

Santeria : Analyzing a Caribbean Religion

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Analyzing a Caribbean Religion

[Name]

[University]

Professor

[Class]

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Abstract

This paper is a deep analysis into the religion of Santeria with a focus on understanding the origins of its existence. With critical research, four main questions will be answered while simultaneously discovering related information from the data uncovered. These questions include:

1. What is Santeria?
2. How was it brought from Africa?
3. What is the relationship between music and the religion?
4. What countries is Santeria practiced in?

In answering these questions many branches of information on the roots of the religion arose. Therefore, I found it crucial to include information such as significant deities that Santeros believe in, specific tribulations undergone by the religion centuries ago, a personal interview with a young woman who practices Santeria, as well as a few religions that relate to Santeria. Research led to a fascinating religion that today is practiced in NYC by over 300,000 believers (Lefever, 1996).

What is Santeria?

Santeria is defined as: the way of the Saints. It is “an African religion that started in Yoruba and made its way to Cuba” (Moreno). Those who follow this religion believe “that spiritual forces [exert] direct control over human destiny” (Andrews, 2004) and therefore follow the footsteps of these ‘saints’. In Santeria, Olodumare is the Supreme Being that created the world. All that it is of lesser/greater intensity is called ashe “the divine/cosmic energy that is the animating

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energy in the universe” (Edmonds and Gonzalez, 94). It is the saints that act as intermediaries between the greater “supreme being” and those who worship. Saints are also known as Orisha, these are “multi-dimensional beings that represent the forces of nature, act as archetypes, and function as sacred patrons or ‘guardian angels’ for devotees” (614, Journal). These ‘devotees’ seek help in work, love and health by “petitioning” (Miller, 1994) to the saints.

In order to get a stronger indulgence into What Santeria actually is, understanding the history is of most importance. It is through the history that we see why this religion even got its name, where it originated from, how it branched off, and how it reached so many different parts of the world as it has today.

How was Santeria brought from Africa?

Many decades after 1492, during what could be called a mass extinction of Native Americans in the newly discovered “Cuba”, the “Spaniards forcefully brought Africans as Indian replacements” (319, Lefever). These Africans were necessary to work the land for the Spaniards. The first African slaves that were shipped into Cuba were from Hispaniola (what we call Haiti and the Dominican Republic today). It was in 1521 that more slaves directly from Africa began flooding into Cuba. Santeria arose from the discouragement of the religions of the slaves that were now under a master’s heavy hand. “The slave masters in Cuba discouraged, and often prohibited, the practice of Africa religions” (319, Lefever). Because of this discouragement Africans were forced to disguise their *orishas* with the Catholic gods and saints. An interview with a young woman who practices Santeria elaborated on the secrecy that became of the African slaves religion, she states “the slaves practiced their

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religion behind Churches, they weren't allowed to believe in orishas, so naturally they had to adapt" (Moreno).

By observing the saints of the Catholics, common threads began to arise from both religions, ones that they would then use as a leeway into being able to openly practice their religion. They realized that "both religions had high gods [and] humans that worshipped them"(Lefever, 319). The difference was that Africans worshipped orishas and Catholics worshipped saints. "So, under the constraints of their oppression, the slaves began to fuse... the two religions" (Lefever, 319) and corresponded their orisha with a specific saint. When the Yoruba "encountered other sacred powers- God the Father, God the Don, the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary" is when the infusion began to take shape. Out of these events developed this religion known as Santeria.

The slaves bought from Yoruba (southern Nigeria) were major carriers of the religious beliefs that "contributed to the development of Santeria" (Lefever, 320). The deities in traditional Yoruba ranged from 400-1700; some including Agayu, who was the saint of father, Babaluaye the saint for illness, and Eleggua the messenger saint- just to name a few. Other gods such as Ogun, who is the god of iron and war, Shango, the god of thunder and lightning and Yemaya, goddess of the sea and rivers were brought from Yoruba into the New World. Devotees praise Saints through prayer, dance and sacrifice. Reading through divination Santeros (priests) seek to find "the relationship between individual worshippers and the particular gods" (Andrews, 71). For example, Ochun is the Saint chosen to take care of Jasmine Moreno, a Santeria practitioner in NYC. As a devotee of Santeria she says "when you

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become a Santero, you become one with the Saints". In other words, Jasmine's chosen guardian is a deity known to seduce men; she is the most beautiful of the female orishas and is much taken with jewelry. "The story of my life" says Jasmine, as she feels that her personal qualities correspond with that of her deity.

