgeoisie was very *picua* [a type of parrot] and had the European pretentiousness, from there comes that they imitated the dances of the rancid aristocracy of the old world. And this bug of the tackiest zone of the past continues to bite us. Now you see: the dead of this tomb are not dead; the schemes inherited from something so distant (in time and in spirit) like those bourgeois señoras of the long ago past, come to us disguised as tradition. [...] This show off mentality does not come to us only from the past but also from around us. Let us not be dragged by the fashions and the models of happiness forced by the

²² On religions see Balbuena Gutiérrez 2003; Cabrera 1996; Fuentes & Gómez 1996; Ortiz 1991, [1949] 1993a, [1906] 2007; on popular celebrations see Barreal Fernandez 1998; Feliú Herrera 2003; Ortiz 1991, [1921] 1992, 1993a, [1951] 1993b.

merchants with images sewn in order to reap their winnings. [...] Compelled by this fever to look like models, that compels us to measure ourselves with those who are like us by the quantity and quality of possessions, the persons lose the meaning of life, they waste it by putting it into the function of the appearance instead of making use of it, seeking real beauty. [...] A respected soul, intelligent and free, gives the body more elegance and more power to a woman than the richest fashions of the shops. [...] Who has plenty inside, needs little outside. Who has plenty outside, has little inside and wants to dissimulate the little she has. Who feels her beauty, the interior beauty, does not look outside for borrowed beauty. [...] Everything that implies ostentation, vanity, exhibitionism is a circus for the stupid ones and [fist] blows that you give to your personality. (Ibid. 199, 202-205).

The question as to what degree this extract from *el Diablo Ilustrado* can be seen to represent state discourse on the quince ritual in Cuba is a complex one. While Fidel Castro's persona and the documents published in his name can be seen to represent the ultimate source of Cuban state discourse, at the same time, the high degree of state control on media and publication in general creates a situation where it is difficult to publish writing that would be completely out of line with the revolutionary cultural policy and official state discourse. At the same time, not everything published in Cuba follows the official state policy, even though publishing of directly counter-revolutionary material is not possible (Prieto 2004: 70). In this case, when the writing takes place under a pseudonym, it is even more difficult to position the author in relation to the official state discourse. However, on the basis of my informants' statements on how the revolutionary government regarded quince as a "bourgeois" ritual, in particular during the early years of the revolution, the view represented by *el Diablo Ilustrado* on the ritual, appears to follow closely this state perspective. Moreover, since the quince ritual is so highly absent from other sources of state discourse, I believe it is possible here to apply Susan Eckstein's (1994: xiv) statement that "because the print media are state-owned and controlled, they tend to present an oficialista, officially approved, view of Cuba" and treat this extract from *el Diablo Ilustrado* as representing state discourse.

The extract from *el Diablo Ilustrado* suggests that in terms of Cuban state discourse, quince appears as a purely commercial tradition of the colonial elite, a leftover of the foreign bourgeois societies (Spain and United States) that governed Cuba in the past. As

such, the ritual fits somewhat uncomfortably into the new socialist society that was to be created by the 1959 revolution.²³ Indeed, several aspects of the symbolism of the quince ritual mix rather uneasily with the central principle of egalitarianism guiding the official ideology of the Cuban state.

Quince Promotes Vanity

An aspect that el Diablo Ilustrado criticises in quince parties, is that they feed vanity and exhibitionism. Vanity is not a quality that is well regarded by the Cuban revolution. Alma Guillermoprieto notes in her memoirs that in the 1970s there were no mirrors in the Cuban state-run dance schools because mirrors represented – from the revolutionaries' point of view – a frowned-upon vanity (2004: 51). Even the magazine that Lisandra read in her quince-video; *Vanidades*, used to be published in Cuba before the Revolution, but was turned into a socialist women's magazine with a more appropriate name *Mujeres* (Women) in the 1960s. The Cuban revolution's denial of vanity and a capitalist, materialist culture also manifests itself in the fact that before the revolution quince and other lifecycle rituals – such as weddings and baptisms – were made public by an announcement in a newspaper along with a photo (see e.g. *El Mundo* 1958; *El Diario de la Marina* 1958). The 1959 revolution changed the media, and the pre-revolutionary newspapers, which included society-news, were closed.²⁴ The new socialist newspapers such as *Granma* and *Juventud Rebelde* did not feature society news due most likely to their 'bourgeois' quality. As a result the quince ritual largely disappeared from the public sphere of the Cuban state-run media.

