

### Santeria: A Branch or its Own Tree?

Santeria is an example of how religious and cultural forms originated from Yoruba have not only survived but flourished in a new environment. It is known as “Regla de Ocha” (rule of law of the orisha), which was the religion of the people who became known as Lucumi in the Spanish American colonies (Ayorinde 2009). When they were extirpated from their home slaves carried with them their deities called orishas and sought to preserve its practices in spite of being forced to convert to Catholicism. However, behind the veneer of Catholicism, Afro-Cubans kept their religion alive by syncretizing their deities with Christian saints. It not only provided enslaved Africans a sense of unity in resisting both assimilation and despair in a new land but allowed them to preserve a vital aspect of the identity they left behind. However, due to the parallel cosmology between both practices, Santeria has been falsely misinterpreted to be a branch of the Catholicism doctrine, when in fact is a religion of its own seeing no dichotomy between sacred and secular.

The word “Santeria” is a Spanish word that means devotion and “worship of saints” (González-Wippler 10). There is no unified body of written work that can be referred to as a sacred text of the Lucumi religion, but rather is transmitted from generation to generation by priest and priestesses as part of an “oral tradition” (Isasi-Díaz 159). This tradition has many *patakies* (sacred stories) that serve as parables and proverbs that embody the teachings of the religion. The priests memorize and study them as part of their religious training, and then teach them to their disciples. Santeria does not use a central creed for its religious practices. Their rituals and ceremonies take place in “house-temples” or houses of saints which are mostly the homes of initiated priests and priestesses. The initiated priests build shrines to different orishas in their homes, creating a place for worship called an *igbodu* (altar). In order to become a santero or

santera (priest or priestess of santeria), the initiator has to go through an extensive initiation process that usually takes a week. To begin, the initiator goes through a cleansing ritual in which his head is cleansed with specific herbs and water, following a traditional pattern of movements into the scalp of the head. However, if the person that wishes to be initiated needs healing, a different step is performed in which instead of a cleansing the santeros “bless the head” of the initiator with coconut water and cotton (Ayorinde 212). Once the first step is performed, there are four major initiation rituals that follow – obtaining the “elekes (beaded necklace), receiving Los Guerreros (the Warriors), making Ocha (Saint), and Asiento (ascending throne)” (Ayorinde 213). The main principle of Santeria is to help individuals “live more in harmony” with themselves and the world around them (De La Torre 5). The concept of *ache*, the spiritual energy present in the universe, is central to their practices. The main quest for practitioners of Santeria, santeros, is to acquire more *ache* and maintain it through attention and ethical behavior to their spiritual practices. They vehemently believe that this will allow them to live good lives and evolve as human beings.

Santeria was born as a powerful coping mechanism and strategy of resilience. The religion is known for combining elements of the Western African Yoruba beliefs with Roman Catholicism. Because of the enslavement of tribal kings and community leaders, religious leaders and their followers were no longer free people to worship their own gods nor to follow the customs they considered fit. Instead they were forced to devote to an unfamiliar god their ancestors did not know surrounded by saints. In spite of being forced to convert to Catholicism slaves continued to further their practice in a clandestine way. In their quest to do so they used their wit to deceive their deities by comparing and syncretizing them with the Catholic saints to avoid colonial persecution. Thereby, since its beginnings, the slaves used Santeria as “a

deceptive tool to escape the Catholic religion” imposed by their masters which at the time consisted of Spanish officials colonizing the island of Cuba (Rausenberger 154). In doing so, the Yoruba slaves continued to practice their traditional rituals filling the spiritual void caused by the reinstitution of their lives as slaves and the loss of their customs. Slaves converted each orisha to a Catholic saint counterpart, whose general attributes, issues, or domains for which they are invoked are perceived as being similar, forming “a syncretic belief with a parallel cosmology” (McCalman 205). As time passed and Santeria evolved, some orishas have ceased to have active cults in Cuba, indicating a “diminishing knowledge of their rituals” as a result of the “societal conditions in the island that have made them less relevant,” leading them to worship mostly those that apply to their society and socioeconomic needs (Rausenberger 158). One of those being Ochun, which is considered as one of the most powerful Yoruba goddesses, syncretized with “La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre,” a Catholic Saint who is considered the “patroness of Cuba” (Isasi-Díaz 159). These connections enabled the slaves to readapt their practices based on their needs while faithfully upholding their African-belief system, by worshipping Ochun while pretending to worship a Catholic saint. Their ability to resist oppression was fortified by their collective reliance on their orishas for guidance and strength.

