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# African Gods in America's Bible Belt: The Challenges of a Santería Community in the Southern U.S

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Members of the Afro-Cuban Santería religious community in the rural southern United States practice a living spiritual tradition that provides identity, ethical standards, and a system of biological and psychological healthcare. The challenges faced by many practitioners in this geographical region, often referred to as the 'Bible Belt,' result from bias, misinformation, and lack of resources for practitioners. My ethnographic fieldwork with this community focuses on exploring the needs of the community and the challenges that practitioners face: needs that include the need for sacred space, material goods used in the ritual practices of the religion, as well as access to community ceremonies. This paper looks at the complexity of Christian and Santería relationships in the South and the need for Christians to understand the effects of colonialism and ethnocentric attitudes toward members of this misunderstood religion.

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## Introduction

My fieldwork with a local temple in the traditions of Regla de Ocha or 'rule of the Orisha' began with an attempt to understand the types of challenges that the community faces in the observance of ceremonies and community gatherings. As someone who has lived in the southern United States, I was quite familiar with regional bias and historic racism toward African based religious traditions. Controversial practices such as animal sacrifice placed the religion into a marginalized place in the communities where they exist. Regions where disdain for pluralism occur have the ability to create hostile environments both philosophically and physically for practitioners.

It is amidst these challenges that the religion of Santería, or 'Ocha' as it is colloquially called, must exist with various survival practices. The religion itself as an African traditional religion had to survive the forced conversions of African slaves by Spanish colonialists. The ritual practices have adapted a number of techniques in order to continue in the face of social challenges. Certain ceremonies must be performed in secret in order to avoid social conflicts.

Although somewhat familiar with the religion at the onset of this research, I would find that observing and experiencing ritual would bring me an increased understanding of the complexities of ritual life. Ceremonial practices including animal sacrifice took on new meanings as the multi-layered conversations between devotee and the deities revealed the living nature of the religion. Ceremonies and material culture were neither rehearsed nor static. Members of the community approached daily life with one eye open to the spiritual at all times. Daily events and stresses were filtered through the worldview that the Orishas (deities), the ancestors and the dead all had a place in daily life. Likewise daily dedication in the form of ritual, dress, and behavior demonstrated dedication to the Santos (saints).

## History

Santería developed from the religion of the Yoruba people of West Africa. In the mid-sixteenth century thousands of Yoruba were taken into slavery and transported to British, French, Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Caribbean Islands. Many of the Yoruba were forced to work on plantations as

slaves. The spiritual and healing traditions of the Yoruba were taken away as many slave owners forced slaves to abandon their traditional practices and observances. Many Yoruba were forced into conversion into the slave owners' religion of Catholicism.

In order to keep traditional religion alive, the Yoruba and several other ethnic groups would observe religious rites in secret. As many ethnic communities met in houses called *cabildos* they could celebrate the dances, songs and practices of their spiritual traditions. Cabildos were identified by specific religious groups known as Regla. The Yoruba religion was referred to as Regla de Ocha or 'rule of the Orishas', a name that is still used today to refer to Santería. The Orishas are the deities from the Yoruba religion of Nigeria. The Catholic saints of the slave owners would become a form of camouflage for the propitiation of the Orishas. For instance, church services dedicated to the courageous Saint Barbara would internally become services for the powerful African king known as Changó. Remnants of this marriage between saint and Orisha can still be seen in churches such as Capilla Santa Barbara in the town of Güines in Cuba. The marriage also spills over into the worship of the Orishas in the religion of Santería. Altars and shrines display images of African deities and Catholic saints interchangeably.

Understanding the oppression that the religion experienced under slavery and religious persecution gives us insight into the dynamics of the culture. Miguel A. De La Torre, Professor of Social Ethics and Latino Studies at Iliff School of Theology states,

Thus Santería became the religion of an oppressed people. To truly understand the worldview of Santería, it is crucial that it is approached on these terms. We begin by recognizing that followers of Santería are not interested in proselytizing, nor in justifying their beliefs to outsiders. Only those who are willing to take a step toward the orishas are entrusted with more in-depth information. The closer one moves toward the orishas, the more the mysteries of Santería are revealed. (De La Torre 2004, 3)

De La Torre stresses the importance of understanding how the religion formed amidst an oppressed people. This explains why the knowledge of the religion is guarded and passed on in a trusting relationship between clergy and initiate.

## Contemporary Reactions

The 1980's became a time of exoticism and curiosity when it came to depicting African cultures in America. A historic precedent was set by Hollywood in the post slavery U.S. where African traditions such as Voodoo and Hoodoo were featured as the national 'boogeyman'. Depictions of these traditions often reeked of colonialism and racism. The southern United States would become witness to acts of abuse and violence against practitioners of African traditional religions and folk healing practices. In cities like Memphis, Tennessee there were campaigns that focused on arresting individuals who practiced forms of herbalism, spiritual readings and folk healing (Kail 2017, 101).

As the 80's loomed, the Mariel Boatlift brought thousands of Cubans to the United States. As many Cubans arrived, Americans who had never encountered Cuban culture before were often basing their understanding of Cuban culture on media depictions. Amidst the rich cultural traditions that arrived came a number of spiritual traditions. Santería was depicted as an exotic practice as demonstrated by early documentaries and writings about the religion. In 1980 The New York Times ran an article headlined *Ritual Slaughter Halted in Bronx By A Police Raid* which described the practitioners of Santería as practicing a 'primitive rite'. The Associated Press produced a documentary in 1981 about the new "Santería or Cuban Occult in Miami," as it was titled. The religion was described as a 'cult,' and terms such as 'black magic' and 'murder' are used in the narration. Hollywood would soon catch up to depicting Santería as a religion practiced by drug dealers and evil cultists in shows like the 1985 season of *Miami Vice* and the 1987 movie *The Believers*.

