Santeria: Its Growth and Changes as a Result of its Major Relocations

Michelle Kindler
St. John Fisher College, mkindler_no@sjfc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur

Part of the Other Religion Commons

How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?

Recommended Citation
<https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur/vol1/iss1/4>.

This document is posted at https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur/vol1/iss1/4 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.
Santeria: Its Growth and Changes as a Result of its Major Relocations

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the article's first paragraph.

Santeria is a religion native to Cuba. Santeria is a very spiritual religious way of life. Followers believe that everything has a spirit to it which must be honored and appeased in order to remain in that spirit's good graces. Each spirit, or orisha, has his/her own special likes, dislikes, colors, herbs, foods, dances, etc. These must be presented in order to honor the orisha. Santeria stems from the African religion Yoruba and was forced to come to the New World because of the slave trade. The Yoruba religion and it's followers survived the massive upheaval and adapted to the new environment it was forced into. The result was the formation of Santeria. The orisha believers are now facing their second major upheaval with their movement away from Cuba. Each of these translocations has opened up a whole new world of problems and obstacles that need to be overcome in order for believers to continue their traditions. Followers have adapted, and their religious beliefs have evolved to meet the demands and pressures of their new environments. A look into the history of the religion explains why an air of secrecy surrounds the religion, its beliefs and its rituals. Believers are reluctant to talk about, or reveal information about Santeria to outsiders for fear of persecution, which has followed the religion ever since it landed in the New World.
Santeria is a religion native to Cuba. Santeria is a very spiritual religious way of life. Followers believe that everything has a spirit to it which must be honored and appeased in order to remain in that spirit’s good graces. Each spirit, or orisha, has his/her own special likes, dislikes, colors, herbs, foods, dances, etc. These must be presented in order to honor the orisha. Santeria stems from the African religion Yoruba and was forced to come to the New World because of the slave trade. The Yoruba religion and it’s followers survived the massive upheaval and adapted to the new environment it was forced into. The result was the formation of Santeria. The orisha believers are now facing their second major upheaval with their movement away from Cuba. Each of these translocations has opened up a whole new world of problems and obstacles that need to be overcome in order for believers to continue their traditions. Followers have adapted, and their religious beliefs have evolved to meet the demands and pressures of their new environments. A look into the history of the religion explains why an air of secrecy surrounds the religion, its beliefs and its rituals. Believers are reluctant to talk about, or reveal information about Santeria to outsiders for fear of persecution, which has followed the religion ever since it landed in the New World.

Santeria has its roots in the African religion of Yoruba. Many of Santeria’s fundamental beliefs, rituals, and practices stem from this African religion. Due to this fact, a look into the beliefs and practices of the Yoruba people is a necessary starting point to understand Santeria. Yoruba is located in what is Nigeria today. The supreme god in Yoruba religion is Olodumare, “the owner of all destinies” (Murphy 1988, 7). Olodumare’s role is that of creator and sustainer of the universe. However, Olodumare has no direct role in the lives of humans. Olodumare has no human characteristics and is never drawn in pictures. Ashe is the incarnation of Olodumare as a force in the world. Ashe is a big part of the Yoruba religion, but is difficult to explain since there are no tangible aspects to it.

Values, power, and order represent the ways of ashe on earth (Murphy 1988, 8). Value comes from honoring one’s ancestors, or ora orun (people of the heaven). The Yoruba people place much emphasis on the past. One must remember the past to find a moral example to live by. Ancestors are also know as egungun. Yoruba has a secret society of males who impersonate the community’s ancestors at the major festivals. The harvest of the yams is a particularly important one in which the egungun make their annual return to the world of the living. During this festival, masked dancers representing the ora orun appear for a week throughout the community providing moral support and criticism while hearing petitions from the people (Murphy 1988, 8-9). The egungun are concerned with the community’s moral and social conditions (Brandon 1993, 15). The Yoruba
people see the egungun as a sign of the “continued guidance of the past and hope for the future” (Murphy 1988, 10).

