

Santeria: Race and Religion in Cuba

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Introduction

In the study of the Santeria religion, we find a reflection of the struggle of Afro-Cuban people as they were forced to acculturate to a white dominated society (Clark, 2007). The blending, or mixing, of these races produced a third racial group: Mestizos (Morales, 2013). Religiously, this same process produced a new faith: Santeria (Lopez-Sierra, 2012). The purpose of this paper is to explore the Santeria religion in terms of its development and practice. Given its racial origins of this faith must be viewed in light of historic racial issues.

As a former colony of Spain, Cuba has a long tradition of Catholic influence (Asante & Mazama, 2007). Catholicism was the state religion during the colonial era (Clark, 2007). With the influx of hundreds of thousands of slaves from Africa, and their Orisha worship traditions, the country, its racial composition and its religious practices were altered (Clark, 2007). These changes remain to this day and are exemplified in the practice of Santeria (Lopez-Sierra, 2012).

Developed by the descendants of slaves, Santeria became, and remains, the primary religion of the mestizo and black working class Cubans (Clark, 2007). Catholicism is still considered the religion of the white ruling class (Hearn, 2008).

A visitor to any working class Cuban home may note evidence of Santeria worship, including a shrine with pictures of Catholic saints, offerings of food and drink, candles and an area for meditation and prayer. Indeed, as we toured Cuba on our recent trip, we were offered a glimpse of Santeria worship in several homes. In viewing these shrines, there appeared to be elements of Catholicism combined with artifacts completely foreign to the practice of Christianity. These domestic shrines seemed to be well tended by the primarily Afro-Cuban

families while nearby Catholic churches appeared to be empty and in need of repair. Though not a scientific evaluation, this served as a visual indicator of the rising importance of Santeria worship and Catholicism's diminished relevance in Cuba today.

The Spanish settlement of Cuba began with Columbus' arrival in 1492 and ultimately resulted in the decimation of its native inhabitants through disease and cultural genocide (Lefever, 1996). The resulting absence of a working class population necessitated import of slaves from Africa (Lefever, 1996). Over the next 350 years, Cuba's Spanish hegemonic leaders brought approximately 702,000 slaves directly from Africa to Cuba (Lefever, 1996).

Slaves carried with them rich cultural traditions of their homeland, including religious beliefs (Lefever, 1996). In particular, Yoruba speaking slaves brought religious practices of Orisha (saint) worship and social traditions of West Africa, influenced by the kingdom of Benin in Nigeria and the kingdom of Dahomey in the Republic of Benin (Asante & Mazama, 2007). These religious traditions provided the foundation for Santeria as it is practiced in Cuba today (Lopez-Sierra, 2012).

The Catholic faith has historically had a strong cultural influence in Cuban society (Clark, 2007). In fact, Columbus's voyage and claim to Cuba of 1492, occurred during the Spanish Inquisition (1478 – 1820), a political and religious effort to "cleanse" the world of non-believers (non-Christians). As a result, Spain claimed Cuba's land for the monarchy and, in addition, established the state's religion, Catholicism (Lopez-Sierra, 2012). The dominance of the Catholic faith remained in place until the Afro-Cuban working class wrestled control from the white ruling class during the revolution in 1959 (Hearn, 2008).

Today, Cuba's population is not just black and white (Morales, 2013). Mestizos, or mixed race people represent a large portion of the population (Morales, 2013). As Cubans have

blurred lines of skin color, so has the religious community in Cuba blurred the lines of religion (Asante & Mazama, 2007) to form Santeria.

The Development of Santeria

Cuba, under Spanish control at the time of its greatest slave importation, allowed only one religion: Catholicism (Hearn, 2008). During the colonial period, slaves were offered a social mechanism called Calibos maintain the culture of their homeland, ultimately, though, slaves electing to practice Orisha worship faced prejudice, prosecution and incarceration at the hands of the Spanish ruling class (Lefever, 1996).

Calibos were fraternities that acted as mutual aid societies for Cuba's slave population (Hearn, 2008). By some accounts, these groups were charged by the government to facilitate conversion of Orisha worshipping slaves to Christianity (Hearn, 2008). This conversion attempt encouraged Orisha followers to adopt aspects of Catholicism while continuing to practice their religion of origin. The covert goal of these Calibos was to eliminate Orisha worship altogether (Asante & Mazama, 2007). Despite these efforts, the Calibos enabled the Yoruba people to maintain a cultural identity apart from their slave owners (Asante & Mazama, 2007). Calibos also succeeded in leading people to adopt elements of Catholicism, thus creating the belief system of Cuban Santeria as it is practiced today (Asante & Mazama, 2007). Calibo societies eventually became the basis for an underground counterhegemonic challenge to Spanish rule (Lefever, 1996).

