

Latino Minority Religion

Key Terms:

Orishas, Yoruba, Santero, Ile

Description:

Santeria is a syncretic religion, blending influences of the Caribbean tradition, West Africa's Yoruba spirituality, and Catholicism. This faith is practiced by thousands of people in the United States, and other countries, and continues to evolve as it welcomes new practitioners.

Key Points:

- Santeria first evolved when African slaves were taken from their homelands during the Colonial period and forced to work in the Caribbean.
- It is a multifaceted system, because it blends the Yoruba divine beings (Orishas), with the Catholic saints.
- There has been a growing number of santeros both worldwide and within the United States.
- As Santeria becomes a more inclusive faith, it is transforming to include the cultures and traditions of its new followers.

Brief:



<http://josancaballero.com/2009/12/04/rezos-y-ofrendas-por-santa-barbara-bendita->

Santeros believe saints from the Catholic Church are African spirits known as Orishas. They consider their leaders to be living beings with needs, similar to those of humans. Santeria rituals allow followers to keep in touch with the Orishas. The rituals often include dancing, drumming, speaking and eating with the spirits (McCrea).

Although Santeria was once only practiced in Cuba by Yoruba slaves, it is a growing in the United States today. Many African-Americans, non-Hispanic West Indians, and European-Americans are embracing Santeria. Even in formerly all-Cuban iles (congregations) there is a growing acceptance of non-Hispanic members (Canizares 59). Iles formerly predominantly exclusively Cuban/Puerto-Rican are moving towards being multi-ethnic. The first documented case of a non-Hispanic being initiated a santero is that of Walter King, an African American who went to Cuba in 1959 to be initiated into the faith. The first documented white American inaugurated into Santeria is the renowned anthropologist, Judith Gleason in 1963. The fastest-growing populations, among non-Hispanics, in Santeria are African-American and black West Indians. This phenomenon can be attributed to demonstrations of African retentions within the religion (Canizares 60). In the birthplace of Santeria, Cuba, the faith had been identified with the lower class; however, as the santero community grows in the United States, there has been a rise in iles consisting of highly educated professionals.



<http://baba-who-babalu-santeria.blogspot.com/2012/10/judith-gleason-oya-lola-has-joined.html>

A result of this spread of non-Hispanics into Santeria is that the venerable Santeria code of secrecy is being questioned. African-American practitioners, in particular, appear to want to proclaim their allegiance to Santeria, many of them displaying the multi-colored necklaces which identify them as believers (Canizares 61). Countless aspects of the traditional practice, such as not discussing the religion with outsiders, are considered obsolete by these newcomers. Another aspect of traditional Santeria being abandoned by these multi-ethnic ones is the implicit paranoia most Cuban santeros constantly experience as a result of believing that, if they are not cautious, they could be victims of curses or poisoned (Canizares 61). Traditional Cuban santeros will seldom eat or drink in other's houses, will not allow their heads to be touched, and avoid being photographed. In contrast, the more modern, multi-ethnic, ones promote openness and comradeship, mirroring the characters of American society (Canizares 62).

For many, the importance of secrecy in practicing Santeria is still very important. This can be proven by Santeria having resisted attempts to measure its popularity. Academic experts estimate only that a majority of Latin immigrants will "have contact" with Santeria at some point in their lives (Vick). Rough estimates display that about 250,000 people worldwide practice Santeria (Street). Due to the social stigma commonly associated with Santeria that still exist today; it is possible that many adherents of the faith keep their beliefs and practices secret from their neighbors.



<http://www.earthenvesseljournal.com/issue04+/articles/Kent/Santeria-SlaverySlavery.html>

In recent years, controversial practices of Santeria have been upheld by the courts. Notably, in 2009, a federal court ruled that a Texas Santero, Jose Merced, could not be prevented by the city of Euless from sacrificing goats in his home. Merced filed a lawsuit with city officials said he could no longer perform animal sacrifices as part of his religious practice (Street). The city claimed "animal sacrifices jeopardize public health and violate its slaughterhouse and animal cruelty ordinances." Merced countered he had been sacrificing animals for over a decade without any problems, and was willing to "quadruple bag the remains" and find a safe method of disposal. In August 2009, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans said the Euless ordinance "placed a substantial burden on Merced's free exercise of religion without advancing a compelling governmental interest." Merced was pleased with the ruling, and said, "Now Santeros can practice their religion at home without being afraid of being fined, arrested or taken to court"

(Street). It is difficult to measure how this victory affected the Santeria community at large; however, it is likely that Santeria will continue to transform as the years go by (McCrea).

Works Cited and General References:

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Relevant Websites:

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<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/523208/Santeria>

BBC Webpage on Santeria:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/santeria/>

National Geographic Video on Santeria:
<http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/places/culture-places/beliefs-and-traditions/cuba-santeria-pp/>