The Yoruba religion also has a belief in the ori (“the head”) which is a spiritual force that connects both the visible and invisible characteristics that make up everyone. Their belief is that an ori kneels before the supreme god, Olodumare, and chooses its destiny for life on earth (Murphy 1988, 10). The ori then chooses all of the physical and mental characteristics of the person which it is born into. The Yoruba people’s belief in reincarnation is also shown through the ori. There are only a set number of ori, this means that once one dies it will come back at some point in another individual (Murphy 1988, 10). This is another reason behind the importance of ancestors to the community and to individuals, they always remain a part of the community in one form or another.

Power is the second element of ashe. Power results from an individual’s relationship with the orishas (spirits). Orishas are concerned with an individual’s destiny, they guide people on the right path to their intended destinies (Brandon 1993, 15). Yoruba belief is that orishas were people who lived in the holy city, Ile Ife, at the beginning of the earth’s creation. The orishas had important influence and power and became the “patrons of Yoruba life” (Murphy 1988, 11). There are a few orishas who are believed to have descended directly from Olodumare and have been here before the first humans appeared (Brandon 1993, 13). The key part to the belief in Orishas is that they are not immortal beings. This belief explains the importance of the animal sacrifices they perform. The children of an orisha, its followers, must sacrifice in order to keep the orisha alive. Without sacrifice the orisha will die (Murphy 1988, 15).

Traditional Yoruba religion recognizes as many as 1,700 different orishas. Every Yoruba activity and part of nature has its own orisha. It is up to the priests and priestess of the Yoruba religion to bring the orishas into the world of the living so others can consult with them. Orishas are able to do this by “mounting” one of their children (Murphy 1988, 14). Usually only people who are trained are able to have an orisha mount him/her. However, an orisha is free to mount anyone present that it wishes.

Order is the final component of ashe. One achieves order through divination. This belief eliminates the concept of chance. Everything that happens is the will of Olodumare (Murphy 1988, 17). Ifa is the path of divination. There are different methods of Ifa. Both include using whole nuts, or shells and then interpreting them. This can be done by throwing them and seeing how the shells land, concave up or down, or by seeing how many nuts remain in the Babalawo’s hand. A Babalawo is a master of the art of divination. It takes 10-15 years of training to master. They are usually high priests and elder men (Murphy 1988, 16). It is rare for women to be Babalawos. Once a person’s situation is determined through divination, a sacrifice is usually needed to the person’s orisha.

The concept of ashe is an important element to the Yoruba religion, but it is not the only part that influences Santeria. The important use of herbs, dancing, drums, and icons are all significant components. For example, the idea that a temple is not important for its structure, but rather because of the icons and paintings it encloses, is also true in Santeria. Humans are believed to be the center of the universe in both religions since they are the only ones capable of performing rituals, sacrifices, and empowering objects with
ashe (Brandon 1993, 17). These basic concepts of the Yoruba religion are necessary to understand because they provide the foundation that Santeria is built on.

Santeria didn’t emerge until the slave trade became an important part of Cuban industry. Many Africans from Yoruba were forcibly brought over to Cuba in the slave trade. These men, women, and children brought their Yoruba religion with them on the voyage from their homeland to the New World. This transfer not only relocated the religion in Cuba but also brought changes to it.

Although the slave trade began in the sixteenth century, it didn’t reach uncontrollable numbers until the early nineteenth century. The late eighteenth century brought with it the great sugar industry boom. Cuba became one of the world’s leading suppliers of sugar. The growing demand led to the development of the largest sugar plantations in the world. This increase in the demand for sugar is the cause for the great upsurge of slave importation in Cuba. The Spaniards needed someone to do all of their labor for them, so that the new wealthy class could maintain their status. Estimates on the number of Africans brought to Cuba as slaves range from 240,000 up to 700,000 people depending on the source.

Once in Cuba, many Africans stayed together in communities. These communities came to be known as Lucumi after the language that they spoke. Santeria is sometimes referred to as Lucumi since all of their rituals and prayers are spoken in this language.

In Cuba the Spaniards decided to bless the now Afro-Cubans with the chance to be baptized Catholics. The Spaniards believed that they were doing the slaves a favor by forcing all of them to become Catholic. “Spanish jurists argued that a life of servitude was a small price to pay for the opportunity of eternal life with Christ” (Murphy 1988, 27). Basically this was the Spaniards’ attempt to justify the wrongfulness of slavery. To enhance the Spaniards’ duty of Christianizing the African slaves, cabildos, or societies of blacks, were set up. The idea behind the start of cabildos was that it would be easier to teach the African slaves about Catholicism if they were all together. Ironically the idea backfired on the Spaniards, although they were unaware of it.

