

Santería: From Slavery to Slavery



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This, my second essay on Santería, is necessitated for two reasons. One, requests came in for more information about the religion; and two, responses to the first essay indicated strong disagreement with my views.

I will admit that my exposure to Santería,¹ at that point, was not as thorough as was needed. Now, however, I am relying on a number of books about the religion, all written by decided proponents, plus personal discussions with a broad spectrum of people. In addition, I have had more time to process what I learned about Santería as I interacted with the following sources: (1) *Santería the Religion*, by Migene Gonzalez-Wippler, (2) *Santería: African Spirits in America*, by Joseph M. Murphy, (3) *Santería: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America*, by Miguel A. De La Torre, (4) *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*, by A. B. Ellis, (5) *Kingdoms of the Yoruba*, 3rd ed., by Robert S. Smith, (6) *The Good The Bad and The Beautiful: Discourse about Values in Yoruba Culture*, by Barry Hallen, and (7) many articles that came up in a Google search on the term "Santería," from varying points of view.

My title for the essay, "From Slavery to Slavery," did not come easily. I hope to be as accepting and tolerant of other belief systems as I can be. However, the conviction I retained after my research was one I knew would not be appreciated by those who identified with Santería. Santería promises its adherents freedom but succeeds only in bringing them into a kind of spiritual, emotional, and mental bondage that is as devastating as the slavery that originally brought West Africans to the New World in the first place.



Left: A photograph of slaves in chains, probably somewhere in East-Africa.²

Religion can be healthy and good, but it can also be bad – toxic, cultic, and dangerous. To impart the extent to which I believe this to be so in Santería, following is a lengthy but necessary laying out of the basic facts and tenets of this religion.

A brief history of the worship of the orishas

Some say the roots of what came to be called Santería in the New World lie in Egypt, or Greece, or Rome, even medieval Europe, but certainly it goes back to West Africa, primarily in what are now the nations of Togo, Benin, and Nigeria. The Yoruba people, who settled in these regions about A.D. 1000, had a belief system that brought together many strains of animistic concepts and which resulted in a coherent religious worldview. Animism is the belief that "spirits" inhabit the earth – in its rocks, plants, streams, animals, mountains, valleys – indeed all that is natural, and that these can be appealed to, interfered with, communicated with, defended against, and manipulated. It is the most widespread of all religious systems and has the most adherents, without those adherents necessarily understanding their relationship to it.

Olodumare is the name usually given to the one supreme god of Santería. Olodumare is almighty and the source of life. All things are said to come from him, and to him all things are to return. In a way, the doctrine combines monotheism (a belief in one god) and monism (one supreme being who is the *all*). Various Pataki's³ of the orishas – stories of the gods and goddesses of the Yoruba religion, including Olodumare – remind one of the foibles of the ancient Greek deities who combined both divine and human traits.

Olodumare is said to be incarnated into the world through "ashé," a creative force, energy, or power that may be obtained by worship and sacrifice to the orishas, or as most know them, the saints.

Right: Dance staff in honor of the orisha Eshu



African slaves brought to the New World

In 1511, the first African slaves were brought to Cuba from Hispaniola, present day Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and these African slaves brought the orishas with them. In 1521, African slaves started being transported directly to Cuba; the slaves ultimately worked producing primarily sugar and coffee.



Left: Slave market in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, circa 1824⁴

Practitioners of Santería in Cuba were under pressure to hide their Yoruba religious concepts, so they learned to mask or merge their faith with that of the Roman Catholic Church. Already in place in that Church was the concept of the immortality of the soul, which led to prayers and offerings made to the dead. The churches were full of carved and painted images of departed people who had been declared saints, but who could, if handled rightly, grant requests.

Masking the Yoruba deities with the Catholic saints was a means of keeping the old religion alive, even if it meant giving new names to the orishas. Catholicism was the seedbed for the survival of the orishas.

Right: A colonial officer watches people at work on a Caribbean agave and sisal plantation.⁵



The Catholic Church allowed ethnic associations – Cabildos – to form and develop, wherein African dancers worshiped before Catholic images, mostly the Virgin and the older saints. This, combined with the blindness of clergymen who did not understand what they were seeing, made certain the West African slaves could keep their spiritual identity.

It was not exactly a form of syncretism, because the belief systems were not combined or inter-twined; rather Spanish Catholicism was a cover to continue worshiping the old gods and goddesses without upsetting or alarming the Catholic hierarchy.

The Yoruba practitioners identified each orisha with a Catholic saint. *Obatala* became known as Our Lady of Ransom (the virgin Mary); *Eleggua* with Anthony of Padua, Martin of Porres, Benito, the Holy Infant of Prague, and the Holy Child of Atocha; *Orunla* with Francis of Assisi, St. Phillip, and St. Joseph; *Chango* with St. Barbara, St. Mark, St. Jerome, St. Elijah, St. Expeditus, and St. Bartholomew; *Ochosi* with St. Norbert, St. Albert, St. Hubert, St. James; *Oggun* with St. Peter, St. James (in Santiago), St John the Baptist, St. Paul, the Archangel Michael; *Babalú-Ayé* with Lazarus; *Yemaya* with Our Lady of Regla; *Oshun* with Our Lady of Charity; *Oya* with Our Lady of Candelaria, St. Teresita; *Osain* with St. Sylvester, St. John, St. Ambrose, St. Anthony Abad, St. Joseph, St. Benito; *Aganyu* with St. Christopher, Archangel Michael (in Santiago), St. Joseph; *Oko* with St Isidro; *Inle* with Angel Raphael; *Obba* with St. Rita of Casia, St. Catalina of Siena, the Virgin of Carmen; *Ibeji* with Sts. Cosmas and Damian, Sts. Crispin and Crispinian, Sts. Justa and Rufina-the heavenly twins.

