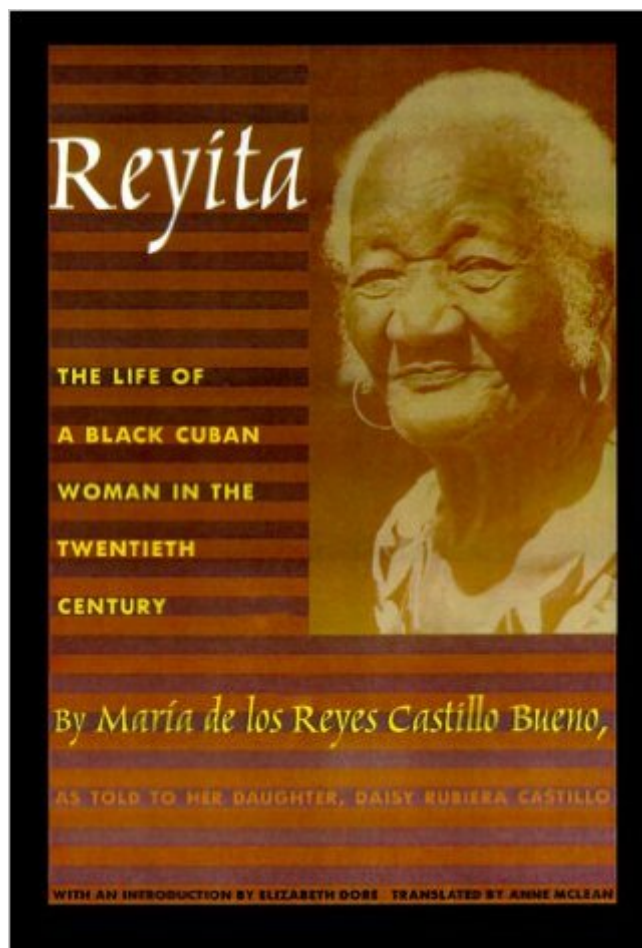


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Reyita: The Life Of A Black Cuban Woman In The Twentieth Century



Synopsis

María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno (1902–1997), a black woman known as “Reyita,” recounts her life in Cuba over the span of ninety years. Reyita’s voice is at once dignified, warm, defiant, strong, poetic, principled, and intelligent. Her story—as told to and recorded by her daughter Daisy Castillo—begins in Africa with her own grandmother’s abduction by slave-traders and continues through a century of experiences with prejudice, struggle, and change in Cuba for Reyita and her numerous family members. Sensitive to and deeply knowledgeable of the systemic causes and consequences of poverty, Reyita’s testimony considers the impact of slavery on succeeding generations, her mother’s internalized racism, and Cuba’s residual discrimination. The humiliation and poverty inflicted on the black Cuban community as well as her decision to marry a white man to ensure a higher standard of living form the basis of other chapters. Reyita actively participated in the life of the community—often caring for the children of prostitutes along with her own eight children and giving herbal medicine and “spiritualist” guidance to ill or troubled neighbors. She describes her growing resistance, over five decades of marriage, to her husband’s sexism and negativity. Strong-willed and frank about her sexuality as well as her religious and political convictions, Reyita recounts joining the revolutionary movement in the face of her husband’s stern objections, a decision that added significant political purpose to her life. At book’s end, Reyita radiates gratification that her 118 descendants have many different hues of skin, enjoy a variety of professions, and—most importantly—are free of racial prejudice.

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Customer Reviews

"Reyita," subtitled "The Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century," as told to her daughter, progresses in rich detail from what could have crushed a weaker spirit to the conclusion a year before her death: "I'm not worried about whether I've acted well or not. I'll always live in peace with myself, because I believe I always did what I had to do. I have walked along with life, I haven't been left behind. And so, at ninety-four years of age, I feel good as new." Reyita's grandmother, a slave, bore the last name of her "owner who was also her father." Reyita's own mother rebuked her for being the only black one of her four daughters. Because she was smart and diligent, Reyita at 18 passed the admissions test to the Institute, only to be kept out because she couldn't afford the required uniform. When she had tried to borrow the money, the response was "That negrita has gone crazy." To spare her own children from parallel treatment, Reyita determined to marry white. Reflecting back she expressed her feeling: "It goes without saying, now, that I love my race, that I'm proud to be black, but in those days, marrying white was vital...." By cooking for others, washing clothes, teaching school, caring for others' kids, including those of prostitutes, and sheer industry and intelligence, Reyita elevated her growing family. In the 1940s she joined the Popular Socialist Party because it fought for "equality between blacks and whites and between men and women." Later, she and her sons were part of the 26th of July Movement that prevailed in the Cuban Revolution.

Reyita describes her life as a black woman, being born in 1902 and growing up through all the violence and poverty of Cuba in the twentieth century. In 1912 Reyita, was living with her godfather and his wife, the latter being terribly abusive. This lady was also head of the women's section of the local branch of the leading Afro-Cuban political party, the PIC. The PIC had been formed in 1908 in order to fight against racial discrimination. It was been banned by the Cuban government in 1910 on the false ground that it was anti-white. As a result of what Reyita claims was a trap laid by the Cuban president Jose Miguel Gomez, the PIC launched a revolt. The Cuban military responded by executing and torturing thousands of ordinary Afro-Cubans. Reyita's aunt was arrested on bogus charges and thrown into prison. Reyita spends a great deal of time in this book discoursing her use of herbal remedies and other home-grown medicine to cure various ailments of her neighbors. In this way, as a medicine woman, also as one with a reputation as receiving accurate visions from the spirit world, she found a certain niche for herself in Cuba's patriarchal culture. Reyita was alert to any opening in Cuba's political sphere which might serve as vehicle to better the condition of her people. The PIC seemed to offer a ray of hope and Reyita tried her best as a young girl to support her neighborhood chapter. After the PIC was crushed, Afro-Cubans were virtually terrorized into

submission. The biggest attraction after this was the fatalistic "Back-to-Africa" movement of Marcus Garvey, which Reyita was enthusiastic for, roughly, in the 1918-22 era. This movement was also repressed by the Cuban state.

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