The Afro-Cubans were very cleaver and made use of any means possible to maintain their religious and cultural traditions. At first the cabildos allowed the slaves to contribute their African heritage into the Catholic ceremonies. Since African dances had been outlawed by the Spanish government, except at celebrations, the slaves used this as an opportunity to preserve their native music, dances and drums. “The carnival dances, loosely harnessed to the veneration of the saints, became the primary way for the Lucumi to be both Catholic and African” (Murphy 1988, 31). There was no problem with this at first. The Catholic teachers even encouraged this as a way of bringing the Africans more fully into the Catholic faith (Brandon 1993, 70). The Spaniards’ attitudes soon changed though as they began to see the preservation of African heritage as a threat. Slowly, more and more laws were passed that limited the use of any element of African heritage. The first of these laws was passed in 1792, the Good Government Law. It prohibited the use of African dances except on holidays and Sundays. By 1842, Africans could only celebrate the Epiphany, the Dia de las Reyes. This celebration was even outlawed in 1884. All of these factors combined together to change the Yoruba religion into its Cuban form of Santeria.
Santeria literally means the way of the saints. The name emerged because of the combination of Yoruba orishas with the saints of the Catholic religion. At first the combining was simply a way for the slaves to hide their religious devotion for the orishas, but the two became so intertwined that they are both an equally important part of the religion.

“What may have once begun as a subterfuge, an attempt to fool Catholic observers while preserving the ways of the Orishas, became a genuine universal religious vision in which a Catholic saint and a Lucumi orisha were seen as different manifestations of the same spiritual entity. As the Yoruba had become Lucumi in Cuba, so the Yoruba religious vision became Santeria, an attempt to honor the gods of Africa in the land of Catholic saints” (Murphy 1988, 32).

Even though the Yoruba religion was combined with Catholicism, it still retained its own beliefs and customs. Olodumare is still the supreme god. Orishas and egungun both remain central to the religion. Rituals, ceremonies and practices that were in the Yoruba religion are still a part of Santeria. The use of herbs, divination, drums, chants, etc. were all carried over into Santeria.

Aside from the addition of the Catholic saints into the religion, secrecy also became an integral part of Santeria. This resulted out of necessity. Secrecy was the only means by which to preserve their traditions and religious beliefs in this new world where they were forced into a culture which they did not understand and one in which they had no desire to be pushed into. They could only worship the orishas in public if they were in the form of the saints. Since their African heritage and traditions were outlawed, slaves had no choice but to practice their customs and beliefs underground where they would not draw attention to themselves. This need for secrecy only increased with time, especially after slavery ended and the War of Independence. Nationalism ran through Cuba after the war, but the nationalism was an attempt to “de-Africanize Cuban culture” (Brandon 1993, 85). Afro-Cubans were persecuted, their drums and religious icons were forbidden. The only way they could practice any of their African rites was in secret.

Secrecy added another element to the once Yoruba religion. Santeria began to mix elements of Espiritismo with their own beliefs. This not only changed some of the practices of the religion, but is also responsible for many of the myths that became associated with Santeria. Since everything about the religion: its beliefs, customs, ceremonies, etc. were all kept private, many people who were not associated with the religion became afraid of it. It is a well known fact that people are afraid of what they do not understand, this is the case with Santeria. Many myths and negative ideas are associated with the religion. Some of these theories include that Santeria is associated with political subversion, gangsterism, (Murphy 1988, 33-34) sorcery, black magic, and
occultism (Brandon 1993, 85). Although there is some truth to all of these ideas concerning Santeria, none are true for the majority of believers. And, none of these are characteristic beliefs or practices encouraged by the religion itself. As is the case with any group, whether religious or not, there will be people who belong to the organization who also follow other beliefs of their own. This is the case with Santeria. Some of its followers were involved in these types of shady practices and helped to give Santeria a bad image.

When Santeria incorporated aspects of Espiritismo into its beliefs the importance of herbs became even greater. Herbs were an important part of the religion dating back to its Yoruba roots. Espiritismo’s greatest impact on Santeria was in the healing aspect of its beliefs. Espiritistas specialized in causas (Brandon 1993, 89). Causas are a category of intranquil spirits that Espiritismo believe to be the cause of disease and suffering.