Animal cruelty agencies and police departments began to distribute information about Santería to their departments. Information was frequently very shallow and included illustrations of hand tattoos found among Cuban criminal enterprises to quietly draw conclusions about the religion. I became interested in the religion, and would go on to research and later write about it, for police and first responders. I would discover that much of the information reflected in public safety circles and in Hollywood was based upon bias, fear, and misunderstanding.

## Ethnography (Abridged)

### Ceremony

Sweesh . . . the spray of Bacardi rum on the back of my neck and back is warm and wet. I turn around to see a short Cuban woman gripping the bottle and filling her mouth with the magical substance only to see her spew it on the backs of men and women waiting to be cleansed through the priestess's saliva and rum. A cackle erupts from the beak of a chicken that is raised to my head. Rubbing it against my body the priestess begins with my head, shoulders, waist, then feet. "This is for your protection," she tells me. A group of devotees dressed in white huddle around a terra cotta tile adorned with cryptic symbols sketched in white chalk. I would learn that the symbols are echoes of the ancient Yoruba divination system known as Ifá. I watch as the priestess draws the symbols that were given to her many years ago in Cuba identifying her life path in the religion of the Orishas.

It was this life path that brought her to this moment. Madrina, a 52 yr. old Cuban Santería priestess known as a *Santera* is fighting for the life of a man and his son. Madrina's work as a priestess of the Orisha Yemayá serves humanity through offering counsel and spiritual guidance to those that come to her shop. Her knowledge of the spiritual realm, herbal remedies, and the physics of the esoteric place her in a unique position to bring aide to those clients suffering from physical and, even worse, spiritual sickness.

The day began with a startling revelation when it was discovered that one of the goats that was to be offered at the ceremony was found dead in its cage. This was a sign that the witchcraft (*brujería*) was strong and the animal had taken the hit sent by the negative energy. There had already been enough worry since this battle had begun. The witchcraft had been sent to an unsuspecting father. He and his son were born in Mexico and had come to the United States where they started a construction business. Someone in the family who was envious had sent something harmful to affect the father. One afternoon as the man stepped out of his truck he immediately fell to the ground and was paralyzed. Through a hazy video on her cell phone Madrina showed me video of the man in a hospital bed unable to move his body. She advised me that the physicians could not find what was wrong with the man, nor could mental health professionals. Through a series of spiritual consultations it was discovered that someone in the family had placed a spiritual working

on the man. Madrina and her assistant Dawn performed rituals involving the use of a photograph of the paralyzed man. The man's son Donald came to Madrina seeking healing and protection from this work. Part of the work concerned discerning if the attack on the man was the work of the dead (*muerto*) or a demon.

On this hot Saturday morning I watch as Madrina's daughter Suhey walks out of the shadows of a makeshift wooden barn. She holds a bird in her right hand. Its wings flap furiously as she walks toward the shrine for the *eggun* (ancestors). The group of huddled white dresses opens as she approaches the sacred tile. She mutters something to Madrina as a look of concern comes over the priestesses' face. The bird has died in her hand. A somber feeling sweeps over us. This was yet another sign that there was something powerful at work.

Madrina retrieves a chicken from the barn and the call to the ancestors begins. Prayer known as *moyubar* begins. The prayer calls out to nature, the deities, ancestors and spiritual elders. It offers respect and seeks permission to proceed with the ceremony.

A familiar song that accompanies the sacrifice (*ebbo*) of the animals begins "Ya ki nya, Ya ki nya loro, Bara ya ki nya, Ya ki nya loro, Ya we se, Ya we se loro." The song speaks of the feeding of the head, or 'ori', which is where the soul and our destiny reside according to Yoruba belief. Another line of the song speaks of the sacrifice taking away bad luck while the last speaks to the manner in which the sacrifice is offered, and offers a prayer that we will not ever be killed in the same manner.

The animal is killed and the blood from the animal is poured upon the tile, the *Teja de Eggun*. In the Yoruba religion the tile is mentioned in ancient stories known as *Patakis*. These are stories from the literary body of the Yoruba Ifá religion. This story comes from the section known as *Odun Ojuani Hermoso* in *Ire AkrIkú lese Eggun*, or, 'A good health through an Eggun'. The story tells of how a devotee wished to communicate with his dead brother. Orúmla, the deity of divination, advised him to consecrate a clay tile that will represent the door of the dead. He then advised him to light nine candles. Candlelight would represent the immortality of the spirits. A dove is to be given as a sacrifice along with a gourd filled with water and honey is to be poured over the offering. Dawn shares with me that when the dove is passed over her body at the beginning of this ceremony she feels a feeling of sacredness come over her. Suhey and Madrina stand

before the shrine with Suhey holding a wooden staff adorned with the face of a man. This is the *Pagugu* staff for addressing the dead.

There is a saying in the religion “*Ikú Lobi Osha*” or “The dead stop the saint,” which implies that you must address the dead before you can address the saint. The saint, or *santo*, refers to the religion’s deities known as Orishas. The Orishas are manifestations of the creator deity known as Olodumare. The Orishas were once humans that have now transcended into the spiritual realm. Dawn and her sister Tonya tell me that this is why the Orishas have an understanding of humanity because they once were human too. The Orishas govern aspects of nature and humanity. Each Orisha has a particular domain that they are known for. For example, the Orisha Oshún governs the river waters and governs all matters related to love. She is also known for assisting in matters related to maternity, so for this reason pregnant mothers may call on her for assistance. Each Orisha has specific attributes in regards to favorite colors, numbers and foods that they prefer. The Orisha Changó likes apples while the Orisha Elegguá prefers corn nuts and children’s toys.

Suhey lights a cigar and begins to blow smoke onto the Teja tile. She begins to sing. The song is known as *Oro a Eggun*. The *oro* is a cycle of prayer songs that are sung for the ancestors. The song is traditionally taught orally.

*Aumba Wa Ori, Aumba Wa Ori*  
*Awa Ósun Awa Oma*  
*Leri Oma Leyawo Araonu Kawe*

Madrina and her daughter are leading the ceremony as Dawn and her sister Tonya stand to my left. Tonya has brought a paper plate containing materials including palm oil (*corojó*), peppers and powdered eggshell (*cascarilla*) and placed it at the base of the tile. A pair of white candles are placed and lit on a plate beside the tile. After the chicken is offered to the tile, honey is poured onto the tile. The shiny golden liquid covers the blood and washes away some of the chalk symbols.