After slavery was abolished in 1898, the white ruling class became increasingly concerned that the black and mulatto segments of the population would demand equality (Lopez-Sierra, 2012) As a result, the government ended relationships with the Calibos and attempted to wipe out the organizations and their influence (Clark, 2007). This caused, the Santeria

community to go underground and grow stronger, creating even more anxiety in the ruling class (Clark, 2007).

To counter this underground rise of Afro-Cuban solidarity and power, a campaign involving various forms of prejudicial misinformation, including charges of child sacrifice, were leveled against the Santeria religion by Cuba's hegemonic elite (Hearn, 2008). These stories propagated the notion that Afro-Cubans were violent, primitive and, consequently, inferior (Clark, 2007). In this way, early efforts to force religious conversion became the vehicle for social division, a focus of ongoing racial discrimination, and a powerful source of support for Afro-Cuban heritage that continues today.

Santeria in Cuba

Demographic studies and authorities consulted for this paper do not provide estimates of Santeria's prevalence in the Cuban population due to several factors. First, there is the secrecy of the faith itself (Lefever, 1996). Santeria does not encourage its followers to identify themselves (Clark, 2007). Secondly, Santeria is not documented (Clark, 2007). The faith does not have registries, holy books or doctrinal teachings preserved in writing (Lefever, 1996). Santeria's history, teachings and practices are passed verbally, from generation to generation and are carried in the memories of its adherents. Finally, Santeria followers venerate the Catholic saints and cling to certain teaching of the Christian church (Lefever, 1996). These beliefs cause many Santeria followers to identify themselves as Catholic when questioned about their affiliation ("Freedom report, Cuba," 2012). Finally, Cuba does not keep records of its own religious believers (Clark, 2007). In fact, the American government has been unable to determine an estimate on the prevalence of Santeria faithful within Cuba as noted in the excerpt from its most recent report of religions in Cuba ("Freedom report, Cuba," 2012):

“(In Cuba) The Roman Catholic Church estimates that 60 to 70 percent of the population is Catholic, but only 4 to 5 percent regularly attend mass. Many people, particularly in the Afro-Cuban community, consult with practitioners of religions with roots in West Africa and the Congo River basin, known as Santeria. These religious practices are commonly intermingled with Catholicism, and some even require Catholic baptism for full initiation, making it difficult to estimate accurately the total membership of these syncretistic groups.”

The website notes that, though there are numerical estimates for many other religions in Cuba, the estimate for Santeria is not given due to dual identification and doctrinal entanglement with Catholicism ("Freedom report, Cuba," 2012).

Since the time of colonialism, Catholicism has maintained its affiliation with the white ruling class while Santeria remains the faith of the black/mestizo working class in Cuba (Hearn, 2008). Scholars agree that Santeria is the traditional faith of workers most often associated with African ancestors. Thus, Cubans view Santeria as the religion of the people (Hearn, 2008).

In the past, Cuban Catholics have treated Santeria followers with animosity (Hearn, 2008). Santeria, though borrowing from and claiming affiliation with the Catholic Church, also has had an uneasy relationship with Catholics (Hearn, 2008). This prejudice can be traced to religious attitudes of the colonial era (Clark, 2007).

Syncretization

In Cuba's racially divided and religiously limited sociopolitical climate of colonialism, Catholicism provided the framework that Yoruba speaking slaves used to mask their unorthodox Orisha worship (Lopez-Sierra, 2012). This process involved superimposing the Orisha system of worship upon the legal and acceptable Catholic structure. Social scientists call this process of "borrowing" of one culture from another, *syncretism* (Lopez-Sierra, 2012) (Lefever, 1996).

Santeria is a religion governed by strict rules of behavior, but characterized by wide latitude of interpretation due to the individualistic nature of worship (Clark, 2007). This includes the adoption of philosophies from other faiths or movements (Asante & Mazama, 2007). Consequently, in the late 1880's, practitioners of Santeria incorporated spiritism (Asante & Mazama, 2007).

Spiritism added a mystical element to Santeria practice (Lefever, 1996). This layer of mysticism was borrowed from a French movement introduced worldwide just before the turn of the twentieth century (Lefever, 1996) by Hippolyte Rivail (pen name: Allan Kardec) (Hearn, 2008). Spiritism contributed elements of enlightenment, spiritual possession, divination and spiritual ascendency that have become syncretized with the Santeria practice (Asante & Mazama, 2007). This, the third element of Santeria religion, with its rituals and cosmology, provides the notable supernatural and sometimes controversial quality of its practice. Thus, Santeria as it is practiced today, is an amalgamation or syncretization of Catholicism, Orisha worship and French spiritism (Hearn, 2008).