Egwe (herbs) play a role in a variety of Santeria practices. First, egwe are necessary for maintaining a healthy and “abundant” life (Brandon 1991, 2). Egwe are capable of promoting happiness because they help keep the orishas happy. Each orisha has its own favorite herbs that it needs to stay alive, healthy, and happy. When one’s orisha is happy, he/she can also be happy. Secondly, egwe is responsible for maintaining one’s health. Santeria believes that illness is due to an imbalance in the person’s life or due to supernatural forces (Pasquali 1994, 1-2). Since mind, body, and spirit are all intertwined with one another, to heal an illness one must look at all three aspects. To regain one’s health, he/she must “avert or neutralize these negative supernatural forces” (Pasquali 1994, 4). Egwes are the first defense taken. Each egwe has its own special powers and the appropriate egwe is used. If the egwe is not known, an herbmaster is consulted.

Thirdly, egwes play an enormous role in the rituals and ceremonies of Santeria. Egwes are mainly used in ceremonies as a way of preparing people for contact with the orishas (Brandon 1991, 4). Egwes are a means of cleansing and refreshing the head, for example, during initiation rites. Two important egwe solutions are ozain and omiero. The ozain of each orisha is different and is based on which egwes are favorable to the orisha. Making of the ozain is its own little ceremony in itself. Several priests/priestesses, an oriate, and an ozainista are all required for the making of the ozain. Each santero (priest or priestess) contributes a part of his/her own ache to the ozain mixture (Brandon 1991, 4). Therefore, the more santeros that help to prepare the ozain, the more powerful it will be. The oriate is required to know all of the songs and prayers of the orisha(s) whose ozain is being made. The ozainista is a priest/priestess who is also an herb specialist. The ozainista needs to be able to gather the herbs as well as be knowledgeable about each egwe’s prayers, personalities, temperaments and powers (Brandon 1991, 4). An important aspect of the preparation of the ozain is that the songs of the orisha, whose ozain is being made, are sung as the egwes are being mixed for the solution. It is important to realize Santeria’s beliefs about plants. Plants are “alive with divine power, but they also have personalities and temperament” (Brandon 1991, 3). Egwes are sacred to believers in Santeria. This is why ozainistas, or herbmasters, are the most vital office within the Santeria religion. “Above everything else, the herbs are what make the religion work, and their properties and symbolic meanings are the most closely guarded secrets of the way of the orishas” (Murphy 1988, 47). Herbs are an integral part of Santeria.
Omiero is the other important herbal mixture. Compared to ozain, omiero is the more powerful of the two, because it is believed to empower the user (Brandon 1991, 4). Omiero is a sacred herbal water that combines the ozains for each of the orishas whose ozains had been prepared. When ozains are made, a small portion is set aside. These are all mixed together to form the omiero. While ozain is just discarded after its use, omiero’s power lasts until it is used up (Brandon 1991, 4). Omiero is used to soak elekes (beaded necklaces sacred to orishas), to prepare an aleyo’s head for asiento (an initiation ceremony) and to wash knives used in sacrifices. The omiero used for the asiento is the most powerful of all omiero. This omiero de asiento contains the egwes of all the orishas.

Asiento is the central ceremony of initiation into Santeria. This is the ceremony in which the devotee is initiated as a santero (priest or priestess) of Santeria. Before undergoing the ceremony, the aleyo (initiate) needs to gain knowledge of all the secrets of the religion. The aleyo needs to memorize the many prayers honoring each of the orishas, as well as learn how to “invoke the spirits.” Most importantly the aleyo needs to gain knowledge of the egwe and their varied uses (Murphy 1988, 14). This is the same as the ceremony of the Yoruba religion. Once the aleyo is ready, he/she must remain in seclusion for nine months. This isolation is believed necessary to prepare oneself for his/her rebirth into the spirit. In Yoruba religion the novitiate becomes an omo-orisha (child of the orisha) (Murphy 1988, 14). This terminology changed in the religion’s transformation into Santeria once it came to Cuba. The aleyo is preparing to become an iyawo (bride of the orisha).