²³ Cf. Davalos on *quince* among Mexicans as an Aztec-originated tradition (1993: 306). This shows the selective way in which states build national culture on the basis of labelling some elements as 'indigenous' and some as 'foreign' and valuing each differently. Cuban state's cultural policy seems to work mainly by effacement: anything too removed from the revolutionary cultural agenda simply does not get published. There are very few written sources on this aspect of Cuban cultural politics (see however Eckstein 1994: xiv) and therefore this remark draws primarily on the impression I acquired during my fieldwork through conversations with some of the more marginalised Cuban researchers and observations on Cuban cultural life and the state-run media.

²⁴ For instance *El Diario de la Marina* was closed on May 13th 1960 (Bell et al. 2007: 321). By society-news I refer to announcements and articles concerning births, baptisms, quinces, weddings, funerals etc., which appeared in the pre-revolutionary newspapers. See also the comment by *El Diablo Ilustrado* on the vain, ridiculous character of such news (2006: 198, 204).

The values promoted by the official Cuban state discourse stress modesty and hard work (see Eckstein 1994; Ramonet & Castro 2007)²⁵, virtues that the luxury-laden, idle quinceañeras clearly do not represent. El Diablo Ilustrado criticises in his account the quince ritual for being a merchants' way to promote capitalist-style consumerism, whereas the inhabitants of a socialist state should not be lured to such ever-expanding materialist spending. This is contradicted by the general stress on wealth, abundance and expensive goods in the ritual.

Quince is a Ritual of Rich, White Foreigners

When examined in the context of the Cuban state discourse as represented by the extract from el Diablo Ilustrado, quince is an elitist, bourgeois and aristocratic-imitating ritual, and quince's symbolism supports this image. The Cuban revolution represents itself as the protector of disadvantaged groups, and in the name of this, supports Afro-Cuban cultural phenomena as formerly oppressed manifestations in the official cultural policy.²⁶ Thereby quince's elitist symbolism and its Spanish colonial roots fit uncomfortably with the official revolutionary stress on egalitarianism in Cuba.

When I was first looking for an institution to affiliate with while conducting my Doctoral Thesis research in Havana in 2006, I had problems due primarily to the fact that quince (and lifecycle rituals more generally) as a research topic, did not fit within the scope of any of the local institutions conducting social science research in Havana. Later on, during my fieldwork in 2007, I was discussing the issue of quince's non-existence within the range of social research in Cuba with Norma – a Cuban researcher working in a state research institute devoted predominantly to the study of Afro-Cuban religions and folklore.²⁷ Norma

²⁵ Material from my fieldwork supports this view.

²⁶ The way in which the Cuban revolutionary state is constantly represented in the local media as the protector of mothers and children – as well as of the poorest campesinos – is a clear example of this image. On Afro-Cuban culture seen as authentically Cuban culture, see Benitez-Rojo 1999; Daniel 1991; Eckstein 1994; Pacini-Hernandez 1998; Schmidt 2008; Wirtz 2004. See also Ramonet & Castro (2007) on state egalitarianism. Cf. Anderson (1983) on the early Creole nationalism in the Americas.

²⁷ By including Norma's comment here my purpose is not to say that Norma as a person embodies the Cuban state discourse; rather, that there are situations in which Cubans display in their statements aspects that reflect the official values of the Cuban revolution. In Cuba (as in other places), there are many levels of speaking and acting, and some speaking situations display more aspects of an 'official discourse' than others. This discussion took place in the open space of the

explained to me what she saw as the essence of quince and why it did not fall within the research agenda of current Cuban social science:

[Quince came to Cuba] in the 20s, 30s, it is a North-American [U.S.] tradition. [It was practiced by] the bourgeoisie, and by the middle class that imitated them. [Quince] is not a custom of the [Cuban] people, it has nothing to do with the traditions of this people; it is not a Cuban tradition, so make sure that you do not commit the error of calling it a Cuban tradition. You have to make it clear that this is a custom of the bourgeoisie, and the very poor people, the masses, could not celebrate it. You have to understand that [Cuba] was a class society; there was the bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie and the masses. Now everybody tries to have a party even though they have no resources for it... The neo-rich do the most spectacular quinces; I see that as bad taste, not everybody in Cuba celebrates them in such a way. To me these [quince] photos seem like a catalogue of prostitutes." (2007).²⁸

Norma's opinion mirrors that of *el Diablo Ilustrado* (2006: 199) in frowning upon quince's lavish, showy features as despicable "bad taste" as opposed to the moderation cherished in the official state discourse.