**Figure 1**  
*Prayers offered to Olofi in the Presence of the Ancestors. (Kail 2021)*

Madrina offers a prayer and holds her hands to the sky. Suhey takes four pieces of coconut and throws them to the ground. The coconut is one of the primary instruments used in communicating with the gods. The coconut known as ‘Obi’ is used in a form of divination that provides guidance from the spiritual realm. The pieces of coconut have a brown colored side of the skin and a white colored side of the flesh. They are thrown, and the pattern in which the pieces land is interpreted as an answer. If the pieces land with the white side up this is known as ‘*Alafia*’. This is an affirmative answer to a question that may be asked of the Orishas.

A large rooster is rubbed over the body of the young man that is the center of the ceremony. The animal is offered to the Eggun to remove any negative energy on the man. I am prompted to cleanse myself as anyone in the ceremony is vulnerable to attacks of negative energy. I am instructed to take a handful of powdered eggshell and to place both hands filled with powder on my head, then to my waist and to my feet. I am then instructed to go in front of the Eggun tile and clap my hands together and to blow the powder onto the tile. The remaining members of the group follow suit and we are then advised to go inside.

Donald is to undergo a number of rituals on this day. I am told, “he has a sickness,” by Suhey. He is instructed to sit on a stool as Suhey, Dawn and Tonya begin to place materials on the table beside him. I can see piles of cotton, cigars, bottles of rum and powdered eggshell being laid down. Dawn calls me into the kitchen where she tells me that she and her sister have

to get their 'heads cleaned' and I cannot see their heads uncovered. I duck into a corner of the kitchen with my back turned. Dawn and Tonya are having a monthly spiritual cleansing as it is required in the initiation process that they are undergoing.

Dawn and Tonya are new initiates into the religion. As part of their initiation, they are recognized as 'Iyawos' or 'brides of the Orisha'. After undergoing several ceremonies their heads are shaved and they are instructed to wear white and to cover their heads for at least a year. There are certain taboos they must avoid such as shaking hands and looking into mirrors. I had noticed that they have a bathroom mirror covered with paper to avoid seeing themselves. Mardina advises Dawn to tell me that there must be several 'cool' heads because there will be a lot of Ebbós (sacrifices) that will be given today. It is said that when the Orishas are fed they can become 'hot'. This can create a lot of direct energy from the Orishas which can be very powerful.

Donald sits atop a stool as Tonya walks around the room carrying sticks of burning incense to cleanse the ritual space. Suhey begins the ritual of '*La Rogación de cabeza*' where the priestess performs a cleansing of the head where '*ori*' resides. She begins to apply cocoa butter, cotton, rice, and water to Donald's head. Coconut is placed on his head and the head is wrapped in cloth. Afterwards he sits down on the couch. I ask him how he feels. "Good, tired to be honest. I'm kind of feeling light," he tells me. Donald's head cleansing is part of the ceremony called '*Santo Lavado*' known as a 'washed saint that protects the head'.

I peer into the kitchen as I watch clear plastic cloth being taped to the floor and walls. A white candle encased in a glass jar is placed in the right corner of the room. A pile of coconut shells rests in the center of the cloth. As members of the temple begin to walk toward the plastic there is a feeling of transformation where the plastic becomes a sacred point of focus. Tonya and Dawn begin to slide several iron pots filled with iron implements including railroad spikes, knives, horseshoes and small agricultural tools across the floor. The pots represent the Orisha Oggún, god of iron and metalworkers. Suhey begins to pour rum and honey on to the implements.

I peer across the living room and see amidst the blue plastic bowls that there is a bowl containing a photograph of Donald's father. His father's image smiles as he stands next to a flowing American flag. After a series of consultations with the Orishas, Dawn tells me that Mardina has determined that the readings revealed that Donald's spiritual mother is Yemayá.

The Orishas also revealed that Donald's mother should not beat down Donald's father verbally by disrespecting him. This makes him anxious and can bring about bad health. Suhey retrieves a bundle of the fresh mint and begins to sweep across Donald's body cleaning him with the energy from the plant.

I watch as Suhey scratches two pieces of the coconut meat off of a shell. She throws them into a bowl containing several stones. She dips her hand into a bowl of water and splashes it on the 4 pieces of coconut piled in front of her. The doorway to the kitchen opens and Mardina enters carrying a small black and white goat in her arms. Dawn leans in and rubs corajo on the head of the goat. The goat's front legs are lifted as Mardina salutes the animal by pressing the animal against her knees. Donald chews a piece of coconut that he was given and it is placed in the animal's mouth. Suhey and Mardina bring the goat to the iron pot of Oggún as they prepare to offer the goat to the Orishas.

Hollywood has conditioned much of the West to consider the sacrifice of animals as just a barbaric act of cruelty. But animal sacrifice can be found in many religious cultures throughout the world. The traditional practice is neither savage nor senseless. There is consideration given to the type of animal that is used and its connection with the Orishas. The act is very intensive and is part of a complex conversation between the practitioner and the deities. The manner in which the animal is offered is considered as the animal is cut in such a way as to sever the carotid artery where the animal does not feel pain. The sacrifice is placed in the context of a conversation with the Orisha that tells the practitioner if the offering was accepted or if there is more to be done.



**Figure 2**  
*A Santera Spiritually Cleanses the Client's Head in the Rogación De Cabeza. (Kail 2021)*

As Suhey tosses the coconut shells to the floor they land with the white of the shells facing up. “*Alafia*” Suhey announces. The sound of a familiar song begins to rise as the room reverberates with, “*Ya ki nya, Ya ki nya loro, Bara ya ki nya, Ya ki nya loro, Ya we se, Ya we se loro.*” The goat’s throat is cut and the goat is lifted above the iron pot and plastic bowls. The blood begins to drip onto the iron implements and then is dripped onto the stones in the plastic bowls.