Following the nine months of isolation, the aleyo is ready for the ceremony. The head is central to the ceremony because the head is what “carries the body” (Mason 1994, 29) and also because the head is the part of the body that receives the orisha. So, to prepare for this, the aleyo’s head is shaved, washed in omiero, his/her orisha’s colors are painted on it, and finally a small cross is carved into the aleyo’s head (Mason 1994, 29). Following the carving of the cross into the skull, sacred herbs of the central orisha are then rubbed into the open, bleeding cross (Mason 1994, 29). The final step in this coronacion (seating of the orisha into the aleyo’s head) is for the placing of the of the stones. Santeria believes that orishas are present in stones, and so to feed orishas, blood and egwe are given to their stones (Murphy 1988, 85). This is the most dramatic part of the ceremony. Stones, that have been washed in omiero and fed, are placed over the initiate’s head while the community of santeros present sing the praises and honors of the orisha whose stone is being placed (Murphy 1988, 87). This is the point in time when the orisha is said to come down and “mount” the iyawo. (newborn initiate, bride of the orisha) During this time, chants, songs, and drums are all being played while waiting for the orisha to come. Although this is the most dramatic part of the ceremony, it is not the end.

The sacrifice is still left to be performed. Sacrifices are an integral part of the Santeria religion, but they are the most misunderstood part as well. For believers, sacrifices are a “way to show the relationship and interdependence of living things” (Murphy 1988, 44). The issues surrounding the sacrifices will be discussed in more detail a little later on, for now just their role in the asiento will be looked at. Before the animal, a type of bird, a guinea hen for example, is washed. The animal is then held by its feet and used to brush the iyawo. The iyawo slowly turns while his/her padrino (godfather in the
religion, the one who performs the initiation) sweeps the iyawo from head to toe with the bird (Mason 1994, 30). The intention of this part of the ceremony is to remove any negative spirits or influences that may be present on the iyawo. Following this the iyawo must sacrifice the animal. The sacrifice is done in three symbolically important steps. The first is the actual killing of the animal. This is the first time that the iyawo will have performed a sacrifice. The padrino fulfills the role of the second step which is the quieting of the animal after it has been killed. The third step is up to the iyawo again. The next time the bird kicks and squeals it is up to him/her to force the air out of the body (Mason 1994, 31). Although quieting the bird is not he focus of the ceremony, it demonstrates the iyawo’s commitment and willingness to accept, follow and continue the Santeria traditions (Mason 1994, 32). The number and type of animals sacrificed depend on the Orishas that were presented to the iyawo. The blood is now fed to the orishas while the santeros eat the meat of the animals that were sacrificed.

The last part of the asiento is the performing of the moforoibale. This again is a tradition that has been passed on from the Yoruba religion. The word moforoibale means “I bow to you.” It is a traditional greeting that the santeros perform for the orishas, and that the newly initiated iyawos must perform for their elder santeros. The greeting is a form of respect and reverence. It is basically just putting one’s head to the ground in front of the other santeros. Specifically how it is done depends on if the iyawo’s orisha is male or female (Mason 1994 32-33 & Murphy 1988, 83).

Believers in Santeria see the relationship between the iyawo and the orisha as a marriage, which is apparent by the very meaning of the word iyawo (bride of the orisha). This is slightly different from the Yoruba belief that sees the initiate as a child of the orisha (Murphy 1988, 14). All humans, regardless of whether they are male or female are considered to be the bride of the orisha. The iyawo has a responsibility to fulfill to her orisha for one full year. These responsibilities include always wearing white, always keeping one’s head covered, abstaining from alcohol, profanity, from visiting bars, jails, cemeteries, hospitals, and any other place of possible contamination (Murphy 1988, 90). Most importantly, the iyawo must abstain from sex for the year’s time. This is because her relation with the orisha is also seen as a sexual one. The orisha is her husband and she must remain faithful to him for this year (Murphy 1988, 89). Beyond these temporary restrictions, the iyawo has certain other restrictions that will last the rest of her life. These are mainly food restrictions. The iyawo can only eat foods that her orisha finds favorable, and must abstain from those which her orisha has forbidden. This varies with each of the different orishas since they all have their own likes and dislikes.

