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THE EPIPHANY AND THE CUBAN SANTERIA

Santería, a religion of beauty and resilience, was able to survive and even prosper under very arduous conditions. Disguising their *orishas* (deities) as Catholic saints, the *santeros* (Santería priests and priestesses) were able to continue the traditions they brought to Cuba from Africa right under the gaze of the Roman Catholic authorities which had proscribed their religion. For complex reasons we will discuss ahead, the Catholic festival of the Epiphany became the most important festival for the practitioners of Santería. Because Santería, a religion practiced more or less secretly by millions of people,¹ mostly Cubans, has not received adequate scholarly attention, I will pause here to briefly describe the religion.

What is Santería? The answer to this question is by no means simple. As the great Cuban ethnographer and folklorist Lydia Cabrera points out, "Santería" was originally a pejorative term employed by Roman Catholic whites to describe the religious practices of certain blacks who employed images of Catholic saints in their public ceremonies.² In its present usage, the word Santería denotes that religious system which evolved in Cuba among Yoruba-speaking people (brought to Cuba as slaves) and their descendants and is more appropriately termed Lucumí. The word "Lucumí" comes from the Yoruba phrase "*oluku mi*," usually translated in Cuba as "my friend." Lucumí not only describes the religion of the Yoruba people and their descendants in Cuba; it also describes their language and culture, both of which must be considered separately from Yoruba language and culture in Africa. The word "Santería" has become increasingly popular in scholarly writings as well as in the general media. Even initiates in the Lucumí religion are at

1. Migene Gonzalez-Wippler, who has written several volumes on Santería, states that there are 100 million practitioners of "*orisha-based*" religions—Santería, Condomble, Macumba, and Shangó. *Santería, the Religion*, (Harmony: New York, 1989) p. 9.
2. Lydia Cabrera, prologue to *La Religión Afro-Cubana*, Mercedes Cros Sandoval (Playor: Madrid, 1980) p. 6.

present more often than not calling themselves "*santeros*." Based on what I have stated so far, an operant definition of Santería can thus be formulated: that system of beliefs which developed in Cuba among Yoruba-speaking slaves and their descendants and which uses Lucumí as its liturgical, ritualistic, language.

The question of how blacks in Cuba successfully preserved much of their African heritage while those in the United States, just ninety miles to the north, did not, has received a great deal of attention. I tend to believe that two institutions unwittingly converged making it possible for Africans to preserve their ways: Spanish ethnic clubs and the Roman Catholic church. Spanish colonialists were not a homogeneous group; they came from Galicia, Catalonia, Vazcogondas, Asturias, Andalusia, and the Canary islands. They spoke Gallego (similar to Portuguese), Catalan (similar to French), Basque (not related to any other language), and Castillian, the official language of Spain. Each of these groups formed social clubs and mutual aid societies which fostered linguistic and ethnic separation since they were divided strictly along linguistic, regional, and ethnic lines. Under the auspices of the Roman Catholic church, ostensibly to "Christianize" the Africans, slaves and free blacks were allowed to form their own social clubs and mutual aid societies in the early part of the 19th century. These societies, called *cabildos*,³ were mirror images of the Spanish clubs and were also organized along ethnic and linguistic lines. Soon, however, the *cabildos* developed a unique function as a place where African customs could be preserved. *Cabildos* became repositories of African customs, languages, and religious beliefs. Although many different African traditions were maintained in these clubs, it was probably the Yoruba or Lucumí religion which most benefitted from the institution of the *cabildo*. The reason for the Lucumí religion's success in adapting to its environment may lie in that religion's intrinsic similarity to popular forms of Roman Catholicism.

European Catholics have not been totally successful in eliminating pre-Christian practices from their midst. As orthodox a Catholic country as Ireland shows vestiges of "paganism" in its forms of worship. It has been suggested that the Irish saint called Bridget was in fact a celtic

3. For a fairly complete study of the Cuban *cabildos* see Philip Anthony Howard's dissertation *Culture, Nationalism, and Liberation: the Afro-Cuban Mutual Aid Societies of the Nineteenth Century*, Indiana University, 1988.