Yoruba carved female figurines of ere ibeji twins -->

Twins hold a special place among the Yoruba of Nigeria where they have the highest rate of twin births in the world. They are protected by the God of Twins, called Ibeji, and are believed to have the power to bring good fortune, health and happiness to their families. Even after a twin dies, its spirit continues to watch over its family. After the death of a twin, its mother has a figure like these carved. It is believed that the spirit of the twin lives inside the figure. To help the twin's spirit feel cared for and loved, the mother cares for the figure as if it were a living child by feeding and bathing it, dressing it with jewelry and carrying it with her wherever she goes. In this way, she respects the twin's spirit and lets everyone in the community know that she holds the special honor of being the mother of twins.⁶



Devotion to and worship of the orishas was carried out beneath the images of the Catholic saints, despite the fact that the Church did not endorse or embrace the Yoruba orishas. Sometimes the African religion was opposed; at others, it was simply ignored.



← Notice the combination of Catholic saints with other Santerian and Pagan items.

The Yoruba people became known as the Lucumi in Cuba, and then as the religion was folded into Spanish Catholicism, the new identity was Santería. (In Cuba the orisha religion is still known as Lucumi.)

Even Jesus was brought into the Old World religion, given new definitions, roles, and personhood, and became known as *Olofi*. The orisha worshipers cleverly, necessarily, adapted to a strange and hostile environment and succeeded in preserving their gods and forms of worship. In this way they were able to resist being completely subsumed by the European majority.

To survive then, the Yoruba slaves created a seeming alliance with the dominant religion. The Spanish Catholic Church did not demand doctrinal adherence to nor an understanding of those doctrines. Usually the "converts" became so under duress, often hundreds were merely sprinkled with holy water – sometimes while still wearing their chains.⁷ African slaves were dispersed throughout the region – Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti⁸, and to other nations of South America, most notably Brazil (which has a high concentration of those who belong to the orisha religion), Venezuela, and other countries.

Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, Cuba (Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre)⁹→

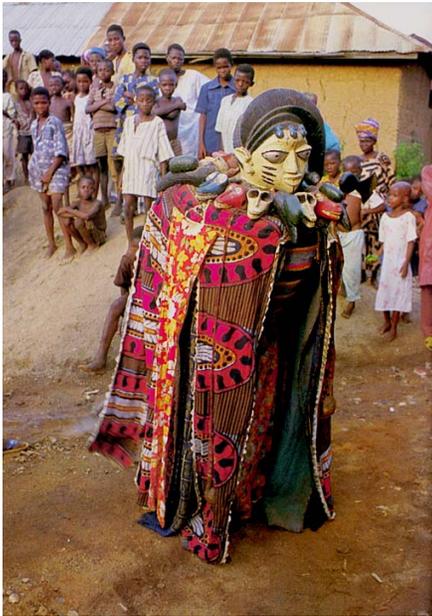
In 1959 and the revolution under Fidel Castro, hundreds of thousands of Cubans fled from Cuba to the United States, principally to Miami and New York. In 1980, a flood of more worshipers of the orishas were pushed off the island. Now most American cities with any sizeable Hispanic population will host those who keep the worship of the ancient African deities alive.

Compared to the Catholics, the Protestants were not as welcoming to the Yoruba orishas. Membership in Protestant churches was more clearly defined and regulated. Mere baptism was not enough – doctrine mattered, as did a commitment to Scripture, which had a decidedly negative view of idol worship and occult practices. The Protestant denominations presented a “narrow gate” rather than the “wide gate” of Catholicism. Catholicism required little of the slaves beyond attendance at the sacraments. Indeed, “the Catholicism of colonial Cuba was perhaps not so terribly unlike the religion of the Yoruba homeland.”¹⁰



The three “ways” of Santería

Santería has three basic approaches to the world of the spirits: One, the way of *values* – by honoring ancestors or the “egun;” Two, the way of *power* – direct relationship with spiritual beings, the orishas; Three, the way of *order* – by way of fortune telling or divination.



First, the way of *values*. Here the spirits of the dead are sought to provide ashé. Ashé gives the worshiper power to accomplish things – to be healthy, wealthy, and powerful over circumstances and enemies. The ancestors called egun, the people of heaven, provide moral ashé or right behavior. By speaking to the living through one mounted or possessed by the egun, advice and counsel is given. However, the information communicated from the dead to the living is not moral in the traditional sense in terms of right and wrong behavior. Ashé from ancestors, or orishas for that matter, may be sought for protection in criminal activity: protection from harm from enemies or the police, or for acquittals in criminal court cases. The egun may prescribe means by which opponents or enemies may be overcome or harmed.

← Egun mask ritual in Benin - Egun are ancestor spirits.¹¹

Dead ancestors are said to reincarnate and be born into their same families after two generations minimum. For instance, grandparents’ souls might be reincarnated into their grandchildren.

The concept of the immortality of the soul and its transmigration is central to Santería. The doctrine of humans having an immortal soul, but not the idea of a transmigration of that soul, was borrowed from Spanish Catholicism, a doctrine which entered the Church in the fourth and fifth centuries through the writings of Augustine, who was deeply influenced by Greek dualistic philosophy that posited the concept of the pre-existent soul and its transmigration.¹²

Second, the way of *power* through orishas who are personifications of ashé that people can use who honor them. In West Africa the lists of the orishas, or gods and goddesses, number about 1700. In the New World the number shrank to either 400 or 401, depending on what information you have, but in practical reality, in contemporary Santería there are seventeen orishas¹³ that are worshiped: Obatalá, Elegguá, Orúnla, Changó, Ochosi, Oggún, Babalú-Ayé, Yemayá, Oshún, Oyá, Osain, Ósun, Aganyú, Oko, Inle, Obba, and Ibeyí.¹⁴

Egun mask festival of Togo and Benin¹⁵ →

The religion teaches that priests and priestesses of Santería learn how to make the orisha's ashé present for those who consult them, thus helping them with their lives, or so they understand. In a celebration known as Bembe, the orishas will mount or possess dancers; it is when the dancer is possessed that the power of the orishas is present and may be dispensed to other worshipers.