Divination is also a very important element of the rituals and ceremonies of Santeria. All rituals begin with a divination. Divination is a way of understanding the will of the orishas. The practice has its roots in the Yoruba religion which also used this technique. There are two types of divination used in Santeria. One is the Ifa. Ifa is the method used by the Yoruba people in Africa. The practice is the same as it was then, only that cowrie shells are now used instead of palm nuts. The purpose is the same though. An opo, a thin chain with the shells attached is used. The interpretations are based on how the shells land, whether the convex or concave side is up. The babalawo tosses the opo, records which sides on each of the eight shells is pointing up, and repeats this three times. Ifa is used to identify troubles, the source of these troubles, and ill-will by others.
toward the questioner, as well as clues to one's destiny (Murphy 1988, 65). Troubles are usually related to the devotee’s health, money or love, keeping in mind that many followers of Santeria are poor. It is believed that the cowrie shells act as the “mouthpieces of the gods” (Pasquali 1994, 6). For this reason there is no such thing as chance. Everything happens because it is the will of the orishas.

The second type of divination used in Santeria is the tossing of the obi. The ideas behind this process are the same as they were for use of the Ifa. The difference is that coconuts are used. A fresh coconut is drained and its shell is broken into four pieces, or obinus. A santero is sufficient to perform the tossing of the obi, a babalowa is not necessary. The santero holds all four sections of coconut shell in his/her hands and then tosses them. Which side of the shell lands up is what is interpreted. There are five possibilities. When two white insides and two dark shells land up, this is the most positive outcome, and means a definite yes (Murphy 1988, 74-75). Of the other four possibilities, the more white insides that are face up, the more positive the outcome, and the more dark shells that land face up, the more negative the answer. When all four dark shells land face up, this is the worst possible scenario. Often this signifies that there is evil present, and that death or destruction will soon be at hand (Pasquali 1994, 5).

Regardless of which system of divination is used, they are both ways of interpreting the will of the orishas. For this reason, sacrifices often follow divination as a way to appease the orishas. “In divination, the orishas speak to human beings, diagnosing their needs and opening their destinies to fulfillment. In sacrifice, human beings respond, giving back to the orishas the ashe that is the sustenance of life” (Murphy 1988, 135). By offering sacrifices the devotee not only thanks the orisha for his/her help and wisdom, but also pleases the orisha. It is key to remember that orishas need sacrifices in order to stay alive, they are not immortal beings. By feeding the orishas, a devotee deepens his/her relationship with the orisha and gains his/her support and blessing in a sense. This is important to avoid the curses and evil spirits of others.

Although Santeria maintained most of the traditions of the Yoruba religion, its followers had to practice these traditions in secret. The Afro-Cuban religion was not accepted nor welcomed in the Catholic society. This was the whole reason for the incorporation of the Catholic saints into the religion in the first place. Santeria remained a persecuted and repressed religion up until the 1920s. This is when the Afro-Cubanism movement developed and thrived in Cuban society. The movement impacted literature, music and the arts through the awakening of Afro-Cuban pride. Native Cuban cultural values were emphasized while western influences were rejected (Murphy 1988, 35). Artists and writers such as Fernando Ortiz, Nicolas Guillen, Alejo Carpentier, Amadeo Roldan and Wilfredo Lam, among others became fascinated with the primitive and magical (Brandon 1993, 90-92). Afro-Cubans provided these artists with a wealth of material to use. The movement brought importance, uniqueness and interest to these Afro-Cuban traditions. Traditions that had always been a part of the culture, but a part that was looked down upon up to this point. Santeria was one of the traditions that benefited from the Afro-Cubanism movement. This intellectual movement helped to bring some validity and acceptance to the Santeria faith. The myths of witchcraft and crime were replaced with the view of Santeria as part of Afro-Cuban folklore (Brandon 1993, 93). This helped spark interest and curiosity in the religion. Although suspicion about the religion was
relaxed for a time, this tolerance for Santeria was not permanent. People’s attitudes towards Santeria fluctuated constantly between acceptance and repression (Brandon 1993, 95). This only furthered the desire of santeros to remain in hiding with their practices.