Moreover, quince represents Cuban girls as colonialist royalties, persons of noble Spanish origin (see photo 8). Due to the strict hierarchy defined by a person's origin of birth during colonialism (see Smith 1996a; Valtonen 2001), portraying oneself as a Spanish colonialist in the context of state socialism represents a symbolic denial of the central revolutionary principle of egalitarianism; a willingness to differentiate. The symbolism stressing luxury and wealth in the ritual contributes to this impression of quinceañeras as if seeking hierarchy instead of the state value of equality.

library in Norma's place of employment with other colleagues present. Cubans rarely express opinions that are critical of the Cuban revolution in public – even less to foreigners and people of whose sympathies they cannot be totally sure of – and therefore opinions expressed in situations that are judged as 'risky' often tend to reflect the official revolutionary values (see also Havel & Keane: 1985: 27-29). Moreover, I include Norma's comment here, as – with the exception of *el Diablo Ilustrado* – written sources that would more directly convey the Cuban revolutionary state discourse on quince are extremely scarce bordering on non-existent.

²⁸ Notice the contradiction in the way in which Norma stresses that quince is not a custom of the Cuban people, but after that complains that everybody wants to celebrate it at any cost!



Photo 8. A quinceañera in a photo shoot.

High class Spaniards of the colonial era, who were most often seen as the originators of the quince ritual by both my informants as well as the state discourse, were white. Historically honour was tightly tied to skin colour in the Caribbean and the fairness of skin still functions as a certain type of value in the area (Smith 1996a; Yelvington 2001; see also Alexander 1996; De la Fuente 1995; Fernandez 1996; Roland 2006).²⁹ As seen by Cubans, quince's origin is connected to the European side of the Cuban cultural mix and its symbolism refers predominantly to a European-originating, high-class, colonialist woman (see also Smith 1996a). Moreover, the way in which Spanishness is often represented as Catholicism in the quince photos, adds a contradiction between quince's ritual symbolism and Cuba's official cultural values – despite the fact that the relationship

²⁹ As for contemporary Cuba, evidence from my fieldwork supports this. For instance, the Cubans who manage to get a job in the desirable – and by Cuban standards, lucrative – tourist industry, are most often white, or of a skin colour that is of a lighter shade of brown. Light skin was also valued in the remarks of several of my Cuban informants of all skin colours, and as a desire to “advance the race” (*adelantar la raza*) by having children with lighter partners. At the same time, the issue of ‘race’ is far from ambiguous in Cuban society, exemplified, for instance, by the fact that most of my informants cited “mulattoes” (*mulata/mulato*) as their beauty ideal. Moreover, ‘race’ never made any type of clear divisions amongst my informants in terms of family relations, love affairs, friendship or any other type of normal social interactions.

between the state and the Catholic Church has come a long way from the hostilities of the early years of the revolution (see Azicri 2000). A ritual that symbolically portrays Cuban girls as of high class, European in origin and Catholic, differs significantly from the official revolutionary discourse, stressing the rejection of colonialism and imperialism (see Castro 1960), promoting equality in all fields of life, and favouring Afro-Cuban and Creole folk cultural expressions as national culture in music (son), dance (rumba) and religion (Santería).³⁰