Also, the worshiper can obtain ashé by sacrificing to the orisha; the sacrifice is known as an ebbó. The proper sacrifice is determined by divination, performed by a santero, santera, or Babalawo. An orisha may demand an animal sacrifice to obtain the animal's blood, which when sprinkled or poured on an object – usually a sacred stone called the otane - it "feeds" the orisha, who then bestows ashé for performing the wishes of the worshiper.



Third, the way of order, which has to do with Ifá, or the oracle, the means of divining the future. This may be done by casting, throwing, or dropping palm nuts, cowrie shells, or pieces of coconut on a special flat surface. The

Babalawo, a higher level of priest, may use a special necklace-like chain that is thrown and then interpreted. For most of the history of Santería, only the Babalawo¹⁶ could perform this pinnacle of divination, but in more recent times this is done more and more by the santeros and santeras. The diviner, through whatever means of divination, receives communication from the orisha that "mounted" or possessed him or her at their initiation ceremony, or asiento, then passes on that prescription for the necessary action or remedy to be taken by the worshiper. Nearly all the sacrifices of Santería that are offered to the orishas are a result of divination.



← Santeria child initiation

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Baptized in Santeria a man is reborn with a different name and for the first year has to wear white. →



Santería and the cultural anthropologist

Cultural anthropologists study ethnic groups in order to understand the dynamics of that people group. These scientists do not make value judgments on the political and religious institutions they find. Beliefs and practices are interesting, and may all, academically speaking, have equal value, perhaps unless the belief system is causing considerable suffering and mayhem. But generally, anthropologists do not make a point of evaluating the truth or fiction or moral correctness of a religious system.

The African slaves were courageously, ingeniously, able to keep their community intact by various mechanisms, not least of which was their belief and worship of the orishas. I am not a cultural anthropologist; thus my valuation of Santería will not be so sanitized. This should come as no surprise, but in terms of survivability, resistance to extinction, and simply the courage to struggle to escape the crushing impact of slavery and poverty – this is commendable in itself.



← Elliott Rivera is Sangoma (shaman) from the Afro-Cuban Santería. He is a trance medium and works a lot with his ancestors. He “gives you the chance to feel and hear the wisdom coming from your own ancestors.”

Spiritism

Spiritism, which is primarily the concept that the dead live on and may be contacted, impacted Santería in the nineteenth century through the writings of Hippolyte Leon Denizard Rivail, better known by his pen name, Allan Kardec. Born in 1804 in Lyon, France, he became interested in a strange phenomena that was sweeping America's and Europe's upper classes, since it was considered to be related to science – “spirit-tapping.” The Fox Sisters of Hydesville, New York, in 1848, began experiencing what they

thought were the sounds and sights of spirits of the dead attempting to communicate with the living. The game was on to understand this phenomena, and it later moved into something best left to mediums – those with special talent for contacting the dead.

“Haitian Vodou has its origins in African religious practices and beliefs that the slaves brought with them, mixed with elements of Catholicism, as well as the practices of the remaining indigenous peoples on Hispaniola. The rituals of Vodouisants (practitioners of Haitian Vodou) include song and prayer, the possession of the body by spirits, and supernatural protection and aid.”¹⁷

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Santería was ripe to be captured by spiritism. The main tenets of Spiritist doctrine are:

- There is a God, defined as "The Supreme Intelligence and Primary Cause of everything." (Easily fits the God concept of Santería).
- There are spirits, all of whom are created simple and ignorant, but owning the power to gradually perfect themselves.
- The natural method of this perfection process is reincarnation, through which the spirit faces countless different situations, problems and obstacles, and needs to learn how to deal with them. (The egun of Santería visit the living and pass on knowledge on how to learn and perfect themselves. The living are thought able to also help the egun to learn, grow, and advance in spiritual knowledge and ability.)
- As part of nature, spirits can naturally communicate with living people, as well as interfere in their lives. (Dovetails nicely with long standing Santería views.)
- Many planets in the universe are inhabited. (Not a problem for Santería.)



To accomplish contact with spirits, Allan Kardec's movement, often called Mesa Blanca, began using small groups of mediums to assist in the communicating. This worked perfectly into the thought system of Santerían people. The egun could be contacted by their own mediums, the initiated, the santeros and santeras, who would be mounted by the orishas. After a time, the old practices from Africa used to contact the egun have been set aside, and the common practices of contemporary mediums have been substituted. The spiritualistic séances, at minimum, have supplemented the way of the orishas.



← This ceremony is called "Cajon de Muertos". Havana (La Habana), Cuba

“The Rhythms and Songs of Cajon - The astonishing variety of songs used in Cajon ceremonies point to its myriad religious and musical influences. The most common songs are those that come from the religious practices of Espiritismo and Palo. The first of these, Espiritismo (Spiritism), is a religious practice that uses mediums and seances to commune with spirits of the dead who have “advanced” to higher levels of spiritual existence. This religious practice came to Cuba in the late 1800s via Spain and the writings of Alan Kardec. Palo also concerns itself primarily with spirits of the dead. It is an Afro-Cuban practice historically

associated with slaves from regions of Central Africa. In addition to these practices, songs used in Cajon come from folk Catholicism, Regla de Ocha (a.k.a. Santeria), makuta, tumba francesa, and other sources. New songs are also composed specifically for Cajon ceremonies, proving that it is becoming an autonomous religious practice, not merely a conglomeration of other practices. While the songs are often thought to be the most important part of calling the spirits, the drumming is essential for opening up participants by encouraging them to dance.”¹⁸

Now then, all fell into place: The orisha worship of Africa folded into a Catholic setting and was then impacted by American and European spiritism.