Orisha worship and Catholicism have many parallels that allowed this syncretization (Lefever, 1996). Both faiths ascribe to the belief that there is one high god (Olodumare/God) responsible for the creation and maintenance of the world (Lefever, 1996). In addition, both religions teach that there are intermediaries between the believer and their god (Lefever, 1996). These intermediaries are known as saints in the Catholic tradition and Orisha for Santeria adherents (Lefever, 1996).

Originally, hundreds of Orisha saints were venerated, but currently only sixteen are recognized (Lefever, 1996). These sixteen were paired with Catholic saints in the Spanish tradition and both became affiliated with a principle, noted in table 1(Lefever, 1996).

Table 1

ORISHAS AND SAINTS		
Orisha	Saint	Principle
Agayu	Christopher	fatherhood
Babaluaye	Lazarus	illness
Eleggua	Nino de Atocha, Anthony of Padua	way-opener, messenger, trickster
Ibeji (twins)	Cosmus and Damien	children
Inle	Rafael	medicine
Obatala	Mercedes	clarity
Ogun	Peter	iron
Olokun	Regla	profundity
Orula	Francis	wisdom, destiny
Osanyin	Joseph	herbs
Oshosi	Norbert	hunt, protection
Oshun	Caridad	eros, rivers
Oya	Candelaria	death
Shango	Barbara	force, thunder
Yemaya	Regla	maternity, seas

(Lefever, 1996, p. 320)

The Practice of Santeria

Santeria devotees believe that there is one god, known as Oodumare (also Olorun and Olofi). As in Christianity, this Supreme Being is the creator (Asante & Mazama, 2007). Orisha are powerful guardians of certain aspects of life and have corresponding saint identities in the Catholic Church (Clark, 2007). On days typically devoted to Christian saints, the Orisha gods as well as the saint are venerated (Asante & Mazama, 2007). As a result, Catholicism, once a “cover” for Orisha worship, has become an acceptable part of Santeria doctrine (Lefever, 1996).

In fact, many of the Santeria faithful are regular attendees of Catholic celebrations and identify as Catholic (Asante & Mazama, 2007).

Ancestors are integral to the practice of Santeria, according to faith doctrine (Clark, 2007). Dead relatives are powerful influences on the living and can be called upon to intercede in affairs along with the Orisha (Asante & Mazama, 2007). The ancestors and personal Orisha (saints) possess a powerful ashe, or life energy, that can be tapped for the purposes of good or evil (Clark, 2007).

Santeria is a highly individualistic practice (Clark, 2007). Each person discovers his or her personal Orisha (saint) through contact with a high priest and devises his or her own manner of worshipping this guardian (Clark, 2007). Orisha are treated as though they are living beings, and are “fed” through offerings of food and drink in the home shrine (Clark, 2007).

Shrines are often constructed in a corner of the home here space can be devoted to meditation and prayer (Clark, 2007). The area may include photographs of ancestors along with representations of saints and Orisha (Lopez-Sierra, 2012). Offerings of food and drink should be fresh and of good quality to respectfully pass on ashe or life energy (Clark, 2007). Orisha are closely aligned with the Supreme Being and through home and community rituals, individuals can align themselves with the Supreme Being through veneration (Asante & Mazama, 2007).

Santeria Worship

Bembes are drum and dance festivals designed to “attain a sacred state of consciousness” described as spirit possession (Lopez-Sierra, 2012). The ritual or worship festival is accomplished with the help of a babalawo (high priest) or other Santeria elders (Asante & Mazama, 2007). Dancing, singing and drumming give way to frenzied activity (Clark, 2007). Possession occurs when the subject performs specific movements and drumming patterns

(Asante & Mazama, 2007). Once the trance-like state has been achieved, the subject (now possessed by the Orisha) is said to speak truth and may approach attendees to offer advice (Clark, 2007).

One of the most controversial elements of Santeria is the adherence to the use of sacrifices and the symbolic use of animal blood (Lefever, 1996). The blood from animal sacrifices is sprinkled on stones representing the head of Orisha and is a ceremonial method of connecting with personal saints (Lefever, 1996). In addition to small animal sacrifices, food is offered to the Orisha (Lefever, 1996).

All elements of nature, including food are considered to have life energy or *ashe* (Lefever, 1996). Food offerings are given to the Orisha, but eaten by humans only after a time period has passed in which the Orisha has consumed the life energy of the offering (Lefever, 1996).

The *babalawo* in Santeria tradition is the high priest and is capable of great insight through the use of manipulated items such as shells, nuts or chains (Hearn, 2008). The divination ceremony involves tossing artifacts and assessing positions in which these artifacts fall (Hearn, 2008). Artifacts of divination indicate for the *babalawo* which fables, songs and prayers will give insight to the subject's problems (Lefever, 1996). Since Santeria is not preserved in books, but in the memories of its devotees, high priests must memorize thousands of these chants and stories in order to carry out divination activities (Lefever, 1996).