goddess which has been "canonized" and transformed into a Christian saint. In popular Catholicism, the fine line between the worship due only to God and the veneration allowed His saints often becomes blurry. Slaves observed as their masters prostrated themselves in front of images of their favorite saints, lighting candles and offering them flowers in thanks for petitions these saints had granted them. These saints were said to have specific powers. St. Barbara, for example, the patroness of soldiers, was thought to have the power to punish by sending down lightning from heaven. The astute Africans seized the opportunity of preserving their *orishas* by deliberately disguising them as Catholic saints. The Yoruba word *orisha* is translated by the Lucumis as "saint." It is from this word that Santería gets its name. The *orishas* of Santería have much in common with popular Catholic notions about saints. Like saints, *orishas* are efficacious granters of human petitions who are under a high god. Like saints, *orishas* are thought to have been special human beings who because of their uniqueness were elevated to divine status. Part of the Lucumi religion required the public parading of *orishas*, much as Catholics parade images of saints in processions. It was the *santeros'* need to publicly parade their *orishas* which prompted the identification of *orishas* with specific Catholic saints. Hiding the stones which represented their *orishas* under images of Catholic saints, the *santeros* were able to publicly worship their ancient gods right under the noses of their oppressors. A secret code developed where, when a particular saint was being paraded, a specific corresponding *orisha* was being worshipped. In this way, when the *cabildos* paraded the statue of St. Barbara, *santeros* knew that the god of lightning, Shangó, was the one really being honored. Catholic festivals, then, became extremely important to *santeros*, because during those times important religious obligations could be fulfilled. Eventually, blacks were forbidden from staging processions, the sole exception being the feast of the Epiphany, celebrated on January 6th. The feast of the Epiphany, called "*Día de Reyes*" (day of kings, referring to the traditional "three wise men" or magi who paid homage to baby Jesus) became the paramount religious holiday among Afro-Cubans, no doubt the reason being that for many years - from the late part of the 19th to the middle of the 20th century - the *dia de reyes* was the only day of the year when blacks were allowed to parade their "saints." The feast of the Epiphany was largely viewed as an "African" holiday in Cuba; as Joseph M. Murphy points out:

Nowhere was the Africanness of Cuba recognized more clearly than in the great religious festival of Epiphany . . . The liturgical cycle of the Catholic year offered Afro-Cubans the opportunity to inject their styles of celebration into the public festivities . . . the celebration of the Epiphany became their special day because of the legend of the black magus, Melchior, who came from Africa to adore the Christ child. Afro-Cubans found their role in Catholic society by identifying with this African presence in Christian folklore.⁴

More importantly, I think, was the fact that the Epiphany, virtually "given over" to the black Cuban population as "their" day, was the only time of the year when the Afro-Cubans were able to fulfill their obligations to the *orishas* by publicly parading them. It was also during Epiphany when the Afro-Cuban population had the opportunity to publicly perform the dance steps and songs of praise to the *orishas* which during the rest of the year they had to practice in secret. The feast of the Epiphany, then, became a vital festival for practitioners of Santería, the most important Afro-Cuban religion. Fully attired in African priestly and regal robes, the different *naciones* ("tribes") sang hymns of praise, danced sacred dances, and performed the necessary public rituals that would ensure the general well-being of the *santeros*, their families, and their adopted country – Cuba. The following is an eye-witness account of an Afro-Cuban procession during the late 19th century:

As they passed by the governor's palace, after their curious performances, there marched in perfect order Congos and Lucumies with their grandiose head-dresses full of feathers, vests with blue stripes, and red percale pantaloons; Ararás with their cheeks covered with scars cut with red-hot irons, bedecked with shells and the teeth of dogs and alligators, beads strung of bone and glass, and on their waists huge grass skirts; Mandingas very elegant with their wide trousers, short jackets and turbans of red silk . . .⁵

4. Joseph M. Murphy, *Santería, An African Religion in America* (Beacon: Boston, 1988), p. 30.

5. Fernando Ortiz, *La Fiesta Afro-Cubana del Día de Reyes* (Universal: Havana, 1925), p. 6.

After formally parading in front of the colonial (later republican) authorities, the Afro-Cubans would retreat to their *cabildos* where sacred Batá drums would be played for the *orishas* and necessary rituals would be carried out behind closed doors.

The festival of Epiphany, then, served the *santeros* and other practitioners of African-based religions on many different levels. Firstly, the festival of Epiphany enabled the *santeros* to fulfil the demands of their *orishas* to be publicly paraded. Secondly, Epiphany allowed an oppressed people to vent out their frustrations and tensions through twenty-four hours of feverish physical activity. Thirdly, Epiphany gave Afro-Cubans a sense of belonging inside Cuba's dominant Catholic society. Fourthly, Epiphany made it possible for Afro-Cubans to retain their African heritage through dance and song as well as through dress and other customs preserved in the Epiphany processions.

Since Cuba became a republic in 1902 there have been periods of intense persecution of *santeros* as well as periods of relative tolerance. Since 1940, when Santería achieved a measure of respect in Cuba through the efforts of such Afro-Cuban artists as Nicolas Gillen, other Catholic festivals have become important to *santeros*. After Cuba became officially atheistic and anti-religious in the early 1960's, the *santeros* continued to exist by adapting to the new conditions. In today's Cuba, the practice of Santería is protected by the government as a unique cultural legacy, and the secularized, state-sponsored carnival is offering the *santeros* the opportunity to continue the practice of parading their *orishas*.