Yet, even though quince's symbolism circulates white European imagery, Cuban girls of all colours celebrate it. There are no significant differences between the ways in which girls of different skin colours celebrate their quince or how girls of different skin colour perceive the ritual's meanings.³¹ Black or dark-skinned girls do not relate any differently to the ritual's European, colonial imagery than white girls. Cuban girls recognize the ritual's symbolism as Spanish, colonial imagery, but this is not an issue that would occupy their attention any further than that. Black or dark-skinned girls do not feel themselves as any less entitled than white girls to embrace a ritual that is seen as Spanish by its origin. To my informants Cuba is a historical mix of two cultures, and all Cubans – black, brown and white – have their share of this cultural blend: "In Cuba there is not a single drop of pure blood, it is all mixed." In this sense the Cuban revolution's egalitarian state policy has been successful in easing up the pre-revolutionary racial distinctions.³²

At the same time, the fact that in the quince ritual only the European side of the Cuban cultural mix is emphasised differs greatly from the way in which racialised meanings are employed in Cuba's official state cultural policy. The fact that quince's white colonial Spanish imagery holds great popularity amongst my informants shows that despite the

³⁰ See Benitez-Rojo 1987, 1999; Daniel 1991. See also Grabendorff 1980; Ramonet & Castro 2007. This official preference on Afro-Cuban cultural forms was also very visible throughout my fieldwork in Cuba, for instance in the Carnival of Havana in 2007.

³¹ However, there is a small 'racial' difference in the ritual practice in the sense that quince parties tend to reflect the fact that Cubans of lighter skin colours receive more remittances from abroad and are often financially better off than those of darker skin tones (see Rosenberg Weinreb 2008). Thereby the most lavish quince parties tend to be organised by girls of lighter skin colours since they have more money available for the party. However, this is in no way a clear-cut difference: black girls may also celebrate a very showy quince party and white girls may celebrate a small, modest quince party, depending on the amount of money in the family.

³² Nevertheless, this does not mean that racial distinctions do not matter or that there is no racism or relative hierarchies of colour in Cuban society, see e.g. Roland 2006; Rosenberg Weinreb 2008.

relative easing up of pre-revolutionary racial distinctions in one sense, on the other hand Cubans have not embraced the state stand wholeheartedly when it comes to embracing only Afro-Cuban and Creole practices as national culture. Instead, they continue practicing a Spanish colonial tradition despite its politically incorrect meanings from the point of view of the state ideology. At the same time, the revolutionary government has never outright condemned quince celebrations and Fidel Castro has never made a speech against quince. Yet quince's white European, colonial imagery fits badly with Fidel Castro's view of Cuba as an "Afro-Latin" nation (Roland 2006: 152). However, this presents no contradiction to my informants who see no problem in the ritual's European imagery, in this way ignoring the state view of an Afro-Latin and Creole-oriented Cuba.

By being seen as of Spanish, or, in Norma's opinion, of North American origin, quince is also 'non-Cuban', i.e. "foreign" (el Diablo Ilustrado 2006: 199). It is something that connects to a time when Cuba was still governed by 'foreigners'; to a time before the Cuban revolution. Carlos, a Cuban historian, remarked that there was almost a nostalgic yearning for the past in Cuba at the time of my fieldwork in 2007: "Now we are going back to what was before the revolution, the 1950s, Tropicana, the old cars, quince; it's the same with the dresses of the high society. In the 1960s there was the rupture, now there's a return back. The ones that now are 20 years and over, they were born with quince and they want to have them big." The younger generation of Cubans seem to want luxury, showy rituals and material goods, and quince materialises these aspirations for Cuban women.

Quince as Continuity with the Past

As noted by Carlos and el Diablo Ilustrado alike, quince represents a return to the past, an imagining of what it was like to be a woman in pre-revolutionary Cuba, a continuation of a tradition that is seen to be dated from the era when Cuba was still a Spanish colony. This aspect of quince as a "tradition" (tradición) was, indeed, how my informants conceptualised the ritual when speaking about it. Also the state discourse seems to recognise this, since in Diablo Ilustrado's text (2006), quince is seen foremost as a leftover of the colonial or bourgeois past. Quince represents thus continuity with the pre-revolutionary past.

This aspect of the quince ritual emerges as of interest when examining historical evidence on the ritual's past in Cuba. While it is difficult to locate an exact historical timeline for the practicing of the ritual in Cuba, it is certain that quince was celebrated by the rich US-

originated upper class in Havana prior to the revolution (see e.g. El Mundo 1958). A statement from Ismael, a Cuban art historian, refers to this: “[Quince parties] have been celebrated for many years. Here before the triumph of the revolution, persons with money used to do it.”