Following the sacrifice Suhey throws the coconut shells again. “*Monte*” she utters. This means that the Orisha want the body of the goat to be taken to the woods or forest. Madrina drags a black trash bag from the kitchen. This process would be followed several times during the day as more goats, chickens, Cornish hens and guinea fowl were offered to the Orishas. Disposing of the sacrifices according to spiritual tradition presents challenges to practitioners. Dawn recalls one experience at which she and some other members of the temple were having to perform a ceremony where an animal was to be left at a specific location. This was also to be accompanied by a ceremony that was to take place at a body of water. The ceremony took place in an obscured location at a public park. Dawn described how a car pulled into the area as members of the temple were conducting the ceremony. A man and woman peered out the windows of their car and yelled out, “*What are ya’ll doing?*” The woman’s insistence to know what was going on was tainted with ethnocentric tones as she demanded to know what was happening in what amounted to ‘her’ park. Dawn’s mother sharply responded with, “It’s none of your business what we are doing!” Fortunately, the man and woman drove away. However, this is just one example of the challenges that are faced in observing the religion.

“Wait till you attend a *Misa*. You will see some things!” Dawn opens her eyes widely and shakes her head in affirmation. “Yeah you will!” Tonya agrees. The *Misa* is a spiritual mass that comes from the influence of French Spiritism or *Espiritismo*. The practices come from the works of a nineteenth century French educator, Allan Kardec. Kardec organized a number of spiritual practices that involved techniques to communicate with the dead. Practices include spirit channeling and table tipping. Kardec’s book, *The Spirit’s Book*, is widely available in many religious goods shops or *Botánicas* that carry products for the practice of Santería. Kardec’s books are frequently placed on a devotee’s spiritual altar for the ancestors known as the *Boveda*. *Espiritismo* teachings focus on

God and several spirits that have been created by God. Spirits are revealed during spiritual ceremonies called *Session Espiritistas*. These seances are traditionally held using a table covered in a white tablecloth. This is called the *Mesa Blanca*. Flowers, candles and a bowl of water are placed on the *Mesa Blanca*. Additional materials including a bottle of Florida Water cologne, and powdered eggshell may be placed on the table for cleansing. The bowl of water is used to capture negative energies that may manifest during the ceremony.

Devotees who serve as mediums may fall into trances and demonstrate possession by various spirits. A number of spirits from various cultures are known to manifest including spirits of West African women known as *Madamas*; Gypsy spirits known as *Gitanas*; Indigenous spirits known as *Indios*; Pirates known as *Piratas* and African spirits known as *Congos*. Prayers from Kardec’s books are read and songs are performed for the spirits. The songs or *cantos* are used to call on spirits and to elevate spirits.

Madrina sings to me songs that are performed at *Misas*. The following is a popular song sung in spiritual masses throughout the world:

Para la Coronación Espiritual:

*‘Oh venid protectores!*

*Oh venid!*

*Seres guía de nuestra misión*

*Oh! Venid protectores a la tierra*

*A ver que linda coronación*

*En coronación, En coronación*

*Baja los seres’*

In English:

*‘Oh come protectors*

*Oh come!*

*Oh come protective beings guide our mission*

*Oh come protectors to earth*

*To see what a beautiful crown*

*In coronation the beings descend’*



**Figure 3**  
*The Boveda is a Sacred Space Created for the Immediate Ancestors. (Kail 2021)*

The ceremony continues through the afternoon. At one juncture the Orisha Oyá who is the goddess of the cemeteries and wind is called upon by the priestesses. The conversation between Madrina and the Orisha through the use of the coconut shell combined with offerings reveals that the father should have 9 distinct fruits placed under his bed. The number nine is a sacred number to Oyá and is the number of the dead. Following hours of prayers, offerings and divination it becomes apparent that the struggle for the father and son's health and protection is not only a spiritual battle but an excruciating physical fight.

I watch as Madrina, Suhey, Dawn, and Tonya struggle with holding the animals. Sweat pours from their foreheads as they sing the ancient hymns of the gods and goddesses of Africa. After each point of the ceremony the blood, feathers, urine, and excrement are cleaned up in intensive labor. It is as if the group never rests. When a member is not moving in the ceremony, they are preparing herbs, tools, and various materials that will be used in the next segment of the ceremony.

During one of the moments of rest in the late afternoon one of the ladies tells me that there will be a ceremony for the Orisha Olokun later in the evening and that I should definitely stay for the event. As evening draws near the floor of the kitchen is swept and cleaned. Several paper plates and bowls filled with various foods are placed in a circle on top of a blue cloth. They are filled with dried beans, dried plantains, dried corn, seeds, and a number of assorted foods. An offering of a duck is made to Olokun. The duck's body

is placed onto a blue cloth inside a wicker basket in the center of the circle of food. Dawn tells me that this is a ceremony that is done for abundance and can increase wealth and health in the lives of participants. She invites me to take part in the ceremony.

I am guided to stand alongside everyone else surrounding the circle of dishes of food. She tells me that I am to start at a plate and to take some of the food and place it to my head, shoulders, waist and feet and then to throw it into the central basket. The group begins to sing a Yoruba chant:

*"Yemayá Asesu, Asesu Yemayá, Yemayá Asesu, Asesu Yemayá,  
Yemayá Olodu, Olodu Yemayá, Yemayá Olodu, Olodu Yemayá  
Asesu Yemayá, Yemayá Asesu, Asesu Yemayá, Yemayá Asesu,"*

We pick up handfuls of the dried foods as the song sways us around the circle. Once we have all offered all pieces of food we stop moving. There are however pieces of food that are not touched by specific members of the circle. These are foods that may be sacred to a particular deity or prohibited by a specific taboo.

The basket is lifted onto Donald's head. We are instructed to place our hands on the basket where it is rocked back and forth like an ocean wave. The use of the blue cloths and the motion of the rocking waves allude to Olokun's domain of the ocean waters. For Olokun was the protector of Africans stolen from their homes and brought across the waters to Cuba. The ceremony closes and the day ends.



