

*Santería*  
**From Africa to Miami Via Cuba;  
Five Hundred Years of Worship**

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*Santería* is an ancient religion with African roots. The slaves brought it to Cuba and the Cubans brought it to the United States where membership is estimated at 60,000 mostly Catholic Cuban immigrants. The religion is prevalent among Cubans living in Miami, where 7.1 percent of the Cuban population utilizes the services of a *santero*.<sup>1</sup> This may be a conservative estimate given the present cloak of secrecy that surrounds the religion, and the unwillingness of many to admit adherence to the cult.

*Santería* is controversial, particularly in South Florida, where the ordinances denouncing the practice. City of Hialeah (Florida) residents and the City Council have opposed the Church of Lukumí Babalú Ayé for its animal sacrifice rituals, spirit possession and perceived links with voodoo and black magic. The civil unrest may be sparking an unprece-

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dented church/state suit in the courts, since U. S. Federal Courts have never decided on the constitutionality of religious animal sacrifice.<sup>2</sup> The only laws regulating Afro-Caribbean religious practices exist in the Cayman Islands.<sup>3</sup> The ritual sacrifice of animals — mostly chickens and goats — is at the core of the civil lawsuit which cites, among other things, that animal sacrifice constitutes cruelty to animals and a public health hazard. However, “the annual feeding” of the gods through animal sacrifice must be considered one of the foundations of *Santería* from which important rituals and ceremonies emerge.<sup>4</sup> In the State of Florida such ritual sacrifice is especially exempted from the statutes so long as the death of the animal is virtually instantaneous.<sup>5</sup> Only time and the courts will decide the outcome of the dilemma between the church’s First Amendment rights of free expression and the state’s right to impose restrictions on religious conduct.

In the meantime, much can be done to inform the public and to lessen fear, ignorance and misinformation. The time is ripe to consider *Santería*, a Cuban religious cult of Nigerian and Catholic origins which has stood the test of time and banishment into foreign lands, and to follow its evolution from the backcountry in Cuba to its contemporary status among white, middle class suburbanites in Miami.

In the aftermath of the inauguration of the first *Santería* church in the City of Hialeah, Florida, and in view of rising public interest in religious and cultural phenomena, we hope to contribute to the body of knowledge on *Santería*. We will focus on factors which played key roles in the survival of African cultural patterns in Cuba as well as in Miami; including a brief examination of slavery, the Catholic Church, and the mass exodus of one million Cubans following the 1959 Cuban Revolution. Although we do not intend to delve into the innermost workings of *Santería*, this essay may stimulate the interested reader to consult the bibliography at the end as a guide to further reading.

### **The Diaspora.**

When the Africans were forcefully shipped across the Atlantic in the sixteenth century, they left behind a great deal of material culture: artifacts, cooking utensils, artwork and weapons. But they brought their gods. Oral tradition tells us that the gods arrived in Cuba in 1512 when the first slave ships sailed into port.

Shangó, the Yoruba god of thunder and other deities followed their children across the ocean to watch over them. We are told that Shangó in all his vanity, wanted his earthly children to continue honoring him

with his favorite foods, dances and ritual offerings, as did the sea goddess Yemayá, along with the love goddess Oshún, Elegguá the trickster, Obatalá the patriarch and Oggún the warrior.

Five hundred years later, the diaspora continues and thrives today in Miami. In 1980, faced with internal economic pressure, Fidel Castro expelled 125,000 Cubans from his island-nation through the Mariel Boatlift. This last immigration attracted media attention following rumors of newly arrived prisoners and mental patients. But later we learned the "Marielitos" were no different from earlier Cuban immigrants. Their aspirations, hopes and goals were the same as those of their predecessors, namely, to find work and to live in a democratic and free society. The main difference between Mariel refugees and the first Cuban immigrants was demographic; the 1980 Mariel refugees represented segments of the Cuban population which had been underrepresented in the past: the young working classes and the blacks.<sup>6</sup>