Rituals are another important aspect of what the Africans brought to Cuba with their religion. Divination "is an expression of the power of ashe" (Lefever, 321). This ritual was utilized to get advice from the deities for everyday problems and to connect the spiritual forces with that of an individual. The Santeros who were able to connect to these spiritual forces assisted those with problems by "harmonizing their relationship with their gods" (Andrews, 72). The use of a variety of nuts, shells and other items to connect were common ways of using divination. Santeria is a faith in which practices were focused on "curing and healing purposes" (Torres and Whitten, 506).

A very controversial ritual that has caused much debate centuries ago as well as today is the use of sacrifices. It is ceremonial for the orishas to be fed; "by sacrificing animals" (Miller, 1993) devotees send them off to their deities. The worshippers first eat these offerings, however they can only eat them after the deities have "consumed the invisible ashe of the sacrifices" (Lefever, 321). Animals such as chickens, roosters, goats, sheep, pigeons and even bulls are sacrificed for the Saints. Every saint has a different preference of animal; whatever is appropriate for the orisha. Through these sacrifices "humans [express] their gratitude and praise and [implore] that the orishas continue the efficacious work" (Lefever, 321). After

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both participant and orisha have eaten the food, the blood of the animal is then sprinkled on sacred stones that represent an individual saint.

Unlike other religions that seem very similar to Santeria, Palo Monte, which originated in the Congo where “witchcraft is more common” (Andrews, 71), pales in comparison to the rituals of Santeria. Also, unlike the Congo religions that used natural based object for their rituals, Santeros “liked to have their figurines, their gods made of wood” (Andres, 71). The different forms of worship and rituals were “winning millions of new adherents, many of them white” (Andrews, 9) by the 1900s. So although this religion began as an African religion, with time other ethnicities and cultures would derive its peculiarity and adopt the religion. Aside from divination, and animal sacrifices, we come to a ritual very important to Santeria because of its importance to its spirits, and that is music and dance.

What is the relationship between the religion and music?

Bembe is the word used for the drum and dance festivals in Santeria. It is difficult to speak about music without the dance and likewise. As Moreno stated during her interview “music is really important to the deity’s. Deity’s used to be humans with flaws, so Yoruba brought their music to play in reenactment of each orisha.” From this it is known that music was a huge part of Santeria, so huge that festivals were “held in the basements, open patios, or living quarters of the santeros or santeras house” (Lefever, 321). Similarly to the food offerings for “Haitian, Cuban and Bahian worshipers, music and dance performance is the offering” (Chireau, 2007). And just like animal sacrifices, each deity also has their own dance, and music. The purpose of the bembe was in honoring the orishas. Worshipers play

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specific rhythms that act out the behavior of the orishas. In Lefever's article he states "Ogun, the orisha of iron, [his] pantomime [uses] shovels, machetes, picks, hammers, chains, keys etc." (321) Other dances for saints such as Ochosi, orisha of the hunt, has shouts and movements of bow and arrow use.

Music offered in festivals is a form of gratitude in itself for the Saints. Drums are the most common instrument played during Santeria festivals. The rhythms "are utilized to attain a sacred state of consciousness, manifested as a trance state or spirit possession" (Lefever, 322). Both music and dance were crucial in these spiritual possessions for it is believed that if the performance is done in accordance with the deity, the saint itself will inhabit the person and "if the party is big enough, [the saint would] dance heartily with the community" (Chireau, 2007). It is obvious that these deities love to party, and party with their own personal preference of music and style that is provided by worshippers. Saints-with their human personalities- is somewhat demanding and the community uses these rituals "to please and placate spirits, to heal afflicted members, to ward off future attacks and to receive the advice and criticism of prescient spirits who utter truths" (Chireau, 2007). In conjunction with thanking the Saints, asking for personal and communal advice and experiencing the personalities of the Saints, the African musical art is used to take worshippers through a spiritual journey, one that in a sense brings the deity to life.

What Countries is Santeria Practiced in?

When African slaves were brought into the New World in 1521, they were not all left directly in Cuba. According to a research conducted in 1969, "out of the total

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of 10 million Africans shipped to the New World as slaves, approximately 702,000 were sent to Cuba” (Lefever, 319). Santeria is a religion, which originated in Cuba by the Africans who were imported from Yoruba. In understanding how Santeria became a multi-national religion it was the “beliefs and practices of Santeria have diffused to many other countries, including United States” (Lefever, 328). Other countries included Haiti, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Brazil and even Colombia. Cuban immigrants “carried Santeria beyond the island” (Encyclopedia.com).