**Figure 4**  
*Ceremony for Olokun. (Kail 2021)*

### *Daily Life and Worship*

Dawn guides me through her kitchen space into the living room. To the right is a table covered in white cloth. This is the *'Boveda'*, a shrine for family ancestors. There are nine glasses of water on the table representing spirits. The glasses are shadowed by a decorative crucifix with an image of Christ hanging from its arms. Photographs of loved ones that have passed on are propped around the edges of the table. A small dark-skinned doll dressed in the colors of the Orisha Babalú Ayé sits against the back of the table. His hat is purple, and his clothing is made from sackcloth. Dawn explains that she purchased him in Cuba on her last trip. A stick of burning incense emits a smoky trail from the table. There is a candle for Our Lady of Guadalupe alongside a bottle of wine and a bundle of flowers on the table.

Dawn opens a small closet door in her kitchen to reveal a shrine to the Eggun. The terracotta *'Teja'* tile can be seen in the darkness of the closet. The chalked symbols of divination results are drawn across the tile's face. Dawn points to a cluster of flowers that were given to the Eggun. "They were almost dead and now look at them," she tells me. The beautiful blooming roses appear as if they are about to bust open in their fullness.

Tonya invites me into her bedroom to show me her Orishas. As she pulls back the doors of her closet, she reveals a chasm filled with various tools, statues, and offerings of fruit and vegetables. The top shelf of her closet is lined with colorful ceramic tureens that hold the sacred stones representing the Orishas. Gold colored bells and crowns adorn some of the tureens. The far-right corner of the closet is home to the shrine for Changó, the god of thunder and lightning. His shrine is a wooden vessel known as the *'Batea de Changó'* and houses his sacred stones which are called *'thunderstones'* or *'Piedras de Rayo'*. These stones are created when lightning strikes the earth. The wooden vessel is placed upon a wooden mortar referred to as *'Pilon'*. The wooden tools of Changó also rest upon the vessel.

On the far left of the closet a white and blue ceramic vessel hold the stones for Yemayá. The vessel known as the *sopera* has a historical lineage back to days of persecution in Cuba. Thompson (1993) states that during days of persecution *soperas* could pass for porcelain collections and could be hidden in wooden cabinets easily. A small bowl of seashells recalling her place as an ocean deity sits beside the vessel. The back

wall of the closet is decorated with an ornately decorated fan and is covered with the clothing and tools representing Tonya's patron Orisha Elegguá. The familiar face of Elegguá is seen on the floor in a decorated stone that features cowrie shells placed in a traditional form of facial features. Green and yellow beads surround the crown of the stone indicating that it was given to Tonya by a high priest or *'Babalawo'*. A black iron pot representing the Orisha Oggún as well as a terra cotta plate containing iron tools representing Oggún and Ochosi sit beside him. A statue of a Native American warrior stands guard beside the Orishas. There are offerings known as *'Addimú'* placed in the shrine consisting of cucumbers, squash, melon and flowers.

The squash in the shrine became an object of focus one day as Tonya shared with me a story of healing. Tonya had been wrestling with some issues related to her health and marks on her skin. She had taken her concerns to her Orishas for healing. One day she discovered that one of the squash had become discolored and began to have a dark mark on its skin. Tonya watched in wonder as the mark mirrored the injury on her skin.



Figure 5  
*Shrine for the Orishas.* (Kail 2021)

Dawn tells me that the Orisha Oyá had been wanting a special offering. Pieces of corn are placed in water where they begin to grow roots. This brings about blessings of prosperity to the devotee. I ask Dawn how she knows when an Orisha is sending a message like a request for an offering. She says, "There is a gradual opening up to specific vibrations. The Orishas are personal as they were once human beings they understand what it is like to be one of us. They can relate to us." I ask her, when she gives an offering,

how does she know it is what her Orishas want. Tonya chimes in, “It is like dialing into a frequency. If things don’t work, such as a candle that doesn’t light, [it] can be telling us something is not exactly right.” Sometimes the Orishas give messages to their children through dreams. Tonya had a dream about someone in Cuba who lived across from Madrina’s property. This person was practicing witchcraft and ‘throwing’ brujeria that was causing Madrina’s relatives to get cancer.

As I walk through their home I see the mirror above the bathroom sink that is covered with a piece of poster board, and am reminded if Dawn and Tonya’s dedication to becoming brides of the Orisha. The process of becoming a bride of the Orisha is a long and complex journey. A spiritual reading is performed to identify which Orisha is your guardian Orisha. The first step in the journey involves receiving sacred necklaces called *Elekes*, or *collares* in Spanish. Each necklace contains a specific number of colored beads. The color and number refer to a specific Orisha. The plastic beads are 2-mm in size and are strung on cotton cloth. The necklace is prepared by clergy and is charged with spiritual energy, *ashé*, in a ceremony. The necklaces are washed in the sacred liquid, *omiero*. The necklaces provide spiritual protection from the Orishas. The beads identify a person as being dedicated to the Orishas. The first five necklaces traditionally given are dedicated to Obatalá, Changó, Yemeyá, Oshún and Elegguá. The necklaces are treated with respect and come with a number of specific instructions regarding their wear.

The next step of the journey involves receiving the protection of *Los Guerreros* or Warriors. This is a group of Orishas that guard the home of the initiate. In the sacred teachings of the religion, the Orishas Elegguá, Oggún and Ochosi travel together. Elegguá is presented in the form of a cement head with cowrie shells for facial features. Oggún is presented in the form of an iron pot containing various iron tools. Ochosi is presented in the form of a metal crossbow. Lastly the guardian angel Ósun is presented in the form of a metal chalice adorned with bells and a small rooster topping the chalice. Initiates are instructed to place Ósun on top of a high place in the home where Ósun can watch for danger. If the chalice tips over this is a sign that danger is near. The warriors are invited into an initiate’s home where they will take place in a special ceremony.