### Cultural and Historical Beginnings.

*Santería* is well known in Miami and in other Cuban-American communities, but it is less understood elsewhere in the United States. Even less is known about the religion prior to the abolition of slavery in colonial Cuba. The gap in the colonial literature has been attributed to class and race-conscious Cuban colonials who considered *Santería* a social and moral evil, a pagan cult unworthy of serious study or scholarship.<sup>7</sup> However, a surge in scholarship surfaced following the abolition of slavery when blacks were assimilated into society. The impetus for research on Afro-American cultures thus began with the works of Nina Rodrigues,<sup>8</sup> Arthur Ramos<sup>9</sup> and Roger Bastide in Brazil,<sup>10</sup> Melville J. Herskovits in Haiti and Dahomey,<sup>11,12</sup> Fernando Ortiz<sup>13</sup> and Lydia Cabrera in Cuba.<sup>14</sup>

The Afro-Cuban studies by Ortiz<sup>15</sup> and Cabrera,<sup>16</sup> considered classics among today's scholars, provide the foundation for our paper. Their writings span over a century of recorded observations of rituals, traditions and folktales among African peoples and their descendants in Cuba and Miami. In addition, current interest in Afro-Cuban-American studies is reflected in the works of at least three Cuban-born anthropologists living in Miami: Rafael Martínez,<sup>17</sup> Lydia Cabrera<sup>18</sup> and Mercedes Sandoval<sup>19</sup>, who continue to monitor the evolution of the cult in exile, where it has gained importance as a support system and mediating institutions for Miami Cubans and other Latin refugees. The greatest of all Afro-Cuban folklorists, Lydia Cabrera, was "led to her work by

European and Cuban intellectuals...," and it was these Black and white artists, scholars, and writers in the Afro-Cuban movement who transformed much of Cuba's attitude of suspicion toward Afro-Cuban culture into enthusiastic pride.<sup>20</sup>



Rarely seen ritual dress from the *Abakua* Society, a subgroup within the *Santería* religion.

Renewed interest in Santería took hold among worshippers and scholars alike shortly after 125,000 Cuban refugees arrived in Miami during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift. The majority of Mariel refugees eventually remained in Miami where they joined relatives and got on with the task of earning a living. The influx of new talent seemed to give impetus to the interest in the arts, literature, and drama. Thus, the Mariel refugees of the 1980s reawakened in the Cuban-American community a craving for the literature, art, music, and religion of their native land.<sup>T</sup>

### Slavery in the Americas.

Slavery in the Americas played a significant part in the development of *Santería*: Slavery was the process by which individuals were separated from their own culture and it provided the mechanism for culture contact between two fundamentally distinct societies.

Cuba holds a special place in Caribbean history, since slavery existed there almost until 1900.<sup>21</sup> In view of this, the first important fact to be borne in mind is the volume and continuity of the slave trade.<sup>22</sup>

The first African slaves reached the New World as early as 1502,<sup>23</sup> and large-scale introduction of African slaves to Cuba dates back to 1524, when the Spanish Crown allowed Cuban colonials to import 300 Africans to work in gold mines.<sup>24</sup> Unable to endure substandard work conditions, Cuba's Taino and Ciboney Indians (numbering 50,000) were quickly decimated by disease and ill-treatment; thus Cuba's need for slaves rose precipitously in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, when a free market economy and increased demand from Spain stimulated sugarcane and coffee production.<sup>25</sup>

Conservative estimates place the total number of slaves transported to the Americas at 9 million,<sup>26</sup> of these, 1.3 million reached Cuba roughly between 1512 and 1864.<sup>27</sup> Toward the end of the slave trade in 1871 one third of the Cuban population was black, including 528,798 "free colored" persons.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the slave trade continued long after slavery was abolished in 1888, when a new class of mercenary slavers formed to supply new shipments of Africans to receptive Caribbean plantation societies.