According to oral traditions, Chango, the lord of thunder, is the third king of the city of Oyo in Nigeria, and the fourth king of Yoruba. His reign lasted seven “violent” years (De La Torre 64). Out of all the orishas Chango is the most human, displaying intense passion and emotion, which made him “loved by the people” (González-Wippler 40). Chango had great magical powers, he was “fascinated with magic” which incited him to make use of his powers recklessly (De La Torre 64). Among Chango’s enemies was his brother Oggun. Oggun had an incestuous relationship with their mother Yemmy, and when Chango found out he swore to take

revenge. He devised a plan to seduce Oya, his brother's wife and orisha of the cemetery, and humiliate him with the goal of making him feel the same sentiments of treason and disgust Chango felt. When Oggun found out he lashed his rage onto his brother, and the two fought until Oya stepped in and brought an end to the battle. However, from that day, Chango and Oggun were not brothers anymore, but mortal enemies with an ongoing enmity that has lasted long after their death.

Due to the animosity between him and Ogun, Chango could never use iron to forge his weapons, and had to employ other materials like wood to build them. Even his emblem, a double-headed ax called *oshe*, is made of wood. One day, during an irresponsible experimentation of his powers, Chango "inadvertently" caused a thunderstorm that destroyed his palace mutilating many of his wives and children (González-Wippler 40). According to the legend, the weight of what he had done was too much to bear and drove Chango to go into the forest and hang himself. He was the only orisha to have experienced death. It is believed that when his enemies "danced upon his death," Chango caused a series of thunderstorms that devastated the city of Oyo, for which many sacrifices were made in his honor and his title was born as "Obakoso, the king did not hang" (González-Wippler 40). Because of this, he represented thunder, lightning and electricity, and is known for his powers of divination, his bravery and "womanizing" (De La Torre 64). His colors are red and white, and his *eleke*, sacred necklace, is made of alternating beads of these colors. Chango likes bananas, red palm oil, and *amala* (corn meal dumplings) and lives in a wooden bowl placed on a pedestal. He is propitiated with apples, bananas, roosters and on "special occasions" with ram, "his sacred animal" (González-Wippler 44). Whenever a santero wishes to "attract Chango's attention" he shakes his maracas, which are a musical instrument characteristic of the Caribbean with seeds or dried

beans inside a shell mounted on a wooden handle (González-Wippler 44). Chango as the Lord of Thunder is believed to be identified with Saint Barbara in the Catholicism faith because she has “a cup in one hand” (Chango’s mortar), “a sword in the other” (his ax), and a “castle at her feet” (González-Wippler 44). In addition, her colors like Chango’s are red and white. According to Roman Catholicism faith, Barbara was a princess imprisoned in a tower by her father because of her Christian faith. One day when she refused to renounce her faith, his father drew his sword and beheaded her. Upon killing his daughter, he was struck by a bolt of lightning, hence making Saint Barbara “the patron saint of lightning” (De La Torre 66). Thereby, believers in Santeria hold the conviction that Chango has manifested himself among Catholics as Saint Barbara.