The Castro government publicly recognized Afro-Cuban religions such as Santeria, because they had no institutions that were a threat to his government (Masland 1995, 30). This recognition, however, only created more problems for Santeria. First of all there was the dilemma between Santeria’s tradition of secrecy and this new acknowledgment of the Santeria beliefs. Many followers still held on to their fears of being prosecuted, so overall Santeria still remained rather secretiv. (Brandon 1993, 101). The second problem was accepting the revolutionary beliefs that were now part of the new Cuban government. Santeria did not “distinguish between the sacred and the secular (Brandon 1993, 102). This created problems because it did not support the revolutionary ideologies. Some of Santeria’s religious practices did not follow the beliefs of the new socialist society (Brandon 1993, 102). Religious ceremonies were only suppose to be performed on government appointed days and Santeria practicers refused to delay their ceremonies to their orishas based on what day it was. As a result the government became concerned over what was going on in these ceremonies. This further increased the desire to hide underground again. This movement underground led to the establishment of a whole secret economy that was not under government control (Brandon 1993, 103). This underground network was the only way for santeros to obtain the needed materials to perform the rituals and celebrations to the orishas.

All of this finally culminated in 1959 when the second major upheaval in the history of these people occurred. This religion was forced to undergo its first transformation when the Yoruba people were enslaved and brought to Cuba to work the sugar cane plantations. The Yoruba people proved to be resilient and adapted to the circumstances. They made the necessary adjustments to keep their religion alive and active. Although these adjustments are what changed the Yoruba religion into Santeria, most of the traditions and beliefs of the Yoruba religion were retained or only had slight modifications. The religion is now undergoing its second major movement. With the Cuban revolution of 1959, refugees have left Cuba to find a new, safe, homeland. Many of these refugees have come to the United States, bringing with them their religious beliefs, rituals, ceremonies and traditions. Now in America, Santeria faces a whole new realm of problems that it must overcome. The American culture is unfamiliar and ignorant about the religious beliefs and practices that are central to Santeria.

Estimates vary, but it is believed that over one million Cuban refugees have come to the United States. The number would be even higher if immigration quotas weren’t imposed in 1973. Miami, New York City, Washington D.C., and New Jersey have the highest Cuban populations in the country (Brandon 1993, 104). In 1979, Dade County, Florida alone had 430,000 Cuban occupants. These Cubans had to deal with a whole new way of life. Many turned to Santeria for support and guidance. Santeria was a familiar way of life from Cuba. “They need support. Santeria helps them deal with reality and so they have retreated to it” (Coppola and Reese 1981, 44). Since coming to the United States, Santeria has more followers than it did in Cuba at the time of the revolution (Brandon 1993, 104).
system and culture upon them. Despite this the Yoruba people were able to adapt and survive. They allowed their religion to take on some of the characteristics of the Christianity imposed on them. Cleverly they sugar coated their own beliefs to appear Christian on the outside, while really worshipping their own native orishas behind the mask. Slowly this became an inseparable part of the belief system and Santeria emerged, from the Yoruba religion. The traditions, beliefs, ceremonies and practices remained the same, only the connection between the orishas and Catholic saints changed. Santeros took the necessary precautions to keep their beliefs alive and unpersecuted. This is why so many of the beliefs and rituals are still unknown today by outsiders. Political and social conditions have forced Santeria to adopt an air of secrecy to it, in order to survive.

The second major upheaval resulted from the Cuban revolution in 1959. While the Castro government at first appeared to accept the religious traditions of Santeria, this soon changed and once again santeros were forced underground. Seeking refuge thousands upon thousands of Cubans left. Most came to the United States where they tried to set up communities of their own. It was only natural that their old Cuban beliefs and traditions would come with them. Santeria proved to be a unifying factor for the Cuban refugees. It was something familiar that they could relate to. As a result, the number of believers in Santeria increased like never before. Although safe from the Cuban government, these Cubans ran into a new realm of problems to face. And, once again, many of their beliefs and practices were forced underground. Because yes, even in America, the land of the free, these Cuban refugees can not find true acceptance and freedom. Battles are raging between these Cubans fighting for their religious freedom, and Americans who disagree with the beliefs of Santeria.

Looking on their history, the santeros here in America should have no problem surviving. Survival in part of their nature, their history. Santeria revolves around protecting and supporting its followers in these times of difficulty. This is just one more obstacle that their faith has been able to withstand.
Works Cited