Tracing the ethnic origins of Afro-American slaves to their exact provenience in Africa has been a difficult task given the inaccuracy of archival records. For example, blacks taken from various regions in Africa were embarked in coastal ports and thereafter identified as originating from these ports and not from their true tribal or state

homesteads. Unfortunately, this misinformation seems to have been carried over into plantation records, which generally are considered incomplete sources of information on the slave trade.<sup>29</sup> Finally, while transport records and bills of sale are valid measures of the total number of Africans to reach Cuba during the slave trade before slavery was abolished in 1888, the validity of such documents after that date must be questioned because slavers often altered and destroyed any evidence of illegal transactions.

Centuries of political unrest among the major European powers, together with shifting sources of slave labor and the incomplete archival record all but impeded the study of African origins in the New World to the extent that one scholar believed that African retentions could be traceable only to the very end of the slave trade.<sup>30</sup>

A breakthrough in the study of African retentions in the New World occurred when researchers worked back in time and place to establish similarities between contemporary American and African ethnic groups. This criterion was first utilized in Brazil by Nina Rodrigues<sup>31</sup> and Arthur Ramos<sup>32</sup> by Fernando Ortiz in Cuba,<sup>33</sup> by Melville J. Herskovits in Haiti and Surinam<sup>34</sup> and by Bryan Edwards in Jamaica.<sup>35</sup>

Melville Herskovits utilized this method to identify three dominant African cultures in the New World:<sup>36</sup>

1. The Gold Coast Fanti-Ashanti, found in the British Antilles in Jamaica, Bahamas, Guiana and in the eastern United States.
2. Dahomey, found in the French Antilles in Haiti, Dutch Guiana, and in the state of Louisiana.
3. The Yoruba, as well as Bantu-speaking peoples found in Cuba and Brazil.

Fernando Ortiz first detected parallels between Cuban and African religious manifestations when he noticed strikingly similar masks and body ornaments worn by Cuban blacks and their distant brethren in Nigeria:

*...the masks were faithfully copied from those in use among African societies; the musical instruments are the same as those employed in Africa; and the names given to characters in the dance were those of (African) gods or spirits.<sup>37</sup>*

While studying the Lukumí of Matanzas, Cuba, and the Yoruba of Ife, Nigeria, William Bascom traced the ethnic origins of the former to the latter by documenting the simultaneous use of identical divination techniques and other rituals in both cultures' generations past the end



of the slave trade.<sup>38</sup> Bascom's case proves that complex segments of Nigerian customs were carried substantially intact from Africa to Cuba.<sup>39</sup>

The language and behaviors people shared in common in Africa and the New World left no doubt that southwestern Nigeria had been the birthplace of the great majority of Cuban slaves. Comparative studies of African and Afro-American societies therefore helped to fill in the gaps in the archival record and became the standard for establishing the ethnic origins of slaves in America<sup>40</sup> By documenting religious rites in Nigeria and in Cuba decades beyond the end of the slave trade, researchers established beyond the shadow of a doubt the common bonds between Cuban blacks and the Yoruba in southwestern Nigeria.<sup>41</sup>

### The Catholic Church

We've examined the impact of slavery on African religious and cultural retentions in the New World. The Church also played an important part in the evolution of *Santería* and other African culture traits among the Afro-Cubans, who, as slaves, encountered two types of religious environments in the colonies: Catholic and Protestant America.<sup>42</sup>

In Protestant America, the African slave was accepted as a member of the church following religious indoctrination. Missionary work eradicated Africanisms, or at best led to a "reinterpretation" of ideology and creed.<sup>43</sup>

In Catholic Latin America, on the other hand, the slave needed only to learn a few prayers and ritual gestures to be granted baptism. Prose-lytization was, broadly speaking, less intense, and African features survived more easily in Catholic America where slaves worshipped their gods surreptitiously during Catholic prayer group assemblies, or *cofradías*.<sup>44</sup>

