

Raul J Canizares
University of South Florida

THE ETHICS OF SANTERIA

Even though a significant number of Cubans – as well as others – practice Santería in private, few acknowledge their allegiance to Santería publicly.¹ This reluctance to acknowledge participation in African-based religions on the part of Cubans has a complicated and convoluted historical basis. Although many people of different ethnic backgrounds have found religious fulfillment in the practice of Santería, many continue to hide their participation in a religion which has been viewed by the dominant Christian societies where Santería has been practiced as a backward religion associated with low-status people. The fundamental elements of Santería were brought to Cuba by way of Yoruba slaves. Over the centuries, through a process of adaptation to the Cuban socio-religious complex, Yoruba traditions were transformed into what has come to be known as Santería.²

Santería's origins as the religion of a people once thought by the dominant sector of Cuban society to be less than human may account for some of the prejudice Euro-Christian societies have historically expressed against it. Another argument one often encounters against Santería is that it is unethical, that it lacks morals. Certain santeros have related to me that they would like to openly declare their adherence to Santería, but are embarrassed to be associated with a system which is viewed as non-ethical. I contend that the question of ethics and morality in Santería should not be formulated in a quantitative mode ("Is Santería less moral than Christianity?"). Instead, one needs to

1. In her book *Lo Ancestral Africano en la Narrativa de Lydia Cabrera* (Barcelona: Editorial Vosgos, 1974), p. 18. Rosa Valdes-Cruz estimates that 75% of the Cuban population practices Santería to some degree.
2. I am only addressing the subject of ethics in Santería; I am not concerning myself with modern Yoruba ethics. Although all of the concepts named in this paper are also present in Yoruba religion, they are understood differently in that tradition. For an overview of Yoruba ethics, see Samuel O. Abogunrin, "Ethics in Yoruba Religious Tradition," *World Religions and Global Ethics*, S. Cromwell Crawford, editor (New York: Paragon House, 1989).

investigate the ethics of Santería from a relatively unbiased position, taking into account the context in which these ethics have developed and the particular perspective of the Santería practitioners.

Santería is practiced by Western people, yet it is not a Western religion. This paradoxical situation has contributed to much of the confusion surrounding the question of Santería's ethics and morality. Santería's ethical standards cannot be objectively characterized as being either superior or inferior to those of Western Christianity. What one can assert is that the worldview of Santería differs from that of the Abrahamic faiths; therefore, the ethical framework one finds in Santería is correspondingly different from that of the Judeo-Christian traditions.

In Western traditions, God is depicted as creator of the universe, as one who brings order to chaos. This bringer of order – the biblical God – later gives mankind a set of rules, the Decalogue, which humans are compelled to obey. As Starhawk (Miriam Simos) writes:

The conception of justice in Western, patriarchal, traditions is of a set of absolute laws that transcend the world, that are imposed on the world from the outside They are the laws of heaven, and must be valued whatever their consequences here on earth – because heaven, not earth, is what [is] value [d].³

Contrast the above statement with the following Santería *patakí* (myth):

In the beginning was Ashé. When Ashé began to think, Ashé became Olodumare. When Olodumare acted, He became Olofi, and it was Olofi who, out of a part of himself, created Obatalá.

The myth goes on to explain how Obatalá became two beings, one male; one female. This first couple became the parents of the first orishas (deities). It was also Obatalá who created the first human beings. Observe that the concept of Ashé predates the existence of God (Olodumare). Ashé – from the Yoruba *Aṣe* – is a dynamic concept not amenable to easy definitions. The word *ashé* has become part of

3. Miriam Simos [Starhawk], *Dreaming the Dark* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 34.

the popular Cuban lexicon, its meaning being reduced to "good luck" or "good fortune." Ashé's ontological meaning, however, is considerably deeper. Understanding the concept of Ashé is central to understanding the ethics of Santería.

Ashe

One of the levels at which Ashé can be understood – the term "ashé" appears to have as many dimensions as the term "dharma" – is as the manifestation of the principles of order and balance. Using "Order and Balance" as a synonym for "Ashé," we find that order and balance were present before the appearance of God. Santeros, then, do not view God as the bringer of order, but as a personification of Ashé. Ashé is the ultimate Source of everything. Santeros view the universe – including God and the orishas – as being inhabited by co-dependent beings who have responsibilities to one another. These responsibilities, spelled out in such orally-transmitted works as the oracle of Ifá,⁴ are all conducive to the attainment of order and balance. Imbalance (lack of ashé) is experienced by the individual as a dysfunctional emotional, physical, or economical state. When a person experiences imbalance, he/she consults one of the oracles of Santería to find out the cause of, and the remedy for, that imbalance. The remedy usually involves some sort of offering to the orishas or to the ancestral spirits, as well as practical advice from the reader of the oracle – usually a Santería priest or priestess – on how to regain the lost balance.