The initiate undergoes a ceremony known as *Cofa*. This ceremony determines which Orisha ‘owns the head.’ Yoruba tradition says that the head is the place

where the soul resides. Once it is determined which Orisha rules the head the focus of the journey is to have the Orisha ‘crowned’ onto the head of the devotee.

The primary initiation in the religion focuses on the alignment of the devotee with their guardian Orisha. The ceremony is known as *Kariocha* which means to ‘put the Ocha (Orisha) on the head.’ In the Santería culture this is referred to as ‘making the saint,’ ‘making santo,’ and ‘making Ocha.’ The ceremony involves the shaving of the devotee’s head and the ritualistic placement of various substances and tools to the head of the devotee. The initiate receives tools to interact with the Orishas including the stones, the seashells known as *Caracoles* used in divining the will of the Orisha and the tools known as *Herramientas* used to represent the Orishas. The set of caracoles is referred to as a *Mano* or ‘hand. It is traditionally a set of 18 cowrie shells. Two of the shells are placed to the side and the remaining 16 shells are known as the *Diloggún*. These shells are used by the initiate to communicate with their Orisha

The ritual ends in a rite known as *Asiento* where the Orisha is seated into the head of the initiate. Various materials including cocoa butter and coconut are fed to the person’s head or *Ori*. There are specific animals offered to the Orishas during this ceremony. Dawn and Tonya underwent the ceremony in Cuba.

The following day is known as the ‘*El día del medio*’ or ‘middle day.’ The initiate sits and eats lunch at a table prepared for them. Following the lunch the initiate is dressed in colored clothing that reflects the Orisha that rules their head. The initiate is presented to the Santería community in a drumming ceremony.

The next day is known as the *Day of Íta*. On this day the initiate receives a spiritual reading given by a diviner. The initiate receives a list of various taboos that they must observe during their life. The initiate also receives information regarding the identity of their mother and father Orisha in the religion. The details of this ceremony are recorded in a book known as the *Liberta*.

The initiate begins their year in white clothing. Three months into the year the initiate takes part in a ceremony called the *Ebbó Meta* or three-month Ebbó. The initiate now known as the ‘*Iyawo*’ observes various rules such as eating meals on a mat and using a specific bowl and spoon for their meals.

During one of the Ebbó Meta ceremonies that I was allowed to attend, I witnessed one of the more misunderstood concepts in the religion. The concept

of trance possession is a phenomenon that is frequently misunderstood and misrepresented in Western culture. Trance in Santería involves the consciousness of a devotee being taken over by a spiritual being. Frequently this being is the Orisha 'riding' the devotee, as it is referred to. During the ceremony Madriona fell back against a wall almost shattering several plates that were displayed on a wooden shelf. Her daughter cried out "Mama!" As Madriona's body stiffened and stood straight there was a feeling of something entering the room. The priestesses' face began to change, developing a stern look. Her voice began to utter in Spanish. She pointed to Tonya and began to speak. I was informed that this was Yemayá speaking, and she had things she needed to share with Tonya regarding her health.



Figure 6  
*Throne for a Child of Eleguá in Cuba. (Kail 2021)*

### Health

One of the primary reasons that many of Madriona's spiritual godchildren sought refuge in the religion deals with issues related to healing. Madriona has an Orisha that is considered a spiritual doctor that can bring about healing. When Dawn and Tonya's family first sought help from Madriona the family had been sick with the Covid-19 virus. Madriona concocted several herbal remedies to complement the medicines prescribed by a local physician. She also provided spiritual services to assist in their healing. Dawn describes her first encounter with the religion in the midst of the pandemic.

With our family, there has always been a general familiarity with the religion. My mom has always had that general familiarity with it. We didn't understand the connotations of it but we were always aware that the necklaces signified protection. We had no context other than that. My mom has always been on the search for those type of items for protection. It wasn't until she received her Guerreros that someone explained, and it started to make sense. She received the collar for Eleguá and we got a little more context into what that meant. There's always been a general familiarity with it. We've been with different *centro* families but every family that we were with I guess were not practicing the religion correctly in the sense they would like to put work on to you so that you would come back to them for help. Madriona was very straightforward and honest, she gave us the help that we needed. And that was within a year because that's how dire the situation was. Even before we started the process to become Santeras she helped us when we were sick with Covid. She didn't really know us but sent us medicines to our house. And really and truly that's just the type of person she is. It speaks to her character. Just imagine if we were sick in Panama, I don't think they would have done anything. Or no one would try to come visit us to see if we were okay. I guess like in the words of Madriona, she acted in such a way because that as she said that was her duty as a Madriona.

Sickness in the religion can be attributed to a number of causes. One of the causes could be related to neglecting the Orishas. Once an initiate has been crowned with the Orisha they are considered responsible for a regular maintenance of offerings, sacrifices, and to maintain their shrine. Neglecting this could create issues in the life of the devotee that is in need of that particular Orisha's protection. Santería tradition teaches that everyone is born as a child of a particular Orisha. If a devotee is misidentified as being a child of an Orisha by spiritual leadership then the devotee can undergo harsh challenges that mimic sickness.

Dawn shares with me that there are cultural terms for good and bad states of health. When you have good health and good fortune this is commonly known as *Iré*. You are typically at peace and may be blessed financially in some cases. Brujería and the breaking of taboos associated with the rule of the Orishas can result in *osogbo*, Or constant bad luck, chaos and

misfortune can be associated with absorbing negative spiritual energies. Cleansings and various rituals may be required to remove a devotee from this state of being.

### ***Social Interactions***

Members of the Santería faith in the Mid-South, such as Mama Oggún, describe feelings of isolation and marginalization amidst the religious landscapes of the region.