Since the 1959 revolution, the most reliable evidence I have located on the subject are random photos dating from different decades. I have not come across quince photos dating from the 1960s, and it seems possible that the ritual disappeared completely from any form of public circulation for some time during this period. This might be due to the strict ideological atmosphere of the new revolutionary state when it came to ritual expressions such as quince and the Afro-Cuban fiestas de santo (see Tweed 1997: 26; Wedel 2002: 36-38). The Cuban art historian Ismael implies this: “For a while these parties [quince parties and Afro-Cuban fiestas de santo] were not celebrated due to certain situations... What were done were activities at home with the quinceañera: a family fiesta or a meal. Later this tradition of dancing the quince parties came back.” In the mid-1970s the photos emerge again, although in a more moderate form than in contemporary Cuba, and the same trend seems to have continued throughout the 1980s.

Paradoxically the effervescence of quince celebrations in Cuba appears to have returned in the 1990s in the midst of the poverty of the post-Soviet special period. During this time quince parties became more lavish, coinciding with the first appearance of big, “colonial”-style dresses. The first time I witnessed evidence of such a dress was in a quince photo dating from 1993. The emergence of such dresses in quince photos, as well as the public nature of the quince ritual achieved by the circulating photos and videos, seems to mirror the more general ritual upsurge in Cuban society in the 1990s and the opening up of the Cuban state towards ritual expressions of diverse types (see Holbraad 2004; Wedel 2002). Quince is a ritual practice that seems to have continued throughout the years of the revolution; in more low-key forms during the early revolutionary years, and when state politics relaxed in the 1990s – similarly to Afro-Cuban religious practices (Holbraad 2004) – the popularity of quince celebrations exploded.

This continuity is significant, since making a clear break with the pre-revolutionary past – the creation of a New Man and a new society where the old bourgeois-colonial past is rejected – has been a central part of the Cuban revolutionary ideology (see Díaz 1993; Guevara [1965] 2005; Ramonet & Castro 2007). As opposed to the revolution’s pursuit of a rupture with the (colonial and bourgeois) past, to my informants quince represents

continuity with the neglected side of Cuba's cultural richness, made up of two traditions: Cuba not only as an Afro-Latin nation as represented by the revolution, but also as a nation with a significant Spanish cultural heritage. Quince's great popularity in contemporary Cuba relates both to its capacity to grant Cuban women a space where to give a ritual form to meanings connected to the matrifocal kinship structure as well as to the ritual's capacity to create space where to express a different conception of Cuba's past than that officially favoured by the revolution.

Quince Represents Women's Agency as Separate from Men

Even though the Cuban state officially goes to great ends to promote full equality in all areas of life, in practice, during both of my fieldwork periods, Cuban women still did most of the housework, took far greater responsibility for the children, and suffered a lot of violence at the hands of Cuban men (in any case, more than men from women). And even though some women have risen to high political positions in the revolutionary state, the majority of the most important state officials are still men with Fidel and Raúl Castro occupying the highest authority positions (see Ramonet & Castro 2007). By praising José Martí's ideas as the foundation of Cuban independence, Fidel Castro borrowed the legitimacy of his power from the father of Cuban patriotism and built a metaphorical patriline of the state starting from Martí via Antonio Maceo, Julio Antonio Mella, Camilo Cienfuegos, Che Guevara and others, with himself as the ultimate, quintessential father of the nation (see Ramonet & Castro 2007; see also Eriksen 2002).³³ Moreover, while the state-level women's organisation, Cuban Women's Federation (Federación de Mujeres Cubanas) officially promotes women's agency on a national level, it does this not as feminism – where women's interests would be seen as separate and in certain cases as in opposition to men's interests – but instead as comprehending the two genders as working together towards a better society following the guidelines given by Fidel Castro (see Ferrer Gómez & Aguilar Ayerra 2006; Ramonet & Castro 2007).

³³ See a letter that the famous 'raft-child' Elián González wrote to Fidel Castro in August 2006: "Dear Grand-pa" (*querido abuelito*) (El Mundo 6.8.2006). I do not see that the replacement of Fidel Castro by Raúl Castro as President of Cuba changes the central ideological position of Fidel Castro in Cuba and in the Cuban revolution.