As a result of the Catholic Church's approach to religious conversion, many African religions therefore coexisted with Catholicism in Latin America and the Caribbean. In addition, this mutual coexistence was made possible by the striking similarity in function and form between Catholicism and African beliefs, specifically the Yoruba religion, in that both ideologies acknowledge the existence of one unique God and creator who remains remote from mankind. It is mankind's remoteness from God which prompts the faithful to seek the aid of intermediaries like the saints, angels, and the African *orisha*, who

are empowered by the Almighty to grant favors and to restore health on His behalf.

Another important similarity between the Yoruba and Catholic religions is in the parallel function of gods and saints who mediate between men and God by overcoming the forces of evil, directing nature and restoring health. Hence the name *Santería*, cult of the saints, also known as the *Lukumí* religion which according to Bascom probably derives from the Yoruba greeting: "oluku Mi," meaning "my friend."<sup>45</sup>

Martínez and Wetli describe this process as the blending of creeds.<sup>46</sup> *Santería* has been noted for its flexibility and lack of dogmatism,<sup>47</sup> and although parallels between gods and saints vary among region, cult and time period, the match between saints and gods almost always corresponds to similarities in outward appearance, personality, life-style factors (such as healing) and in personal tastes in clothing, music, dancing and dining. For example, according to Catholic hagiography, the Virgin of Regla shares many traits in common with the Yoruba goddess of the sea Yemayá and both are clothed in blue and white, which symbolizes further their identification with water. In other cases, the therapeutic or social functions of the divinities provide the correspondence, thus African Shangó and Catholic Saint Bárbara fuse into a dual spirit because they share a mutual symbolic identity with the natural forces of thunder and lightning.

Finally, the close alignment between Catholic and African beliefs has been attributed to the similar hierarchical structure of the religions; i. e., the trilogy comprising the chain of worship, with men and women at the bottom of the pyramid, guided by the priesthood who in turn look to a family of deities who answer to one Almighty God. Not only has the cult evolved from the blending of African and Catholic ritual elements; *Santería* today also contains native American Indian elements, as well as secular European influences dating to 19th century French spiritism.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Evolution of *Santería* the rural/urban dichotomy.**

Like a royal palm swaying in the tropical wind, *Santería* has endured despite centuries of Catholicism, the slave trade and strong infusions of foreign beliefs, ever flexible and adaptable to changing social conditions. At the root of the survival of Afro-Catholic religious cults in the Caribbean and in Latin America were the powerful bonds formed by slaves who shared common language and ethnic traits and who estab-



lished networks of religious associations which served to foster transmission of languages and traditions.<sup>49</sup> These religious centers — temples, schools and mutual aid societies, or “nations” — enhanced solidarity among slaves and reinforced the survival of African cultural patterns among them and their descendants.

The demographic distribution of slaves in urban and rural Cuba also influenced the nature and degree of African retentions. Santería flourished in the Cuban capital of Havana and in other towns in Western Cuba. To assess the impact of urbanization on acculturation, Herskovits compared the retention of Africanisms to settlement patterns in the New World from rural areas to urban townships.<sup>50</sup> Syncretism, or the blending of cultural traits, took hold in the urban areas where life conditions were conducive to carrying on customs and beliefs.



