



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET

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# SANTERÍA IN CUBA

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### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

### The Santería Tradition in Cuba

*By Kirsten Lavery, Supervisory Policy Analyst*

#### Introduction

This factsheet highlights the Santería practice in Cuba, providing an overview of this tradition and detailing the religious freedom conditions of its practitioners. Santería is a syncretic religion based significantly in the traditions of the Yoruba and incorporating elements of Catholicism. Today, roughly 70 percent of Cubans observe one or more Santería or other religious practices based in an African tradition. Elements of Santería and its African roots permeate Cuban culture, including by influencing Cuban art, food, music, and dance.

Many Cubans can openly and freely practice Santería, including when interwoven with Catholicism. However, some Santería practitioners and religious leaders, especially those who are part of unregistered and independent communities, have experienced ongoing violations of religious freedom, including harassment, detainment, and repeated attempts by the government to co-opt their religion. While this factsheet is focused on the Santería community, the Cuban government's treatment of independent Santería practitioners and the impact of restrictive laws and policies on the Santería community's enjoyment of the freedom of religion or belief is illustrative of broader religious freedom conditions in Cuba.

#### Background

Afro-Cuban religions have long been an integral part of Cuban society. Santería is a syncretic religion *rooted* in the religious practices of the Yoruba people, who were brought as slaves to Cuba from the Congo Basin and West Africa, that incorporates elements of Catholicism. In early times, Santería *developed* and was practiced in secret, as *Catholicism* was the only religion permitted on the island by the Spanish colonial government. African gods were syncretized with Catholic saints and the religion adopted some Catholic religious practices. Practice of Afro-Cuban religions remained illegal even after the abolishment of slavery. Following the 1959 revolution, Santería continued to be practiced on the island, despite restrictions on religion. While these restrictions aimed to suppress all religions, the Cuban government particularly targeted Catholicism and Santería due to their importance to Cuban identity.

Today, Santería religious [practices](#) continue to be intermingled with Catholicism, with some interpretations requiring Catholic baptism for full initiation into the faith. [Santería practitioners](#) make physical offerings to saints or deities, known as *orishas*. Orishas typically have a Catholic counterpart. As one example, the Santería orisha Ochún is [syncretized](#) with the patron saint of Cuba, la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. While many Cubans blend the two religions, the Catholic Church does not officially [recognize](#) Santería as a religion. As the Santería faith developed in secret, the Santería community did not build houses of worship and instead operates through private homes with altars and informal societies. There is no centralized authority for the tradition.



Santería display in Trinidad, Cuba

Although there are no independent and authoritative sources for religious demography in Cuba, an [estimated](#) 70 percent of Cuba's 11 million people perform some type of Santería or other Afro-Cuban practice. It is further estimated that [60 percent](#) of Cubans self-identify as Catholic, and many self-identified Catholics [incorporate](#) Santería practices into their faith. These synergies between Santería and Catholicism make determining the number of Santería practitioners particularly difficult.

## Religious Freedom Violations

The Cuban government uses a system of laws and policies, surveillance, and harassment to control religious groups and undermine the freedom of religion or belief. Government authorities repressively enforce these restrictions to ensure tight control over religious leaders, members of religious communities, and others deemed threats to the Cuban government's agenda due to their advocacy or support for religious freedom.

Many Cubans can freely and openly practice Santería and celebrate its influence on Cuban culture. For those

who blend religions, there is also space for many to practice Catholicism. At the same time, independent Santería communities and practitioners whose beliefs and practices do not align with the Cuban government's agenda experience ongoing religious freedom violations. While the underground nature of the faith makes it difficult to obtain comprehensive information on the religious freedom conditions of Cuba's Santería community, this section provides an overview of ongoing or recent violations of the religious freedom of the independent Santería community and highlights representative examples of these violations based on available information.

### *Threat of Criminal Penalties due to Failure to Register*

In Cuba, all religious groups are [required](#) to register with the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), an entity within the Cuban Communist Party (CCP) operating out of the Ministry of Justice. Membership in an unregistered religious group is a crime. Given the omnipresent threat of criminal penalties, unregistered religious groups are particularly vulnerable and frequently subjected to harassment by the ORA and other government authorities in Cuba.

There are several distinct Santería communities on the island. One such group, the Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba, is [registered](#) with the ORA and allegedly government-controlled. The Free Yoruba Association of Cuba (Asociación de Yorubas Libres de Cuba, or "Free Yorubas") is an independent Santería community that was founded in 2012 by Santería practitioners who did not agree with the Yoruba Cultural Association. The Free Yorubas have refused to register with the ORA, not wanting to come under the influence of the Cuban government. The Free Yoruba's refusal to register has led to sustained harassment of this religious community and its leaders.

### *Harassment and Detention of Santería Religious Leaders and Practitioners*

Across Cuba, certain religious leaders are the target of government-sponsored harassment campaigns. This harassment extends to several Santería religious leaders and practitioners, particularly targeting members of the Free Yorubas. The Cuban government has [accused](#) this group of "destabilizing society" and [subjected](#) its leaders to arbitrary detentions and beatings, destruction of ceremonial objects, police monitoring, and searches-and-seizures without probable cause. The Free Yorubas have also reported surveillance by state authorities, raising [particular concern](#) that state officials allegedly have hacked

their social media accounts and used them to spread smear campaigns. These allegations fall in line with the [larger trend](#) of Cuban state officials using social media to harass and defame religious leaders.