Western bi-polarities, such as good/evil and God/Satan, have little meaning in Santería.⁵ For santeros, "evil" is a relative term; there are no absolutes. "Evil," "sin," and "pain," can all be defined as lack of ashé – imbalance – a "good" person by Western standards could conceivably fit Santería's definition of evil: one who causes imbalance. The following hypothetical case will demonstrate what I mean:

-
4. The oracle of Ifa, a collection of stories originally memorized by *babalao*s, has been in book form in Cuba for at least 200 years (privately printed). Anthropologists Judith Gleason and William Bascom have each written English translations of the oracle of Ifa.
 5. Although modern Yoruba scholars have identified Eshu (Esu) with Satan, in Santería Eshu – called Elegua – has retained his theriomorphic character. Although he is a trickster, Elegua in no way resembles the evil devil of the West.

A Roman Catholic priest in a small Latin-American town, armed with a hatchet, cuts down a tree to which local santeros give offerings. The priest feels he is helping his neighbors by eliminating a temptation to practice idolatry, a mortal sin. The santeros, however, feel that the Catholic priest has caused a very serious imbalance. After an oracle is consulted, a santero proclaims that the Catholic priest will suffer the consequences of having caused that imbalance. That night, the priest suffers a heart attack and dies. Christians denounce the santeros as belonging to a satanic cult which used black magic to harm a saintly man.

From the Christian perspective, the Catholic priest was following the dictates of his faith. From the santeros' perspective, however, the priest cut down a sacred entity, thus committing an act of unprovoked aggression tantamount to murder. Santeros would view the outcome – the priest's death – as indicative of the priest's culpability.⁶ An argument from the Santería perspective could be made to the effect that the hypothetical priest's problem lay on the faulty ethics to which he subscribed – the "thou shalt nots" of the Abrahamic faiths. The rigid ethics of Western Christianity, a santero might argue, consist of an arbitrary set of rules imposed from the outside, rules which, because of their static nature, are irrelevant to particular situations. Santeros believe that a more realistic, naturalistic, and yes, moral course of action is that which is dictated by a person's own ashé. Santeros believe that one's ashé internally inspires each person. Someone who is in contact with his/her ashé will act in a manner congruent with the avoidance of imbalance. When a santero experiences difficulty accessing his/her ashé, that person may ask his/her eledá – personal orisha, "guardian angel" – to help him/her regain his/her lost ashé.

Eleda

Although in Yoruba religion there are literally hundreds of orishas, the total number in Santería is less than twenty. Santeros believe that everyone has a heavenly mother and father just as each person has

6. The concepts of karmic justice and reincarnation, now part of Yoruba religion, were never fully developed in Santería, though an inclination towards those concepts can be detected in seminal form.

an earthly mother and father. The heavenly parents are members of the ranks of the orishas, the efficacious demigods of Santería. Orishas possess particular faults as well as virtues. The orishas' faults, however, are to be interpreted as sacred stories, not actual deficiencies or imbalances. Orishas are thought to be the repositories of Olodumare's Ashé. These sacred stories of the supposed frailties of the orishas help humans understand their own character flaws – personality traits which tend to contribute to states of imbalance – thus helping people find remedies for the imbalances these faults may precipitate.

Of the two heavenly parents each person has, one asserts himself/herself more strongly on that person's life, becoming such a person's primary spiritual parent. These primary spiritual parental figures are called *eledás* or guardian angels in Santería. Just as a child tends to exhibit physical and emotional characteristics inherited from his/her earthly parents, so can he/she exhibit characteristics associated with the heavenly parents. In this way, an *omo-Shangó* (child of Shangó) may be assertive, attractive, and strong like the orisha Shangó. He/she may also have the imbalance-causing tendencies which are associated with the orisha Shangó, such as a quick temper, a fear of things dead, and a propensity for sexual promiscuity. Sometimes an orisha's mythic faults are so evident in his/her *omo* that, in order for the *omo* to experience peace and tranquility, the orisha must be *asentad(a)* in that person's head – the person must be consecrated a priest/priestess of his/her orisha.