The youngest and the most beloved of all the orishas in Cuba is Ochun. She is the goddess of love embodying sexuality and feminine beauty, and ruler of the fresh-flowing water of the rivers. To practitioners of Santeria, she is the “love which exists between two individuals,” and the “chemistry that sparks sexual passion” (De La Torre 74). Legend says she is irresistible to humans and to orishas when she dances, “rubbing her honey dipped fingers across the lips” of whomever she wishes to seduce to her favor (González-Wippler 31). Ochun has been romantically involved with many orishas, and although in other religions this may be seen as promiscuous, in Santeria, eroticism is recognized as “a powerful force” (De La Torre 74). She was created by Olodumare with the quest of cultivating sweetness and love in others. According to “sacred stories,” Ochun journeyed from Africa when her African children were forced to migrate to Cuba. Even though she demanded an explanation from Yemaya, there was no power that could prevent her “catastrophy” (De La Torre 74). Because of the source of support that she brought to the enslaved African in their adaptation process, Ochun is highly praised in Cuban culture. Ochun loves silks, perfumes especially sandalwood scents, fans and mirrors, Cuban-style

tamales, river crayfish and her “favorite treat” is honey (González-Wippler 33). Her colors are yellow and gold, and therefore her *eleke* is made up of yellow and honey colored beads. Due to her vast experience in relationships, she is in the best position of all of the orishas to offer guidance in complex interpersonal relationships. Ochun is the sensual orisha who “makes sure babies are conceived” promoting fertility, and also the one who “helps” with female reproductive organs’ illnesses (González-Wippler 33).

Ochun manifests herself in Catholicism as a “symbol of hope in La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre” (De La Torre 75). It is believed that three men went rowing on Cuba’s Nipe Bay in search for salt. After waiting on a fierce storm that impacted the island, they stumbled upon a carved statue of Virgin Mary with a yellow embroidered dress, a child on her hand, and at her feet an inscribed phrase claiming, “I am the Virgin of Chastity” (De La Torre 75). They took her to El Cobre where her name was derived. Due to the similarities to the story and characteristics, Ochun was syncretized with La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, and became in Santeria the declared “patron saint” (De La Torre 75). However, even though they are syncretized with one another, Santeria nor Catholicism show parallel practices in their admiration towards the saints, being that for a santero a saint represents a god, and for Catholics an admirable Christian.

Practitioners of Santeria are defamed of being guilty of “the sin” of idolatry due to their worship of the saints as masks of the orishas (De La Torre 214). Many Christians, especially Catholic Christians have attempted to draw the line of what separates worship and veneration in their quest to differentiate how human beings and God should be revered. Upon this delineation they believed that individuals, like saints, are definitely worthy of remembrance and upmost honor but made it clear that “only God should receive human adoration and worship” (McCalman 203). For instance, Catholic Christians believe that Saint Barbara should be held in

high regard and respected because of her unbreakable faith and strong convictions, but they consider that to praise her in the same way as God is highly inappropriate.

From a Christian standpoint, Santeria's emphasis on the saints and the extremity of its rituals appear to be "practiced in the same magnitude as that of God" given by the degree of reverence and offerings of its practitioners (De La Torre 215). Christians share the conviction that "idolatry" is the worship of any physical object as a god, and because of this belief, they view the santera's or santero's veneration of otanes and other sacred objects present in their altars as "idolatry." However, this belief seems to be dependent on how Santeria's practices are understood in the eyes of the Christians. Devotees of Santeria when worshipping saints view themselves as worshipping the orishas in disguise, an idea that dates back to the very beginnings of the religion. Thereby, in worshipping the otanes and objects what they argue to be worshipping is not the inanimate object itself but the presence of their orishas in them. They do not credit the object itself with creating the earth or having powers, but rather believe that "their view of the gods is simply different from Christianity's view of God" (McCalman 204). Santeros neglect the main premise of Christianity that salvation occurred through Jesus Christ, and rather believe that is in actuality a myriad of gods directing humans through "never-ending life cycles" (McCalman 204). Therefore, due to the distinctive inherent beliefs between core of the two practices, Santeria should be interpreted as an independent religion cutting its ties with the Catholic faith.