This metaphoric patriliney built by the socialist state is in contradiction with the mother-centred tendency prevailing on the practical level of actual Cuban kinship, for which quince provides an idiom. Quince is a ritual where women are the main agents and the highest authority whilst men occupy a marginal position. In what remains often the rather 'machista' environment of Cuba, quince grants women a space where they can take and display the main ritual agency. Quince is a women's 'discourse' (Urban 1996: 66, 71-72, 147, 245), where pictures of female beauty are circulated and set in motion mainly by women. This is very different from the images (and tales) of men's military heroism passed around in Cuban state media. Quince is a ritual from the symbolism of which the state is absent, a performance where the state discourse is completely ignored. Objects representing the Cuban state are never present in quince rituals. In quince's ritual imagery, Cuban girls are never seen as workers, soldiers or students – roles that in reality are open for women in Cuban society – but only as characters that are not in line with the ideology of the modern-day Cuba like pirates, royals, or strippers.³⁴

Quince as Cuban Women's Space Outside of the Revolutionary State

Quince as a ritual practice can be seen to represent the point where the desires and wishes of individual Cuban women intersect with the official values of the Cuban revolutionary state. Apart from the practical needs that the celebration of quince requires (access to ritual locations, attainment of ritual objects such as quince dresses, contact with ritual experts such as photographers, organisation of ritual publicity such as a newspaper announcement), the revolutionary Cuban government can enable or disable the celebration of certain rituals via laws, incentives or other means of social control. This is done by either promoting the public celebration of some rituals (like the May Day parade), while making other rituals illegal or difficult to realise (like Catholic weddings before the 1990s as stated by my Cuban informants, see also Malarney 1996).

Various anthropological works highlight the influence of cultural practices that are considered to be 'traditional' (Boddy 1989; Wardlow 2006), 'indigenous' (Bilby 1999; Kapferer 1997) or 'low-class' (Bilby 1999) as representing an alternative to dominant power structures in the context of the modernising / modern state. Yet in Cuba's socialist state context, such an alternative is provided by a ritual practice that is seen to be 'elitist'

³⁴ Prostitution and strip clubs are prohibited in revolutionary Cuba.

and 'foreign' in its origin – the legacy of a colonial high-class custom that fits badly with the official egalitarian state discourse. The Cuban socialist state represents itself as the promoter of equality, 'authentic' Cuban culture and the low-class masses. In such a context, embracing a ritual performance that is locally conceived as elitist in origin and in symbolism, and that symbolically elevates the quinceañera higher than others, becomes a practice that allows for the temporary ignoring of the revolutionary state discourse.

Quince grants Cuban women a space where they can be the central agents of the ritual and celebrate female sexuality and motherhood in a non-state setting. As opposed to the state promoted view of the worker, quinceañeras represent idle, leisure-seeking, sensuality-laden, vain, aristocratic women. Most importantly, in a performative form, quince gives a ritual expression to the Caribbean matrifocal kinship structure, which centrally characterises Cuban kinship relations. In this way quince creates for Cuban women a symbolic space outside of the socialist state, where revolutionary virtues are temporarily ignored and forgotten. Moreover, in a situation where a regime equipped with a powerful state structure wants to clearly distance itself from earlier rule by making a clear break from the (pre-revolutionary) past by pushing for large-scale changes in the society – as has been typical in socialist countries – being conservative; that is, trying to retain what is seen by Cubans as the pre-revolutionary rituals, does symbolically place the practitioners outside of the state sphere.³⁵

How should we interpret this 'space outside of the state' represented by the quince ritual? What does it mean to Cuban women to set themselves outside of state discourses in a context that has long aimed for very high degrees of state definition in all areas of life? One might easily view this as resistance; that Cuban women engage in a luxurious, colonial ritual practice that ignores the socialist state discourse in an effort to display criticism toward the (still) rather authoritarian state power. Yet I believe that it would be a mistake to interpret the Cuban quince ritual as simply resistance to state power. My informants themselves never supported such an interpretation of the ritual. Even though from the point of view of state authorities, ignoring state discourses is likely to appear as resistance to state ideology, my informants did not see the matter this way. They never