Santeria and Politics

In January of 1959, when Fidel Castro gave his first televised address, a white dove perched on his shoulder and another landed on the rostrum where he spoke (Hearn, 2008). Both birds stayed for the entirety of Castro's two-hour speech (Hearn, 2008). White doves are the

symbol of Obatalá, a divine African Santeria king who molds humans from clay in heaven (Clark, 2007). In addition, Christians believe that the white dove symbolizes peace (Clark, 2007). The faithful, particularly Santeria adherents, saw this unusual spectacle as an indication that supernatural forces selected Castro to rule the country (Clark, 2007). This theory has been offered as rationale for Fidel Castro's survival of numerous assassination attempts (Hearn, 2008).

Castro is himself is said to be a follower of Santeria (Hearn, 2008). Despite being baptized, raised and educated by Catholics, it is no secret that Castro practices Santeria and uses high priests to treat illnesses of his loved ones (Hearn, 2008). Consequently, it is not surprising that Castro has used religious symbolism in his speeches and public ceremonies (Lopez-Sierra, 2012).

Santeria in the US, a Racial Difference

In the United States, Santeria has evolved from a racially segregated practice to a more diverse group of followers with greater emphasis on universalism (Lefever, 1996). In fact, American Babalawos (high priests), in contrast to their Cuban counterparts, are more frequently white, educated, upper middle class individuals (Lefever, 1996). In addition, the US Santeria religion has gone "mainstream", suspending its secrecy dictates to win recognition of legitimacy as a religion by the Supreme Court (Lefever, 1996).

Santeria is known to have existed in the United States prior to 1959 with just a small number of followers (Lefever, 1996). The influx of Cubans fleeing the revolution enabled a small number of devotees to immigrate here (Lefever, 1996). These early immigrants were mostly white ruling class Cubans, and more likely to have been followers of Catholicism (Lefever, 1996). It wasn't until the Mariel boatlift of 1980 occurred that a functioning group of Santeria followers were able to establish themselves in the United States (Lefever, 1996).

This most recent group of US Cuban immigrants has been characterized, racially and economically, as lower class Afro-Cuban or mestizo (Lopez-Sierra, 2012). These people, unlike the ruling class that immigrated at the time of the revolution, did not adhere completely to Catholicism, but brought with them the basis of today's American Santeria practices (Lefever, 1996). Due to Santeria's secrecy, devotees do not often identify their religion (Clark, 2007). Therefore, accurate statistics on the Santeria church in America are unavailable (Lefever, 1996), but an estimate of US Santeria followers was attempted in 1993 (Lefever, 1996). This study suggested there were as many as 500,000 Santeria faithful in the United States (Lefever, 1996). In the eleven years that have elapsed, since this study, it is reasonable to assume, given the popularity of this practice, that the number of adherents may have increased (Clark, 2007).

Most American Santeria followers (approximately 300,00) are located in New York City with a much smaller number (approximately 70,000) living in south Florida (Lefever, 1996). Researchers agree that the structure of Santeria in the United States is very different from that in Cuba due to differences in racial and socio-economic attitudes related to development of the religion in environment (Clark, 2007).

Conclusion

Cuba is a country of contrast and syncretization. It is deeply divided by race, but its large mestizo population is evidence that races have found uneasy, but common, ground (Morales, 2013). As a result, perhaps Cuba is the only place in the world where two opposing religions could combine to form a cohesive, yet ever changing system of faith.

Politics and an evolving religious climate have set the stage for more changes in Santeria traditions in Cuba and around the world (Clark, 2007). This diverse religion, developed by descendants of Afro-Cuban slaves and influenced by the faith practices of white slave owners,

has traveled beyond the country's borders to the neighborhoods of wealthy white Americans where it is likely to continue to change and grow (Clark, 2007).

Cuba, with its racial tension and economic strain is currently in transition (Hearn, 2008). As we examine the impact of Cuba's challenging demographic structure and the resulting evolution of its primary religions, it is clear that more changes are on the horizon.

Santeria is a product of faith, social manipulation and racial discord. Morales makes it clear to us that this discord is not over, it is simply underground (Morales, 2013). As a result, Hearn anticipates an official break between the Catholic Church and Santeria (Hearn, 2008), while Clark envisions the growth of Santeria to establish itself as a strong worldwide religion (Clark, 2007). Whatever the outcome of future societal, religious and political actions, it is clear that the Santeria faith will adapt to changing tides and these adaptations will be reflected in its practice.

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