When a person agrees to have his/her *eledá* installed inside his/her head in the ceremony called *kariocha*,⁷ that person enters into a very serious contract with the orisha – nowadays such a contract is written – where the *omo* agrees to keep certain taboos. In exchange, the orisha will give the *omo* peace, tranquility, and other, more tangible benefits – such as material wealth. The taboos the *omo* must keep usually consist of avoiding certain foods, certain colors, and fulfilling other obligations such as faithfully observing certain rituals. Failure to honor the contract will result in loss of ashé, keeping the promises made to the orishas results in the accumulation of ashé – here also meaning power; material, spiritual, and magical. The principal function of the *eledá* is to protect his/her *omo* from undeserved harm. Notice

7. *Kariocha* literally means "to be seated on one's head."

that the orisha is not required to keep the santero from all harm, since it is expected that everyone must pay the price of having been the cause of imbalance. When a santero engages in a practice which may have negative effects on a particular person, such as seeking a position held by another, the potentially affected person's *eledá* must be ritually consulted (without the conscious knowledge of the person, of course) and appeased. Santeros will sometimes plead with another person's *eledá* to allow something to be done to that person, the causes of the santeros' actions being explained to the potentially affected person's *eledá* as if he/she were a judge. Along with the concept of *Ashé* and that of the *eledá*, the third component of what I would call the "Big Three" determinants of Santería ethics is the central position the oracles have in the religion, chief among these being the Oracle of *Ifá*.

Oracles

Although some Yoruba scholars have attempted to equate the oracle of *Ifá* with the Judeo-Christian scriptures,⁸ I propose that this is not really accurate. The oracle of *Ifá* consists of a body of sacred stories (*patakies*) which a highly trained priest called a *babalao* (Yoruba *babalawo*) memorizes. By casting a small chain with eight small concave circles, the *babalao* obtains a configuration which indicates which *oddu*—chapter—of the oracle of *Ifá* is to be recited at a particular moment, for a particular inquirer. These stories, sometimes highly ambiguous, are interpreted by the *babalao* through the inspiration of his *ashé*. Although considered highly reliable, the oracle of *Ifá* is not as frequently consulted as the *caracoles* oracle—also known as *meddiloqun*—which any santería priest or priestess can learn to cast.

The *caracoles* oracle is simpler than the *Ifá* system. While as many as 256 *oddu*s appear in *Ifá*, only 16 are evident in *meddiloqun*. The way to cast the *caracoles* is by using 16 cowrie shells. The number of shells which fall with the openings facing up determines which *oddu* is to be recited. Traditionally, *oddu*s one through twelve can be interpreted by any priest or priestess. *Oddu*s thirteen through sixteen are to be interpreted only by *babalao*s, the high priests of the religion, highly esteemed because of their wisdom and the amount of taboos their position place on them. The most frequently used oracle in Santería is the *obi* oracle.

8. See Samuel O. Abogunrin, *Op. Cit.*

Practically anyone—including non-santeros—may use the *obi* oracle (also called the cocoanut oracle). Four pieces of cocoanut are used in the *obi* divination system. Depending if the white (pulpous) side or dark side come up, a total of five configurations are possible. Generally, the answers given through the *obi* are limited to “yes,” “no,” “try again,” and “consult your elders.” Some people are highly proficient in the art of cocoanut casting—“they have a lot of ashé”—and can extract a surprising number of answers from this simple oracle.

When a person enters into the serious commitment of the *kariocha* initiation—the person, regardless of gender, is then known as an *iyabo*, from the Yoruba *iyawo*: wife—accepting the responsibilities and benefits of such a commitment. An especially trained santero known as an *oriaté* casts the newly initiated person's *itá*. The *itá* is a very complex and thorough recitation which advises the new initiate what taboos he/she should keep in order to maximize his/her happiness. During the *itá*, many facets of the person's future are revealed, and ways of avoiding accidents and early death are discussed—a person may be advised never to go to the beach, for example. Once, a person had to memorize his/her entire *itá*. Since the 19th century, santeros have been writing their *itás* in notebooks known as *libretas*. Some of these *libretas* of santeros of long ago are at present highly esteemed in Santería circles, attaining the status of sacred scriptures.

Conclusion

Santería's ethics are intricately intertwined to the whole system of beliefs and values of the Santeros. Originally the religion of an enslaved people, Santería was maintained in private due to its proscribed nature. Probably reflecting the values of 18th and 19th century Yorubas, Santería's approach to ethics and morality differs both from those of Western societies and from modern Yoruba (African) interpretations. A basic understanding of fundamental concepts particular to Santería is needed before the ethics of Santería can be discussed. Such concepts reveal that, while Santería's worldview differs substantially from those of Western societies, the religion does not lack a system of ethics. Rather, Santería's system of ethics reveal a deep understanding of the needs of a community to make sense of its surroundings and an intrinsic desire to live in cosmic harmony.