A look at how the religion of Santería functions—the rituals and ceremonies

Santeros and Santeras – and the Ilé

More and more women, probably now numbering more than men, act as priests of Santería. These are the ones who conduct the asiento or initiation into the religion.

Powerful women have always been at the center of Santería



“Historically, culturally and liturgically speaking, Santería has always been a religion that honors women and upholds their importance in society. Some of the most important and pivotal figures in the history of Santería have been women. Women shaped the way our religion evolved in the new world. Women preserved the lore of our religion by passing on the secrets of our ceremonies, our sacred songs, and the lexicon of information found in our divination systems. Plainly put, Santería is a women’s religion.”¹⁹



All those who are initiated become a member of that santero's or santera's house or *Ilé*. The egun, the dead belonging to the members of the Ilé, are also a part of that household. Santeros (as) at once live for the orishas and to help those who seek the aid of the orishas.

Some long-standing members of Santería complain about how ill-equipped or uneducated many santeros and santeras are. In times past, the time spent in learning the mysteries was long and complex. Now, some are initiated after only a few months.



← A young girl, freshly "reborn" and baptized in Santería. A newborn has to wear white for a whole year. Havana (La Habana), Cuba^{19a}

People in need of help come to the santero priests and santera priestesses to seek a solution to a problem – maybe involving health, money, or love – the top three categories. The price or fee is the *derecho*, meaning "right" in Spanish,²⁰ supposedly limited to the price of procuring the items essential for whatever sacrifice might be required by the orisha so that the ashé of the orisha can be secured to resolve the problem. However, apparently prices are going up, and there is a fear that the priests and priestesses are taking advantage of their very powerful place in the life of their Ilé.

There is no actual hierarchy in Santería, no actual organization beyond the Ilé. The leader is the santero(a), though the head of all Santería is known as the "Ooni," who is the spiritual head of the Yoruba of Nigeria and of all who worship the orishas in the Americas. The Ooni is said to be a direct descendant of the original persons who founded the Yoruba nation.

How one enters Santería

There are four roles or steps available for a person entering Santería. Each step requires a separate ritual be conducted and results in increasing degrees of protection, power, and knowledge. Full entrance requires reaching all four levels, but a person can stop at any one. The steps or roles are:

1. Receiving Elekes – the beaded necklaces
2. Receiving the Elegguá
3. Receiving the Warriors
4. Making saint or Asiento

Elekes

Elekes are beaded necklaces and are made up of different colors and patterns that correspond to the preferences of the orisha of the santero or santera who conducts the initiation.

A Babalawo, by the use of a divination ritual called the bajar a Orunla determines which orisha(s) will be the initiate's, or iyawo's²¹ ruling head. The iyawo is usually given four to six necklaces, and these are removed in certain circumstances – bathing, sexual activities, sleeping, and during a woman's menstruation. The breaking of a necklace, for any reason, is a serious problem, and further rituals must be conducted to prevent bad results.



The necklaces are given by a *Madrina*, a santera who officiates or orchestrates the initiation. A derecho or fee is required for this ritual, and it is usually substantial.

The main purpose then of the Elekes is for protection against all manner of evil, from curses to illnesses. The ashé of the orishas Elegguá, Obatala, Oshun, Yemaya, Chango, and Oya is in the necklaces and is the means of the protection.

Receiving or making Elegguá

Elegguá is a "warrior" orisha and is responsible for determining the destinies of people.²²



← Cuban Babalawo divining²³

A babalawo is consulted, and by using a divining tool like the "seashells," the initiate's past, present, and future are revealed. From such divining the babalawo prescribes both the building materials and the method for how an image of the head of the orisha Elegguá is to be constructed. The image, mostly made of stones, is then placed somewhere in the house of the iyawo, as close to the front door of the dwelling as possible, in order to protect the house and those living in it from evil forces.

If, for example, a particular person is causing trouble, that person's name is written down on a slip of paper and placed under the image. This assures that the orisha Elegguá will suppress that person from causing evil effects.

Babalawo making sacrifice prior to the drum ebo. →



The stone image of Elegguá must then be "fed" periodically to assure that there is enough ashé present. This feeding requires blood from a sacrificed animal be sprinkled on the image. In addition to the blood, the image can be fed with the orisha's favorite offerings: rum, cigars, coconut, toasted corn, smoked fish, opossum meat, and candy.

Receiving the Warriors

The Warriors, or *guerreros* in Spanish, are given by a babalawo or padrino²⁴- the santero or priest who officiates and orchestrates the initiations. The warrior orishas are Eleggua, Oggun, Osun, and Oshosi.

The iyawo now has the protection of Eleggua at this stage, but the protection of the other orishas named above is needed. This overall protection is for battle with enemies, both physical and spiritual.



← "Warriors" santos Elegguá, Oggún, Ochosi and Osun.

A distinction in function and power is made between the Elekes and the Warriors. The Elekes are for defensive protection, while the Warriors are offensive and attack any who try to do harm.

The rooster that sits atop the iron chalice of Osun, one of



Santería's protective Orishas (deities) -- Osun is one of the four Los Guerreros: Eleggua, Ogun, Ochossi and Osun.²⁵ →

Making saint or Asiento

Members of Santería will have a pot, a crock, or other receptacle in their house containing the otane stones, collected by means of hearing the voices of the ruling orishas. The stones are, in a sense, the orishas and have within them the ashé of the orishas. The orishas are fed through the stones – they are washed and oiled, and the blood of sacrificed animals is sprinkled on them. The ashé stored in the stones is available for the orishas to then use in assisting those living in the house.

In the asiento – the "ascending the throne" or "making orisha" – the orisha, the identity of which is determined by the babalawo by means of divination, is seated or mounted on or in the head of the iyawo. When this occurs, after a many days-long elaborate ritual, the iyawo may be said to be "born again" into the faith of Santería.