In terms of religious beliefs in the dichotomy of flesh and spirit, Santeria holds the body to a higher degree than Christian practices. The Catholic doctrine argues that there is a clear contrast between the importance of body and soul. They hold the conviction that the body is merely an "obstacle" that prevents individuals from "achieving their full spiritual potential" and

therefore it should be regarded as such (De La Torre 218). From their standpoint, the spirit should be cherished, protected and elevated with pious religious acts for it connotes “power” while the body is “doomed to death” (De La Torre 219). Meanwhile devotees of Santeria believe that there should not be a difference between body and soul. They dispute that the body is just as important if not more important than the soul, and that the latter should not be held as an intangible form of “absolute power” by individuals. For santeros, to be embodied is desirable and highly praised because it contributes to their *ache*. In fact, they regularly hold special ceremonies where the orishas participate in the “possession of their ‘children’” by “mounting” a santero’s body converting him or her to a *caballo* (horse) (Ayorinde 14).

Devotees of Santeria believe that this “possession” can only be achieved through the body, emphasizing its importance for allowing direct communication with the orisha. Santeros perform different dancing ceremonies for specific orishas. When one of them enters into a “state of possession” they all chant to the orisha screaming, making a call for him or her to “come down” into the body (Ayorinde 14). These traditional ceremonies and beliefs are completely different from those forged upon by the Catholic doctrine. In Santeria, the body is perceived as a platform, instead of an “obstacle,” for their gods to come through and communicate their thoughts and wishes. For santeros, the trance possession of their bodies is a state where their “spirit is loss,” where only the body allows sacred union between the them and the gods (De La Torre 219). While Catholic Christians hold the preservation of the spirit as the ultimate purpose, Santeria does not view the spirit of individuals as important or absolute, and rather consider its temporal loss beneficial to their community, for which allows the bodies to serve as host and missionaries of their orishas. Their conflicting views in basic concepts of body and soul and the

respective perception in their significance elucidates intrinsic differences between both Santeria and Catholicism that corroborates to the individuality of their practices.

Santeria does not focus on the shedding of blood for atonement purposes, but rather to “feed and nourish” the orishas (De La Torre 212). In Christian tradition, blood is shed, sometimes literally and sometimes symbolically with the purpose of atoning for the “sins of humans” (De La Torre 212). Christians argue that “the life of the flesh is in the blood,” but according to the bible if any person “drinks blood of any kind, I [God] will set my face against that person and cut the person from my people,” thereby making this act forbidden in the Catholic religion (De La Torre 213). Santeria on the other hand claims that drinking blood is a “necessary” component in rituals to “empower” and persuade the orishas to assist their devotees (Ayorinde 13). Due to the misinterpretation of its practices, Christians believe that Santeria is falsely portraying their catholic practices and violating a biblical mandate. However, santeros cannot share the mandate if they do not have the same outlook. Instead, they share a different perspective that the Catholic Christians have failed to consider. For santeros, after the possession, once the person becomes the “horse,” the orishas are the ones who are really drinking the blood, “for all blood is theirs” not the possessed person whose spirit “is not there” (Ayorinde 14). Practitioners of Santeria should not be targeted or criticized for a “sin” they didn’t commit. They argue that this false relationship of the two religions where one is taken as the derivative the other, allows for erroneous accusations that arise from the Catholic doctrine. Devotees of Santeria believe that they cannot be accused of breaking a mandate they do not hold to be true, thereby reinforcing the claim that is imperative for their religious practice to be considered as one entity.

Due to the roots of Santeria, and the need of its creators to maintain their doctrines by syncretizing their orishas to Catholic saints, the religion has been wrongly misinterpreted as a branch of Christianity instead of a religion of its own. Santeria is a religion that does not belong to a monotheistic order, but rather one that grew to unite the exiled. Unlike Catholicism, it does not uphold a dichotomy of what is secular and sacred, depicted with their use of homes as religious sacred places, their lack of sacred text, and the worldly aspects of their religious ceremonies. As catholic Christians witness the growth of Santeria in Cuba they feel the need to delineate and defend their monistic practices. What the Catholic doctrine have failed to comprehend, is that while Santeria inevitably borrowed and readapted the saints of the Catholicism faith, it flourished being a completely different religion with distinctive practices and because of this needs to be perceived as independent.

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