Events such as the exiles rushing into the United States after the Cuban Revolution brought over “900,000 Cubans to the United States after 1960” (Edmonds and Gonzalez, 101). Famous priests such as Poncho Mora also migrated into the United States in 1946, bringing many practitioners with him as well. Cubans who adapted to American life were still able to conserve much of the Cuban traditions and identities by continuing the practice of Santeria. Although Santeria is not a commercialized or an official religion, studies show that “estimates of the actual number of people committed to Santeria in the United States varies from 250,000 to five million” (Edmonds and Gonzalez, 102). Many of these practitioners are from Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Central and South American countries. Santeria continues to spread through “traveling elders, published texts, the internet, and face to face relationships”(Encyclopedia.com).

Cuba’s interrelationships with many other countries during the 1970s were partly the reason why Santeria traveled into other countries. The drug trafficking that was conducted between Colombian and Cuba in the 1960s to the 1970s gave

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way to Cuban religions and traditions deposited with the South American country.

From here, those who brought their beliefs and made contact with Colombian citizens shared their religion, thus spreading Santeria even further. Other countries that have had interrelationships with Cuba, most due to Fidel Castro's military reign were Jamaica, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and much more. All of these countries were in contact with the different cultures of Cuba, including those who believe in Santeria.

The Great Depression happening in Haiti during the 1920's and 30's brought many Haitians to the Dominican Republic. Therefor migrating their religion with them as well, however Haitians were seen as a threat to the Republic, and in the 1930's the regime of Rafael Trujillo denounced Voodooism as well as Santeria as a threat to the Catholicism of the Dominican Republic. His dictatorship "reached a climax in October 1937, when army units along the Haitian border, murder 15,000 Haitian immigrants" (Andres, 142). At this point many of these running Haitians sought haven in other countries, taking their religion along with them.

From the 1500's where Africans were forced to hide and congregate behind churches, to today's societal judgment off Santeria, this religion continues to be one of much secrecy. A *New York Times* article published in 1994 says, "Santeria's current image is exotic, to some even sinister." Perhaps it is the animal sacrificial rituals that have "the Human Society [condemning] its animal sacrifice" even "Hollywood generally portrays Yoruba practice, like voodoo, and other religion with roots in Africa, as spooky and villainous" (Miller, 1994). In the 1900's, with suspicion of black organizations and efforts to establish a "European identity" Santeria came

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under attack with the “proscriptions against the use of drums, and [elimination] of sorcery and witchcraft” (Edmond and Gonzalez, 100).

With much fire against Santeria and the constant disagreement of the religion, it is worth noting the transition from the secrecy of the religion from hundreds of years ago to modern day secrecy. Santeros and worshippers congregate in houses, homes, patios and private places where they cannot be seen or bothered by outside non-believers. This secrecy has made an impact on the practice of Santeria such as the decline of trance-possession rituals, “because consecrated bata drums, the playing of which are essential for possession, either are not available or are not played in order to avoid negative reactions from neighbors” (Fegever, 323). These changes are evident in the United States, where religions such as these are not seen in positive light. Jasmine Moreno reiterates the modern practices of Santeria “It’s basically a secret organization now, with so much social injustices and the misunderstanding of the religion it’s obvious why it’s not seen so often. I mean look at Disney, how they portray witchery, which is a religion closely tied to Voodooism. The misconfiguration of these religions on a mass media level creates what people should believe about our religion, instead of learning about our history to make true judgment.”

During the early 1900’s “Santeria transitioned from the public, to the private setting of the home... in more or less discreet and underground fashion” (Edmond and Gonzalez, 100). Approximately 90 years later, a United States Supreme Court banned the use of animal sacrifice, one that violated the freedom of religion for Santeria. It is true that Santeria is steadily growing in numbers. However much

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perspective of others has not changed, similar to the perspective of centuries ago. It seems unfair that Christianity Catholicism and other mainstream religions and be practiced easily, however Santeria and religions with African based roots are technically not allowed to be practiced freely.

Conclusion

Santeria has been a transgression and evolution of a religion that came from a continent who originated From the importation of the African turned slaves of Yoruba, to the secret adaptation where these believers had to disguise their gods by using Catholic saint names to represent their own, thus creating Santeria, the history has led to its practice now. It was crucial to view different aspects of Santeria, beginning with its origin, to better root out into smaller details of the religion. Through this research, a complexity of history arose, displaying insight the connections these religions have and how they spread and impact other places, people and religions.

As a student in NYC with diversity coming from all over the world, discussing and analyzing in complete depth the history of cultures seems like the best way to obtain a new type of acceptance and understanding. The origin, music, rituals, culture, migration illustrate the counter-reaction of a group of people being oppressed and how their form of secrecy and their need to express their religion has millions of loyal devotees to this one religion.

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