← Blood offering poured on otane shells & stones

Miguel A. De La Torre has this interesting description of what happens in the asiento:

Prior to the ritual, the individual is considered impure and is therefore required to "die" to their old self. The ritual is a process of purification and divination whereby the convert becomes like a newborn, even to the point of having to be bathed and fed like a baby. They are taught the secrets and rites of their god, they learn how to speak through the oracles, and they are "resurrected" to a new life in which they can unite their consciousness with their god. From the moment of the asiento,

the convert begins a new life of deeper growth within the faith.²⁶

The head is thought to be like a stone, and it is in stones, the otanes, where the orishas live and their ashé is stored. A metaphor may be helpful: the stones are like a bank where deposits and withdrawals are made. It is said that the iyawo is crowned with the orisha. The idea of possession comes close to describing the result of the asiento, since the orisha is said to be in the head of the iyawo.

A Santero in a prayer-trance²⁷ →



Again a quote from De La Torre is helpful in making it clear what the asiento is:

“The purpose of this ritual is to condition the person's mind and body so that all of the supernatural powers of their orisha can be invested on the one being ordained, allowing him or her literally to become the orisha. This ceremony, which requires at least sixteen santeros or santeras as witnesses, is also known as an asiento. Asiento, the Spanish word for seat, refers to the way in which an orisha "mounts" the one being ordained. To be mounted by an orisha means to be spiritually possessed.”²⁸

The iyawo or ordained one must observe special conditions for a period of one year, one of which is to abstain from sexual activity for that period. “The relationship between human and orisha can be seen as a sexual one. A mystical union in which the orishas are ‘inside’ their brides. They ‘descend’ and ‘mount’ their devotees.”²⁹

The orisha is said to take over the consciousness of the iyawo, and anything said by the person is now considered the direct revelation of the orisha. Male and female identities can be blurred as “male orishas spiritually possess female bodies and vice versa.”³⁰ Again from De La Torre, "While mounted, the possessed person can predict the future, provide advice, see activities occurring elsewhere, or do anything else capricious gods feel like doing" (p. 115). In addition to the orisha, the iyawo is also said to be inhabited, in the head, by an *eleda* which is said to be a guardian angel.

Making the saint is neither simple nor inexpensive. The ordination process may require as many as three years, though a more contemporary dumbed down version is far shorter; but the fee, or derecho, may be as much as \$5,000, and some have paid as much as \$45,000.

During the feast that follows the asiento, the iyawo is said to be possessed for the first time by their orisha, and at that point a guinea hen's head is removed and the blood is drunk by the iyawo.

For a year following the ordination or asiento, the iyawo learns from their padrino and madrina the fine points of Santería, including the means of fortune telling and how to communicate with the dead.



Bembe

A Bembe is a party,³¹ sometimes held out of doors for the public to view, but most often are held at the home, house church, or temple of the santero and/or santera. It is a party filled with African style drumming and dance.

← Trance state at a bembe

This is where the heart of the religion takes place. Special dancers and drummers are used. The drums are said to have ashé in them, and that ashé and the praise of the participants – often derisive things said in order to stir up the orishas – make the orishas join the party.

It is evident when the orishas show up. The dancers appear to become possessed and take on the individual orisha

character traits, through styles of dance that are attributed to them. Joseph M. Murphy calls this, "a harmony of the human and the divine in dance and joy."³² The drumming assists in calling the orishas to the party to possess the dancers, who will go into a trance when so possessed.

Santeria Cubana
Bembe →

Ebbos

Ebbos are food offerings to the orishas. These may be herbal baths, animal sacrifices, or whatever else may be requested by the orishas through divination.



In this July 8, 2009 photo, people sacrifice a goat during a Santeria ceremony in honor of the ocean goddess Yemaya at the annual Caribbean Festival in in Santiago de Cuba, Cuba.³³ →



← Praying and offering the food ritual for Oxum

"Ebo contains many categories of sacrifice and offering to the Orisha. "There are offerings such as addimú which can include candles, fruits, candy, or any number of items that may be appreciated by the deities or orishas in the religion. In divination, the orishas may ask for a favorite fruit or dish, or they may call for the person to heed advice given. At times they may ask that a person give up drinking or other practices that are unwise for that individual. They may request a person to wear certain jewelry, receive initiations or any number of other things."³⁴

Ebbos are not bribes, though some are offered to secure the goodwill of an orisha. Mostly ebbos are for the creation of ashé, that power of the orishas necessary to "help" the petitioner. There are nine different kinds of ebbos, all the way from food offerings, to offerings made to make holy the various objects set aside for offerings.

Candles are lit and various plants are burnt, like tobacco in the form of cigars. These offerings are said to release large quantities of ashé. But the amount of ashé released by these are small in comparison to the ashé obtained from the blood from animal sacrifices

According to the religion, the orishas themselves will determine what animals are to be sacrificed and what parts of the animal are to be offered, by way of the priests and priestesses using divination. Some of the animals typically offered are rooster, opossum, pigeon, female goat, white dove, white canary, white chicken, male goat, monkey, sheep, oxen, deer, bull, turtle, rabbit, quail, horse, guinea hen, pig, snake, duck, ram, fish, turkey, owl, and more. The orishas have their favorites, which are spelled out in charts but always memorized by the santeros and santeras.



← Chicken sacrificed for its blood

Blood sacrifices are necessary, because the orishas are said to be alive and must therefore eat. The blood of the animals is sprinkled or poured on the stones or otanes (these will be explained a little further along in the essay), which are the most tangible representation of the orishas on earth. The orishas must be fed, which happens when the blood strikes them (the stones), and thus ashé is created to be used.