**The Church of the Lukumí Babalu Aye, the first public worship center associated with Santería in South Florida, formerly located in Hialeah.**

Bastide also looked at settlement patterns in 1971, and wrote:

...[The Lukumi] were restricted to the towns; in the country, they could only exist if they spread over an entire district, which seems to have been rare.<sup>51</sup>

In the rural areas then, plantation slaves lived in relative isolation from other plantations, and this lack of inter-plantation interaction evidently precluded the maintenance of common religious and ethnic associations. Religious nations flourished in the towns:

...[where] wealthy families maintained an army of servants. This disproportion was advantageous to the black servants, who were able to retain their customs regarding food habits, associations, festivities, religious rites, etc.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, urban slaves had better access to ritual gatherings in the cities where houses were closely-packed, than out in the country where the rural slave population was distributed among relatively isolated plantations. Religious syncretism became more pronounced in the towns where slaves, freed blacks and their descendants formed associations, and where the anonymity of city life fostered participation in ceremonies in the guise of the Catholic mass. Rural blacks, on the other hand, had to hold secret meetings at night and away from the plantations and overseers, and as a result, *Santería* tended not to flourish out in the countryside where there were many barriers to its free expression.<sup>53</sup>

Other important economic factors came into play in the city, such as access to steady sources of income for priests' fees. Burns noted the African influence permeating towns throughout the Caribbean where blacks worked as domestic servants, peddlers, mechanics, and artisans whose urban living offered ample opportunities for practicing *Santería*.<sup>54</sup>

In brief, the development of Afro-American religions differed greatly among rural and urban Blacks, Aand among Protestant and Catholic America; and although Africanisms prevailed in cities and the countryside all over the New World, they have and they continue to prosper in the city.<sup>52</sup>

### And the Gods Move On...

The immigration of *santeros* and the faithful during the past three decades since the Cuban Revolution has established *Santería* wherever large Cuban communities exist, and a rise in religious activity has been documented in the Greater Miami Metropolitan area, where 600,000 Cubans now reside.<sup>56</sup> Martíñez and Wetli anticipated that an increase in cases of *Santería* ritual involving animal sacrifice and grave robberies would take place shortly after the Mariel Boatlift in 1980, and data from the records of the Miami-Dade County Examiner's Office indeed show a rise in the number of reported cases of grave robberies and animal sacrifice between 1980 and 1982.<sup>57</sup>

One of the questions we raised concerns the evolution of the cult from its Yoruba beginnings to its present status as a religion of the white middle class. In Cuba, *Santería* was prevalent in the lower economic

stratum, although Sandoval documents the participation of members of the middle class.<sup>59</sup> And in exile, *Santería's* growing popularity among Latins in Miami can be linked directly to the changing needs of the immigrant population, among whom many find in *Santería* a:

*link to the past and a positive means of coping with many of the adjustment pressures imposed by the new social, economic and political order.*<sup>59</sup>

Although early Cuban Santería worshippers consisted of slaves and their descendants, its popularity eventually crossed socioeconomic lines. *Santería* lore gradually reached all levels of Cuban society following generations of intimate contact between black domestic servants and white middle upper class families. However, the process also was hastened by the Cuban colonials' reliance upon the santero for spiritual and medical advice in cases where neither Catholic priests nor medical practitioners obtained results.

When Fidel Castro rose to power and reconstructed Cuban society by establishing a socialist government, close to one million persons, representing one tenth of the population fled the country. Unable or unwilling to return to a communist Cuba, many Cubans have endured psychological, social and economic strains. The pressures of living in exile, including the language barrier, downward social and economic mobility, separation from family and homeland and anxiety about what the future may bring have instilled in many estranged Cubans the need to strengthen socio-cultural practices and beliefs.

Consequently, *Santería* ritual has become increasingly popular among exiles living in Florida and elsewhere. Sandoval attributes the popularity of the religion to its functional role.<sup>60</sup> *Santería* seems to be taking the place of the vanishing Cuban extended family by bringing together individuals who relate to each other as kin during the course of planning and participating in festivities and other social gatherings.