Some Santería leaders were [pressured](#) to support the new constitution during the reform process that led to Cuba's April 2019 constitution. Religious leader and activist Alexei Mora Montalvo was [arrested](#) for collecting opinions on the draft constitution in November 2018. As government authorities continued their harassment campaign against Montalvo and his family, Montalvo [went](#) on a 15-day hunger strike in February 2019. In August 2020, Montalvo was again [arrested](#) for protesting against the Cuban regime. Montalvo has been subject to a travel ban and not allowed by the state to leave the island since 2018.

In 2019, at least one [Santería follower](#), 17-year old Dairon Hernández Pérez, was repeatedly harassed and pressured for refusing to enlist in the Cuban military based on his religious beliefs. Cuba's new constitution, passed in April 2019, makes it illegal to invoke [conscientious objection](#) to mandatory military service. In [March 2019](#), a Yoruba high priest, or babalawo, was detained, beaten, and taken to a remote location by a group of plain clothed paramilitary led by a military official.

According to [reports](#), the harassment of Free Yorubas increased in February 2020 after members of the community challenged Caridad Diego, the head of the ORA, to a public debate on freedom of conscience. State security [arrested](#) and threatened several high ranking Free Yorubas, including Eliaisys Almeida Pavón, Donaida Pérez Paseiro, and Loreto Hernández García, in February and March 2020. According to Pérez, state officials declared that “there is only one god, Fidel Castro” and used an obscenity about God and the Orishas. In [August 2020](#), a Free Yoruba priest, priestess, and other members of the community were violently summoned to the police station and threatened. In another incident, two members of the executive committee of the Free Yorubas were [arrested, held overnight, and beaten](#) in September 2020.

### ***Government Co-opting of Santería***

The Cuban government has frequently been accused of trying to co-opt Santería religious practice. This dynamic of co-optation and resistance has played out in tension over the Letter of the Year, which is an important [annual prophecy](#) in the Yoruba calendar that is issued by babalawos of different branches of Santería. The government-controlled Yoruba Cultural Association and the Miguel Febles Padrón Commission [issue](#) an annual Letter of the Year that is backed by the government and widely shared through government media. Their Letter of the Year has been disavowed by independent, unregistered groups, like the Free Yorubas. The Free Yorubas have [stated](#) that the babalawos who produce this letter lack the religious moral authority to do so. The group has also critiqued the predictions in the government-backed letter for being manipulated and used to push the Cuban government's agenda, by including, for example, recommendations that call on Cubans to “not participate in any conspiracy.”

The condemnation of government-appropriated Santería practice, including the Letter of the Year, has led to increased harassment of Santería leaders. In January 2018, the Free Yorubas issued a statement challenging the legitimacy of the Letter of the Year. Soon after, Alexei Mora Montalvo was forcefully [detained](#) by police. During his detention, police pressured Montalvo to join the Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba. Several other Santería religious leaders were [detained](#) in relation to their criticism of the prophecy that year. In another incident in 2019, state security officials [detained](#) a Santería leader and told him to “stop stealing the [Santería priests] from the revolution.” In 2020, there were reports that at least one member of the Free Yorubas received threats and was told to keep quiet at the start of the year.

### ***Regulation of Meeting Houses***

Santería practitioners [have](#) few religious buildings, as rituals and ceremonies typically take place in private homes outfitted with altars. During the coronavirus pandemic, some Santería practitioners have [continued](#) to hold intimate or individual home rituals. With access to the internet expanding in Cuba in recent years, others have started hosting [virtual rituals](#) on social media.



A Santería altar

Homes that host Santería ceremonies operate within the broader restrictions on religious buildings in Cuba, where it is illegal to hold religious activities in buildings not dedicated for religious use. The Cuban government uses a [2005 law](#) regulating meeting houses and house churches to impose complicated and repressive requirements on the private residences used as places of worship. This law also mandates registration according to strict procedures and empowers authorities to supervise and control the religious activities in private residences. Unregistered religious groups cannot apply to legalize the buildings used for religious services and risk penalties for congregating in unauthorized buildings.

In addition to facing the risk of sanctions for worshipping in unregistered buildings as an unregistered religious community, members of the Free Yorubas, according to some [reports](#), are intimidated during their religious services. As an example, a one city block radius around a meeting house is regularly surrounded by police cars during religious services.

### *Other Potential Restrictions on Religious Practice*

As part of the Santería religion, some practitioners participate in [animal sacrifices](#). These religious rituals have at times led to [conflict](#) between the religious community and Cuban state authorities. Following unprecedented protests and demands from animal rights activists, the Cuban government is in the process of passing a new [animal welfare law](#). It remains unclear what restrictions, if any, this law will place on Santería religious rituals.

### **Conclusion**

The Cuban government's restrictions on religion impact all religious communities on the island, including Santería practitioners. While allowing many Cubans to observe Santería and other Afro-Cuban practices, the Cuban government, at the same time, violates the freedom of religion or belief of independent Santería communities in a range of ways, including ongoing harassment, attempts to co-opt the faith for political purposes, and restrictions on members' ability to worship in meeting houses. Members of unregistered Santería communities, particularly the Free Yorubas, are particularly vulnerable and face ongoing threats of criminal sanctions. These violations are emblematic of the tactics used by the Cuban government to control faith and suppress independent religious communities.

USCIRF's [2020 Annual Report](#) provided several recommendations for the United States to support religious freedom in Cuba, including that the State Department maintain Cuba on its Special Watch List (SWL) for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Pursuant to this recommendation, on December 2, 2020, the State Department again [placed](#) Cuba on its SWL. The U.S. government must continue to promote religious freedom in Cuba and work to ensure that all religious and belief communities, including those who observe the Santería tradition, can freely practice their faith.



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