As I am sitting with members of the temple in a popular Chinese restaurant, I can't help but notice the stares and glares from people around us. Tonya tells me, "A lot of people give us looks because we are dressed up in all white. But they either confuse us for being Muslim or for being nuns." Her sister adds, "I feel like they think it's like a stylistic presence. I've found a couple of times when people were brave enough to ask me, 'why are you dressed in all white?' I'm like, 'It's for religious purposes.' Then they are like, 'oh.'" Dawn chimes in, "We were looking for furniture, we went to the furniture next door and the lady was so nice. She asked if we needed anything. Very nice. We went to the furniture store next to it. They don't say anything to us. Nobody would even look at us. As we were moving around the store you could just see the glares. It was just like water and oil. It would be different if we're like shrouded in black and hunched over." Dawn laughs and shakes her head. "I was in the grocery store and this lady said, 'I just love your outfit, I love your style.' She just registered it as a style. And I was at Starbucks and this person wanted to talk to me about being dressed in white. They made a joke like, 'It must be hard to keep it clean,' and I said, 'You have no idea.'" Mama Oggún leans in, "We went to Wal-Mart and there was this lady, she looks at us and she said 'Oh Jesus,' and stepped back. I did the sign of the rosary and said 'Amen!'" This reaction by outsiders would be repeated as we were walking on a busy downtown street in Cuba and a woman started shouting "Leave in the name of Jesus," as she noticed the priestesses dressed in white.

### **Observations**

An analysis of the challenges faced by the Lucumi (a word frequently used to refer to the religion, language and people of the Yoruba in Cuba) community in the Mid-South seeks to not only understand the needs and barriers of those who

practice the religion but to also gain an understanding of how society may possibly be contributing to these challenges.

During fieldwork I encountered examples of supernatural experiences that helped me gain an understanding into the behavior of members of the community. I observed the emotional strain on the faces of practitioners when witchcraft took the lives of animals set aside for sacrifices. I observed the stress and desperation and the toll it took on practitioners' bodies as they gave offerings to Orishas that continued to speak through divination about getting rid of malevolent works that trapped a young man's family. Sweat pouring from foreheads, muscles bulging in arms from gripping animals and repeated throws of divination tools.

In each of these cases there was the element of supernatural directives that motivate physical needs. The deity was instructing the practitioner to do more, give more, and seek more. When a deity advises a practitioner to take an offering to the river, the practitioner is left with a decision. Do I obey and risk being arrested or harassed by possible onlookers, or do I disobey and risk spiritual danger? When a deity speaks to a priestess and tells her to obtain a particular type of herb in order to bring healing to a client, does the lack of resources place the priestess in a difficult place spiritually?

There are several things needed for religious practitioners to practice the religion. One of the important needs is for space. The practice of Santería requires using specific spaces for ceremonies, shrines, and communal gatherings. The delineation between the 'sacred' and the 'profane' must be made for these spaces. The profane are those places that are available without special ceremony or ritual (Moro & Myers, p.52). When I became familiar with sacred spaces in the community it became easier to identify the profane spaces as well.



**Figure 7**  
***Ceremony for Oko,***  
***Orisha of Agriculture and Fertility.*** (Kail 2021)

An individual's sacred spaces used in the religion include a place for the dead (*muertos*), a place for ancestors (*eggun*) such as the *boveda* and spaces for the *soperas* that hold the sacred stones (*fundamentos*) of the Orishas. Communal spaces such as the traditional *Igbodu* (*Igbodún*) are needed as they serve a number of functions within the religion. They not only contain vessels and tools of the Orishas but they also provide a space for initiation. Brown speaks of the function of the threshold of the *Igbodún*, "Important values are constituted by the opposition of 'inside' and 'outside' of the room. The room's threshold represents the fulcrum of neophytes' initiatory rites of passage and irrevocably divides their old lives from their new lives 'in the santo'" (Orsi 1999, 165).

The practice of *Santería* involves using a number of elements of material culture. Material culture includes the sum or inventory of the technology and material artifacts of a human group, including those elements related to subsistence activities as well as those which are produced for the ornamental, artistic, or ritual purposes (Smith 1986, 183). Access to material culture is necessary for the practice of the *Lucumi* religion. Material culture such as jewelry is not only an integral part of initiation, but is also used as an indicator of membership in the community as well. Specific materials such as the items that represent *Los Guerreros* are necessary in order for the practitioner to have access to specific spiritual domains. Materials such as seashells, powdered eggshell, and cacao are necessary in order to perform specific ceremonies.

As *Santería* is a religious and healing resource for devotees, practitioners say that access to spiritual supply stores like *Botánicas* and to traditional healers is necessary for healing needs in the lives of practitioners. Among folk healing traditions such as

*Santería* many have gained recognition for their role as an informal mental health care system offering a cultural reality that combines health, illness, and treatment options (Pasquali 1994).

Wellness in the religion is encouraged in many different formats. On the day of the *Íta* it occurred to me that many of the directives for the life of the new initiate deal with guidelines for health and wellness. For example, specific dietary restrictions are frequently given during the life reading. Spiritual wisdom concerning specific taboos that include smoking and drinking alcohol are frequently mentioned in these readings. These directives also include instructions regarding social relationships such as the value of showing respect and self-protection.

As medical healthcare addresses issues related to biological agents, *Santería* also addresses supernatural agents related to witchcraft. Witchcraft is defined as an anti-social psychic power (Douglas 1966). Anti-witchcraft therapies are an integral part of the *Lucumi* healing traditions. Spiritual cleansings can be performed by ritual specialists to aid devotees in removing witchcraft and sorcery. Sometimes initiations are required in order for a particular Orisha to provide spiritual protection for victims of witchcraft. Specific ceremonies can be performed that release tension for victims of malevolent magic. This may be something such as a spiritual bath prescribed by an experienced herbalist or priest. Many *Botánicas* also carry amulets used to combat witchcraft, including bracelets made from coral and specific seeds that can be worn for protection.

### ***Santería, Christianity, and Colonialism***

Throughout history colonialism and ethnocentrism have often been motivated by religious fervor. As Christians encounter *Santería* they must understand that many of the historical traumas that the religion and its practitioners have endured have come as a result of religious motivated colonialism. The needs, values, and culture of those who have suffered as a result of colonialism should be valued by those with the heart of Christ. Likewise, there needs to be healing that is initiated by the Christian community. It is the name of the Divine and the sacred teachings of the Christian faith that have been used and twisted to endorse abuse and slavery throughout modern history.