Another reason for the growing popularity of *Santería* among Cuban immigrants in South Florida can be attributed to the activities of the Vatican in the 1960s. When the Vatican revised the Catholic hagiography and repudiated several saints who were previously revered in Cuba, including St. Lazarus (Babalú-Ayé) and St. Barbara (Shangó), many Catholics simply joined the ranks of *Santería* to continue to worship their favorite saints.<sup>61</sup>

The anonymity of exile makes it easy for many to practice *Santería* in relative safety; Latins are not eager to admit involvement in the cult because doing so tends to reinforce the stereotype many non-Latins

have about people who believe in *Santería*; but Latins are more tolerant of such behaviors and are very likely to seek the aid of all healers, including priests, physicians and *santeros*.<sup>62</sup>

Over the centuries, social, cultural, and political factors have altered the form and function of the cult. We've examined the roles played by slavery, the Catholic Church and the Cuban exile experience in shaping the current status of *Santería*. Of equal importance has been the impact of *Santería* and other Hispanic traits on the development of Miami.

The Latinization of the Greater Miami area began during the 1960s migration of Cuban exiles, although constant waves of other Latins seeking refuge from political turmoil in their countries continue to reinforce the view of Miami as a gateway to the Americas.

Miami has evolved into a unique city with a distinct Latin flavor as a result of its geography and demography. Latin-owned businesses, health clinics, Spanish-language media and banking are but a few of the many services and products now being marketed by Miami Latins to other Latins and non-Latins throughout the Americas.

The commercialization of Latin businesses and services is a relatively recent development in a population that is accustomed to approaching professional interactions in a more personal and informal manner. The shift in interpersonal relations among clients seeking services, for example, is evident in the case of *Santería*, where cash has replaced gifts of food, clothing or housewares for payment of services rendered.

The proliferation of *botánicas*, those Cuban flower and religious stores found along 8th Street and Flagler Street in Miami, have no precedent in Cuban history.<sup>63</sup> *Botánicas* are retail outlets specializing in herbs, roots and religious items for use by *santeros* and their clients in healing rituals and special ceremonies. We have mentioned the rise in *Santería* ritual following the 1980 Mariel Boatlift which introduced new *santeros* and helped to renew interest in the cult among Cubans living in Miami. Even a cursory review of the listings in the Miami telephone directory under "Religious Goods" shows significant statistical increases in the number of *botánicas* since the Mariel Boatlift. In 1980, only twelve such outlets were listed in the Miami directory, whereas close to forty now appear in the 1987-88 directory, representing a 233 percent increase in seven years.

Although *botánicas* are seen as Cuban specialty stores, this was not the case in pre-Castro's Cuba, where *botánicas* did not thrive to the same extent as in Miami.<sup>64</sup> According to eyewitness accounts, curative . 11.

As they look towards Cuba for signs of a return to democracy, many exiles rely upon *Santería* to make the passage of time tolerable. Thus, the syncretic process continues, but initiation fees are high, and upwardly mobile Cubans perceive *Santería* as a glamorous luxury.

Unfortunately, exploitation of worshippers has become a reality as unscrupulous self-proclaimed priests target the needs of desperate souls. Nonetheless, as long as suffering prevails, people will continue to seek relief, whether in the form of magic or religion.<sup>66</sup> In view of this, *Santería* shall prevail as long as it continues to fulfill the needs of Cubans and other Latin immigrants, refugees and exiles.

Loss of land and country, severed family ties and economic as well as social hardship are contributing factors to the popularity of *Santería* in Miami. Although there have been studies on *Santería* in places like New York,<sup>67</sup> research is needed to determine if Sandoval's findings are valid in other American cities with large Cuban communities. It will be interesting to trace the flexibility of the religion with time and to test its ability to heal the alienated and the emotionally distressed.

There is little doubt that the future course of *Santería* will influence the way Floridians feel about the basic laws of religious freedom and the rights of states to impose restrictions on religious conduct. Although the legal fate of Pichardo's "dream of a public *Santería* Church remains unresolved, one thing remains certain. Whatever happens to Pichardo's church, *Santería* is a centuries-old religion that will endure,"<sup>68</sup> especially in a city like Miami, which provides fertile ground for the continued growth and blending of multiple cultures.<sup>67</sup>

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