In western countries, since people are offended by the animal sacrifices, especially when dead animal carcasses surface in neighborhoods and other public places, there is less and less of this kind of ritual. This is part of the effort by Santería to become more acceptable in America particularly.

Spells

Spells and curses are common with Voodoo, but are found in Santería as well. The religion is power-based, controlling and using it for the benefit of practitioners of the faith. For example, for those involved in criminal court cases, a special powder is used to obtain the help of an orisha that specializes in such things. The use of the powder is said to either win a not-guilty verdict or to simply have the subject released from custody. This is why those involved in criminal activity are attracted to La Santa Muerte, “The Holy Dead,” a subset of Santería.

Shelf in a botánica shop. Los Angeles, CA³⁵
→

An interesting example of a common spell for women in Santería is the following: If a woman wishes to seduce a man, she can take seven earthworms, some of her menstrual blood, a dash of her feces, hair from her head and pubic hair, and place them in the sun to dry. When they are dried, she can grind them into a fine powder and place the powder in the man's food or drink.^{35b}

Adura

Adura is prayer, but with a twist. Since some orishas have certain powers others do not, the proper selection of an orisha to pray to is important. For instance, the orisha Babalu-Aye is best for healing, so the *adura*, which is the Yoruba word for prayer, is addressed to Babalu-Aye.



Ewe

Ewe are herbs, and may be a more important component of offerings than an animal sacrifice. Those who deal with herbs, the herb masters, fill the religion's most vital office.

To animists like Santerians, plants are alive and have characteristics of personhood, are guarded by certain spiritual entities, and most importantly are loaded with ashé. Herbs are often used as offerings to obtain healing.



← Santeria spiritual herb bath

Before an herb is used, prayers must be offered that basically ask permission to “take the life of the plant.”³⁶ Once permission is given, the herb can be used in a variety of ways for medicine or casting a spell or a curse, depending on what the santero or santera desires. An interesting spell used for causing someone to fall in love with another person is the following: A person swallows a few kernels of hard, dry corn. That kernel is retrieved from the feces, washed, roasted, then ground up into a powder. Then, of course, the powder is slipped into the food or drink of the intended “victim.”

Another fascinating use of ewe, and one that might be used by practitioners of La Santa Muerte, is the hanging of crabgrass at the four corners of the house where someone wanted by the police is staying. The magic is that the crabgrass somehow disorients the police and no one is found. My favorite is this one: “Washing one's eyes with bog onion is meant to promote clairvoyance.”³⁷

Since many of the objects necessary for the rituals of Santería may be easily obtained in tropical and jungle lands, they are not common in the large cities of the Americas. But specialty stores exist to meet this need. The main place to find all kinds of articles necessary to life in Santería can be found in the Botánica. “Botánicas,” “pet stores,” “religious goods” – if these words are placed in a search engine, or if the yellow pages are consulted, these terms will reveal the presence, or not, of those who belong to Santería. These stores will likely incorporate a saint's or orisha's name for easy identification as to its real purpose.

Botanica in Massachusetts →



Otanes

Otanes are stones that are said to carry within them the actual presence of an orisha and are thus full of ashé. Otanes are carefully selected on beaches, in valleys, on mountains, and so on, as they call out in some mysterious way to the faithful to be collected.



← Santeria Sopera to hold otanes

The stones are kept in crockery, or a jar of some kind, called a *sopera*. The otanes must be fed on a regular basis – with blood at least once a year, and periodically refreshed in herbal baths, and oiled with substances as well.

Ifa

Ifa is the orisha of the oracle – the centerpiece of Santería fortune telling. The *babalawo*, or more recently the *santeros* and *santeras* “read” the Ifa to those who come seeking counsel, healing, and other forms of help. By Ifa the priest or priestess of Santería deal with the problems of the community.

Cowrie shells, coconut pieces (four), and palm nuts are thrown, or a chain called the *opele* is laid down and interpreted. Using a strict formula these are “read” and the reading will determine what is to be done about the problem. Doing Ifa is the most common of Santería's practices. It goes on most every day. For centuries those initiated fully into the religion, those who made the saint, will be sought out by those who need help.

Essentially, the Ifa will reveal if a person is in harmony with his or her destiny, and if not, what can be done, what offering made, to bring things back into balance.

Magic and fortune telling

What we see when looking at many of the rituals and practices of Santería is simply known as magic. Some of it is fortune telling, and these two, combined with spiritism, make up the three branches of the occult. The occult arts are all about acquiring power and knowledge, and knowledge is really power. Some Santerians will acknowledge this. Others want to disguise it, wanting to give their rituals an identity different from magic and fortune telling, since they are aware that Christianity, including the Catholic Church, declares that occult practices are both non-biblical and dangerous. Christians have always been aware of the power of the occult but ascribe that power to demonic forces.

This is important to understand, this magical, occult nature of Santería, since the religion must stand as it really is and not on what Santería insiders wish outsiders would not see or know.

On what authority?

The cultural anthropologist is not concerned about the authority or truthfulness of a religious system – but we are, because our interest goes beyond understanding cultural mores and traits. When one purports to know the will of the supreme deity, others will make an evaluation of the truth claims of that one.

Religions are in competition with one another; they all cannot be correct, since there are significantly different theological and doctrinal views among them. Some are monotheistic, others are monistic, and some are atheistic. The anthropologist need not, as a professional, be concerned about the differences other than to record them.

The question of authority must be raised in regard to Santería and the Yoruba religion of the orishas: What is the authority for the veracity of their religious teachings? How is it that the orisha system is the true paradigm and others are not? Is Santería the truth because a large block of people embrace it? Or, is it truth for only those who are their adherents, which makes each and every religious system nothing more than a culturally unique fantasy devised to explain the human dilemma and ease pain and suffering?

In the Christian Scriptures Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Santería teaches that Olofi, an orisha, is Jesus, and that those who worship Olofi are worshiping Jesus. This notion is adverse to true followers of Jesus and is clearly an inauthentic gimmick meant to deceive the unwary.