³⁵ The revolutionary government's desire to make large scale changes in Cuban society is exemplified, for instance, by the New Man policy of the Cuban regime, see Díaz 1993; Guevara 2005; Ramonet & Castro 2007. On the cultural renovation efforts of other, socialist or communist, revolutionary regimes, see Anagnost 1985, 1987; Farquhar 1996 on China; Malarney 1996 on Vietnam; Roth 1990 on Bulgaria.

made any connections between the ritual and the socialist state but instead ignored socialist notions completely in the context of the ritual. Thus, even though the revolutionary state has, via its ritual policies and via the larger institutional and historical context, to a degree played a role in shaping how the ritual is currently practiced in Cuba, its current importance to Cuban women emerges from meanings that are not about the socialist state.

To Cuban women quince is important because it connects in a significant way with the matrifocal kinship system that structures and gives meaning to their lives. As a girls' puberty ritual quince connects with the continuity of women's kinship relations and personal life projects via the children that are expected to be born to girls when they become women – the children that will add up to the matrifocal kinship structure and ensure its continuity through time. But quince also represents another type of continuity; a continuity that reaches out to the past; to a practice that Cuban women see as a Cuban "tradition" that forms part of their national cultural heritage as Cubans – as a country that is made up of a "mixture between Spain and Africa". Quince gives continuity to the Spanish side of Cuba's cultural heritage neglected by the revolutionary conception of history. Quince's great popularity in contemporary Cuba thus relates both to its capacity to grant Cuban women a space to give a ritual form to meanings connected to the matrifocal kinship structure as well as to the ritual's capacity to express a different view of Cuba's past than that officially favoured by the revolution.

Local culture mediates state power everywhere in the world and there is more complexity to any society than the mere fact of state power (Gal 1985) – even in a socialist state with high degrees of state definition. Quince's popularity amongst Cuban women shows that despite the revolution's efforts to create a completely new socialist society with its specifically defined array of national traditions, Cubans' view of their own cultural heritage is wider than that defined by the revolution. The ritual also shows that Cubans are creative in the ways in which they draw on the distinct aspects of the island's cultural history. While the meanings circulated in quince's ritual symbolism partly reproduce colonial notions of hierarchy and power, at the same time the egalitarian policy of Cuban revolution has influenced the ritual's contemporary practice in such a way that it is currently embraced by all types of Cuban girls with little regard for class, or 'race' or skin colour. Thus, by pursuing a policy of levelling out the distinct social differences in Cuban society, the revolution has for its part contributed to this originally white, upper-class practice becoming popular throughout the country. At the same time the ritual's meaning to my Cuban

informants is not related to the revolutionary state, drawing instead from Cuba's rich historical cultural diversity.

Conclusion

The Cuban quince ritual is a girls' puberty ritual that holds great importance in Cuba and relates centrally to the matrifocal kinship structure prevalent in the Caribbean. The widely circulated quince photos are the most important aspect of the ritual and they embody a women's discourse that can be seen to represent matrifocality in a material form.

In the context of Cuba's socialist state, the quince ritual represents a tradition from the Spanish colonial past that fits badly with the strongly egalitarian, official revolutionary ideology. Even though the practicing of the ritual was particularly low-key during the fiercest years of the revolution in the 1960s, with the relaxing of the state policy towards ritual practices of all types in the 1990s quince gained huge popularity amongst Cubans. The ritual's luxurious imagery and royal symbolism allow Cuban women to embrace meanings that take them to the pre-revolutionary colonial past and as such, create a symbolic space outside of the revolutionary state discourse.

The revolutionary state has no place in the ritual's symbolic imagery or in its meanings – quince is a ritual practice that ignores the state. Yet, to Cuban women, ignoring state discourse does not equal resisting state power. Instead, the meanings of such acts are mediated by local cultural understandings. For Cuban women, quince's significance relates both to their personal kinship connections as well as to the ritual's position as a genuinely Cuban tradition – despite its Spanish colonial roots that fit badly to the revolutionary emphasis on Creole and Afro-Cuban traditions as national culture. This shows that in their daily practices Cubans embrace a wider array of traditions as national culture than that defined by the revolution, testifying for the strength of long-term cultural and social structures even in situations where a powerful regime has aimed for a total rupture with the past.

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