The practices of African traditional religion have endured both in Africa and throughout the world despite the horrors of slavery. In Cuba members of

various African communities formed slave societies where indigenous traditions could be practiced without the suppression of traditional beliefs. These societies became active in physical and spiritual resistance toward colonialism. Members of these societies were documented as being involved in military skirmishes, including giving aid to pirates that were fighting the Spanish in La Habana in 1539 (De La Torre 2004, 195).

Attacks on African religion have been recorded not only as physical attacks on practitioners but in a philosophical sense as well. Depictions of African religions as primitive and void of morality have managed to remain in pop culture and the consciousness of many non-Africans around the world.

The line of colonialist thought toward African religions has suppressed the notion of ethics among African traditions. As Christians engage members of African religious traditions, it is imperative that they do so in an informed manner. This requires reliance on solid cultural, historical and philosophical understanding of the religions, along with an understanding of how colonialism and issues related to race have affected cultural views on these traditions.

### ***Medical Outreach***

Christians providing healthcare in communities where Santería is being practiced may encounter various aspects of the religion's healing traditions. From those serving in local outreach to medical missions, it is important to understand the patient or client's perspective. Client's may be reluctant to speak of their tradition. Physical and verbal communication is necessary in order to give clients the sense of peace and safety.

For instance, one of the first visible indicators of those in the Lucumi faith may be the presence of sacred jewelry in the form of necklaces or bracelets. It is important that healthcare providers do not touch these objects as they are considered sacred. Touching objects may communicate disrespect and can potentially affect lines of communication between providers and those they are seeking to serve.



**Figure 8**  
***Sacred Jewelry Plays an Important Part in the Religion. Jewelry can Serve as a Symbol of Social Status and Spiritual Protection. (Kail 2021)***

The use of herbs in the Santería religion is a very important part of the tradition's approach to healing and wellness. Clients may share that they utilize herbal treatments for a number of physical and spiritual issues. It is important as we serve in providing medical care that we understand as opposed to attack traditional approaches to healing.

It is also important to have an understanding of the client's ethnohistory. The ethnohistory looks at the lifeways within a particular cultural context. It can provide insight into the client's perception of illness and how illness is treated within a cultural context. This can aid in immediate treatment or in creating a treatment plan for the client.

### ***Empowerment and Gender***

In order to understand the role that Santería serves in the lives of its followers, it is important to realize that the religion encourages ethnic and racial pride in the community. The power that the religion demonstrated as a mechanism for survival for many Africans is a respected aspect that brings about feelings of pride and empowerment to many followers. In addition, there is an especially important role that the religion plays in regards to gender. Female practitioners amidst world cultures where male domination and machismo is highlighted find that the religion presents a very different view of them.

Female deities in the Santería pantheon are highly respected and honored. Oshún is the mighty power of the river waters bringing fertility and love. Yemayá is

the mighty ocean waters that carried the bodies of Africans to Cuba. Oyá is the great power of the wind and storm. Although they may be worshipped in communities where there is gender inequality, male practitioners give them honor and dare not incur their wrath. The aesthetics and cultural terminology associated with initiation into Santería honor female initiates as queens and daughters of powerful deities. Female Orishas are relatable to women as their mythology describes their dreams, hardships and struggles. Patakis are filled with stories of heartbreak, love, and empowerment that provide relevant instruction on living.

The ability of the Orishas to appear in the form of trance possession and the opportunity for adherents of all gender backgrounds to become vessels for the deities communicates messages of equality. For example, a young female initiate may be ridden by the Orisha Oyá and can communicate warnings and directions for much older male initiates in the ceremony. There is no consideration of the initiates gender or age as the deity speaks through her. She in turn becomes the goddess.

### ***Overcoming Fear and Intolerance***

Christians who serve in communities where African traditional religions like Santería are present may succumb to fear and apathy toward those who they might not understand. The religion of Santería does not focus on proselytizing or forcing beliefs on those outside the faith. Still, over the years I have witnessed situations where the discovery of dead animals, candles, or spiritual supply shops have immediately brought about fears and bias against African spiritual communities. In one case the discovery of a dead chicken alongside a candle and several pennies brought fears that a ‘Santería cult’ was targeting a suburb. There have been instances where the discovery of animal sacrifices have led to assumptions that practitioners would “move on to killing humans.”

The Church plays an important role in how practitioners of the religion are viewed in the community. Demonization and false information about the religion can create hostile communities where practitioners are feared or even attacked. These patterns can be seen in cases throughout Africa where false information about child witches and devil worship has fueled a host of campaigns of violence (Priest 2020). Promotion of false information about the

religion can become a case of ‘bearing false witness’ against practitioners.

The Santería religion promotes a number of principles that Christians can relate to and encourage: reverence for nature and the environment; respect toward elders and ancestors; loyalty to Deity; and love for our community are all honorable practices that adherents of both religions can agree upon. The differences between the two faiths theologically come with the focus on the numerous deities in Santería as opposed to the sole worship of Jesus Christ for salvation. De La Torre speaks to this difference:

Their view of the gods is simply different from Christianity’s view of God. Thus it is right to say that Santería is not Christian, but not because it condones idolatry. It is not Christian because it rejects Christianity’s main premise that salvation occurs through the work of Jesus Christ who was God incarnate, affirming instead a multitude of gods who guide humans through never-ending life cycles. (De La Torre 2004, 215)

In looking at the historical development of Santería, the abuse and oppression of those embracing African traditions at the hands of colonizers that claimed to be Christian cannot be forgotten. It is imperative that Christians seek to humbly promote the teachings of Christ, which do not seek to colonize but to bring individuals to the understanding of the love of Jesus Christ. The message of Jesus Christ replaces the scourge of colonialism with compassion, mercy, and peace that passes all understanding.

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