Christianity has a definite and substantial authority base found in the Bible. The ultimate author of the Book is the Creator God who has revealed Himself in His Son, Jesus Christ. Christianity is a revealed faith; it is either right or wrong, true or false. Christianity and Santería are antithetical – they will not stand together and any attempt to make them do so is fraudulent.



Who exactly are the orishas and the egun?

According to Yoruba traditions the orishas are spirits that have a mysterious power called ashé, that must be obtained by the use of praise, sacrifices, and other magical means. Egun are said to be spirits of the dead.

How can we be sure this is all true?

The orishas' behavior reminds us of the antics of the Greek gods and goddesses of antiquity who were capricious, unpredictable, often immoral, even murderous. Many ancient Greeks believed in them but most did not. Greek mythology served people by explaining, in the most crude and unscientific ways, how and why the world existed. The Greek gods were part of fables only and had no actual being. My contention is that this is the same for the orishas and the egun.

The egun, reincarnating from generation to generation, served to comfort people in the face of the human reality of death. Death had some of its sting removed through the concept of the immortal

nature of the "soul" and its continuous life and contact with the living. Comfort and hope are one thing, but living with a fictitious world view is not helpful or desirable.

Could the orishas and egun be evil spirits? Many major world religions accept the existence of evil spiritual beings, including Christianity. Christianity posits an evil presence called Satan, who has with him an innumerable number of fallen angels called demons. Satan wanted to be worshiped as God was; this was his undoing and the reason for his ejection from God's presence. Satan craves worship; what a perfect mechanism Santería is for this idol worship!

Conclusions and Thoughts

As I studied the nature of the religion, the superstitious nature of it jumped out at me. The magical processes that stand at the center of the rituals cannot be ignored by simply taking the cultural anthropologist's way of observing something interesting without attaching moral value to it. To so many, religion is nothing more than a form of theater with no good or bad labels applied.

Beyond the magic, even more to the core of the religion of the orishas is possession, the mounting of the iyawo at asiento, a straight-forward acknowledgement, even goal, of the god or goddess to invade the individual and take that person over. The priests and priestesses of Santería are possessed by gods and goddesses and thus direct other people how to live.

There can be no answer to that question, but any slavery is brutal, barbaric, and evil. Evil – the dimensions of evil, the monstrosity of it, will likely only be known to us in some far distant future when its hideous presence has been abolished and the goodness of the Creator God is fully revealed.

This essay is titled, From Slavery to Slavery. Evil rarely appears evil. What began with a tribal religion among the West Africans who were transported to the New World and terribly enslaved, developed by means of Santería into slavery of a different kind. The slavery that I see in Santería is also terrible, and no comparisons can I give or even hint at, but it is enough to say there is an awful and mostly unseen slavery at the heart of Santería.

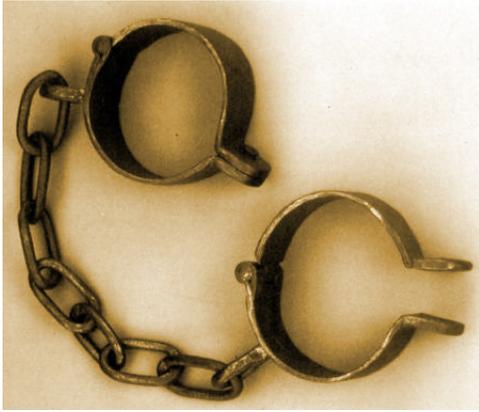
Has Santería been beneficial to its adherents? Is Santería the reason the Yoruba culture survived, and is maintaining ties to that ancient tribal culture worth the cost of trading one kind of slavery for another?

I write this essay because so much of what has been Santería is morphing to meet the challenges of the post-modern world. The Ile's are becoming churches. Men's drumming groups are becoming a means for evangelizing Santería on American college and university campuses. Animal sacrifices are far less common, and the carcasses of dead animals are rarely left for a skeptical public to discover. The wild and implausible stories of the Orishas or the Patakis are heard and written about much less often. And as De La Torre writes, "The African influences within the religion are minimized as the religion advocates more broadly 'Christian' ethical perspectives and principles."³⁸

Santería, due to the fact the religion found itself immersed in a Spanish Catholic world, had to go underground; it had to keep its secrets secret. Understood. But now in a different time and place, Santería means to capture its share of all strata of those hungry for a fuller "spiritual life." Indeed, as Miguel de La Torre has so well said, "What was once the religion of the uneducated black lower economic class is becoming the religion of educated middle-class whites."³⁹

Today well-known musical groups, having adapted the beautiful and captivating African and Latin drum rhythms, are opening up doors through which new converts – largely unsuspecting potential converts – are entering. One interesting statistic is that Brazil, with its 190 million people, Santería adherents may run as high as 90%.

The future will see the institutionalizing of Santería, which will become immediately apparent by typing Santería into a Google search. Right now, Santería has more people devoted to it than many Christian denominations. In fact, it is being viewed now as a world religion alongside Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and so on. Murphy sees the emergence of Santería and speculates, "We must wait to see where and when the *orishas* may emerge to mount America at large."⁴⁰



Murphy is confident in Santería's ability to win acceptance in America. He looks to the religion's history and sees a story of survival, a miracle in light of the enslavement and removal of a people from the Old to the New World. It is often said that the human tragedy of slavery of the body did not become slavery of the spirit. It is this that I question. Will continued acceptance of Santería bring freedom or slavery? A look at the teachings and practices of the religion lead me to think that slavery is the answer.

