

## **Santeria: Child of an African Mother and a Spanish Father**

The fusion of beliefs, traditions and culture forms a fundamental aspect of life in the Caribbean. As a people, we are heirs to a rich heritage from various regions, for example Asia, Europe and Africa. The Shango cult in Trinidad and Tobago is a representation of the amalgamation of religious practices of the slaves of West Africa and Roman Catholics from France, Spain and England. Similarly, in Cuba, our Latin American sister, one can find yet another vivid example of this syncretism- Santeria.

'La Santería' as it is called in the Spanish – speaking world is indeed a child of Afro-Hispanic parentage. The religion is practiced in various nations throughout our region- Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Panama and of course in Cuba, the isle in which it was conceived. Furthermore, wherever there may be large populations of Latin Americans, for example in New York and Miami, Santeria forms part of the cultural tapestry of the people.

As was stated earlier, Santeria is an example of religious syncretism- a fusion of tribal practices of the Yoruba of West Africa as well as Catholic doctrine handed down by the Spaniards. During the period of Caribbean chattel slavery, the captured West-African people who survived the horrendous journey of the Middle Passage, held within their hearts their traditional religious beliefs. However, under the yolk of their Spanish masters, the Afro-Cuban slaves were forced to adopt the practices of the Roman Catholic Church. As a result, they were forced to suppress their own beliefs and follow the religion of their Catholic masters. Nonetheless, the slaves would not relent and they continued to fuel the flames of their traditions. In addition, the enslaved people discovered some interesting parallels between their practices and those of their masters. Thus, 'La Santeria' was born, as the slaves embraced certain aspects of this new religion and fused them with their own heritage.

One primordial similarity that the slaves drew upon between their Yoruba tribal practices and Catholicism was the presence of an all-seeing, all-knowing, omnipresent, omnipotent God. On the sugar plantations, the slaves were taught to worship this great 'God' (Dios in Spanish), who created the universe in six days and rested on the seventh. Also, this 'Dios' was one made up of the entities- the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This would have been a familiar concept for the slaves because they too believed in a powerful, creative energy, who made heaven, earth and everything within the world. Furthermore, just as 'Dios' was three persons in one God, the supreme God of the Yoruba people was an entity composed of three separate spirits- Oludumare Nzame, Olofi and Baba Nkwa.

'La Santeria' translated into English means *The Way of the Saints*. It is not by chance that this name was chosen by the Afro-Cuban people because in addition to their supreme God, Oludumare, they worshiped other smaller Gods called 'Orishas'. To the slaves, Los Santos Católicos (the Catholic Saints), of whose greatness and strength their masters spoke, seemed to be the same orishas of their faith, but slightly different manifestations of these tribal deities. For example, when the slaves were told the story of 'Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre', in English- 'Our Lady of the Charity of Copper'. The

latter was in fact the the patroness of Cuba, the Africans would have naturally identified with and forged devotion to this Saint, because for the Yoruba, copper was considered to be the most precious of all metals. The Orisha Oshún, patroness of river waters, had a deep love of copper jewelry and so this deity was syncretized with the aforementioned Catholic Saint. Another illustration of the syncretism between the Saints and the Orishas is that of the fusion of San Lázaro (St. Lazarus) and the orisha Babalú-Ayé. Just as San Lázaro is the patron saint of healing and survival of illnesses, Babalú-Ayé is the orisha who confers good health. This Orisha is also patron of skin diseases, paraplegics and thus like the saint, people pray to him in hope of recovery.

Although various studies have been completed on Santeria, in reality, certain details about the religion remain secret and privy only to those initiated into the faith. Nonetheless, there are some interesting facts which only add to the richness of the beliefs of 'santeros'- the followers of the religion. 'Trance possession' is one of the principal mysteries of Santeria. In her book "The Altar of My Soul- the Living Traditions of Santeria", Marta Moreno Vega tells of these supernatural experiences, often witnessing the possession of her relatives and fellow santeros by deceased spirits. On one occasion, even the spirit of her mother emerged from beyond the grave to enter the body of her godmother. Believers can also be possessed by an orisha and so, through the singing of particular invocations, enchanting drumming and rhythmic dancing during a ceremony known as a 'bembe', an orisha such as Oshún or Babalú-Aye. Animal sacrificing is yet another thought provoking dimension of Santeria, where to pay tribute to an orisha, or to seek salvation from sickness or misfortune, a santero may kill a chicken or a dove.

One may not agree with the beliefs of Santeria, but given Trinidad and Tobago's interaction with Latin America and the growing number of Venezuelans in this country, it is possible that the religion may eventually form a greater part of our socio-cultural landscape. As a people, we should foster an appreciation of Santeria, as it represents the legacy left by our African ancestors and our Spanish forefathers as well.

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