What slavery do I have in mind? Slavery to a religion that controls most every aspect of life. Slavery to a faith captured by superstition and magical practices. Slavery to a paranoid mindset where spells and curses are cast and are needing to be protected against. Slavery to the spirits of the dead. Slavery to the necessity of placating the orishas and meeting their demands. Slavery to a class of priests and priestesses whose very words are to be considered the words of a deity. Slavery to the spirits, the saints called orishas, those entities who are in fact nothing more than unclean or demonic spirits.

Finally, practitioners of Santería may display their opposition toward those Christians who challenge their belief systems; I have dozens of emails to substantiate this. Why would this be so? I see a fear-based response to clear biblically-oriented confrontations, which is because Jesus, and only Jesus Christ of Nazareth, has power and authority over demonic spirits.

During the earthly ministry of Jesus, He cast out demons and it troubled and amazed the people of His day – including the religious leaders.⁴¹ He also gave His disciples authority to do the same, and they have so done over the centuries. The Apostle John even said, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). And then James said, “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).



Ultimately the reason for this essay is to speak a word of grace, peace, and mercy to those entangled in Santería. My intent is also to caution those drawn to Santería: There is more to it than meets the eye.

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¹ In Cuba Santería it is known as Lucumi, in Brazil either Macumba or Candomblé, and in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Trinidad, Mexico, and other Latin countries, it became known as Santeria. In different places the names for the rites also changed. For instance, in Haiti the magical rites are called Voodoo or Vodun.

² Source: Odhiambo Atieno, E. S., Ouso, T. I. & Williams, J. F. M. (1977). *A History of East Africa*. London: Longman Group Ltd.. ISBN 0-582-60886-4. Page 96, fig. 11.5a.

³ A Pataki, of which there are thousands, are tales of the gods of Santeria, the orishas.

⁴ Illus. in: *Journal of a voyage to Brazil, and residence there, during part of the years 1821, 1822, 1823* / Maria Graham. London : Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green and J. Murray, 1824, pl. 23. - Library of Congress (see below). Illus. author: Edward Francis Finden (1791-1858)

⁵ From the Tropenmuseum of the Royal Tropical Institute.

⁶ Photo from The Children's Museum of Indianapolis. Photographer: Wendy Kaveny

⁷ The Church at the time and for a long period afterward did require the slaves to be baptized; but now that Jews, Muslims, and people of other faiths are joining Santeria, the requirement to receive Catholic baptism is being abandoned. Protestants, who arrived centuries later, did demand doctrinal understanding and thus did not receive into their communities large numbers of the African slaves.

⁸ Due to French influences it is known there as Voodoo or Voudun.

⁹ From the Knights of Columbus website www.kofc.org

¹⁰ Joseph M. Murphy, *Santeria: African Spirits in America*, page 114.

¹¹ This photo comes from the 1997 Egba-Egbado Descendants Association website

¹² Augustine rejected, however, the pre-existence of the soul and did not embrace reincarnation, but he did retain the idea of an immortal soul, which was retained from that day to this. Biblically speaking, people *are* soul, in that they are created in the image of God and thus can have a relationship with Him. Thus, humans *are* soul rather than *having* a separate entity identified as the soul.

¹³ Some lists have sixteen orishas, others have eighteen.

¹⁴ Many of the references to Yoruba and Spanish words will not have their proper accent marks.

¹⁵ Photo found at www.transafrica.biz

¹⁶ The Babalawos, the most respected of all the Santeria priests, were called the "fathers of the mysteries." It is said that it took ten to fifteen years to learn the art of divination.

¹⁷ from: <http://americasouthandnorth.wordpress.com/2011/09/page/2/>

¹⁸ Photo by Jorge Royan (submitted to Wikimedia). Quote from http://www.nolanwarden.com/Warden-Cajon_pa_los_Muertos%28WPR-2008%29.pdf. Found 9/17/2012.

¹⁹ Photo image and quote from: <http://santeriachurch.org/the-importance-of-women-in-santeria/>

^{19a} Photo image by Jorge Royan (submitted to Wikimedia, 1/2/2011)

²⁰ As in English, this Spanish word expresses several meanings: straight and upright, right side as opposed to left side, human right, and a right determined by law. Perhaps more than one of these meanings are incorporated.

²¹ Iyawo means "bride of an orisha." A spiritual kind of marriage occurs when an initiate goes through the whole process and is "mounted" by an orisha at the Asiento.

²² Santeria is fatalistic in the sense that a person's future is already determined. However, modifications can be made through magical rituals.

²³ Author: Lilmitrion, 23 May 2009

²⁴ The santero and santera, the priest and priestess heads of the Ilé, are often now replacing the more honored babalawo's function.

²⁵ Photo by Thomas Altfather Good, 4/2/2012

²⁶ From *Santeria: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America* by Miguel A. De La Torre, page 112.

²⁷ Found at <http://www.perthnow.com.au/gallery-e6frg3t3-1225890156531?page=8>

²⁸ From *Santeria: African Spirits in America* by Joseph M. Murphy, page 89.

²⁹ Though I have not seen it spelled out clearly, I have found scattered references, in my opinion deliberately obscured, to incubi and succubae - demons that assume human form and have sexual intercourse with humans. It is not clear from the literature if this is what is meant by an orisha mounting the iyawo.

³⁰ De La Torre, page 114.

³¹ Santeria has been described as a "dance religion."

³² Murphy, page 99.

³³ Found at <http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/article/Cuban-Santeros-wary-of-Pope-visit-after-JPII-snob-3380795.php#photo-2579488>

³⁴ From: <http://www.powerfulsanteriaspells.com/what-is-santeria.html>

³⁵ Photo by Sgerbic (submitted to Wikimedia 12/22/2011)

^{35b} De La Torre, page 128.

³⁶ De La Torre, page 131.

³⁷ De La Torre, page 133.

³⁸ De La Torre, page 223.

³⁹ De La Torre, page 224.

⁴⁰ Joseph M. Murphy, page 115

⁴¹ Reading through the Gospel of Matthew will make this abundantly clear.