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Political Implications on Santería

This paper will examine how the Batista and Castro regimes were able to impact the perception of Santería amongst the Cuban public. Santeria is a polytheistic religion practice in Cuba that combines elements of Yoruba beliefs and Catholicism. Recently, Santeria appears to be experiencing a growth in visibility in Cuba. The syncretic religion has become of interest to examine and report on, amongst many media outlets. According to a Vice News article published as recently as 2014, the author dubs Santería as “Cuba’s New Religion”. The article describes Santería as a dynamic form of worship, with participation and a creation of a shared identity amongst all levels of Cuban society and other societies of practicing Latin American countries. In this paper, I plan to examine the perceptions of Santeria during the twentieth and twenty first centuries, and demonstrate these perceptions of Santeria have affected their visibility--or lack thereof.

Introduction

Over the course of many decades, the attitudes and perceptions towards Santería has shifted from a more negative stereotype, to a more positive one¹. While some attribute this to the openness and willingness of the Cuban people to become more educated on the religion, I argue

¹ Keeping in mind, that the practitioners of the religion did not view it as such.

that it is a direct result of the influence of the Cuban government, specifically the regimes during the 20th century. The 20th century Cuban governance under both the Batista and Castro regime's distorted the Cuban people's views on Santería, by implementing legislation which generated misinformation about the religion.

This paper will first introduce the religion of Santeria and examine its history as well as practice. Then, the paper will focus on the perceptions of Santeria over the course of the Castro and Batista regimes; and how their impact on these perceptions of Santeria. The goal is to show a causal link between government legislation and both negative and positive perceptions amongst the Cuban population to Santeria.

I will be taking a qualitative methodology approach when writing this paper. The qualitative evidence I will present will be academic journals, articles, and case studies that examine syncretic religion of Santeria and the policies of the Batista and Castro regimes. The dependent variable in this research is the perception of Santeria and my independent variable is the influence of the Castro and Batista regimes. Through the data presented in this work, the audience will be able to see a direct link between government influence and Cuban population's perceptions of Santeria.

Part I: Historical Overview

Santería gains its origins in West Africa, specifically from Nigeria and Benin. It is a syncretic religion rooted in Yoruba African religious traditions and Catholic religious traditions. Santería was first introduced to the Caribbean, specifically the island of Cuba, during the slave trade in the nineteenth century. Over the course of the next 350 years, a total of ten million

Africans were brought over to the new world--702,000 of them had been sent to Cuba². The slave masters in Cuba prohibited slaves from practicing their traditional African religions, such as a Yoruba, forcing the slaves to find other means of worshipping without being punished. The African slaves within Cuba began fusing Yoruba practices with that of Catholicism. They saw Yoruba and Catholicism as being very similar and it was not difficult for them to blend the two into one syncretic religion. Early on, slaves became aware of the parallels that existed between their African religions and the new religion of Catholicism they confronted³. Catholicism and Yoruba both focus on high gods who are an integral element to the creation and livelihood of the world. Both religions have shared concepts such as intermediaries who serve as buffers between the high gods and humans. Central features of this religion are the worship of divinities called orishas and the regular dialogue with these entities through different techniques⁴.

The Catholics had saints and the Africans had orishas. So, under the constraints of their oppression, the slaves began to fuse the intermediaries of the two religions and to identify a specific orisha with a corresponding specific saint. This syncretism led to a development of a highly complex form of religion known as Santería, or the way of the saints⁵.

Santería's pantheon consists of a creator god, who allocates the *aché* (a mystic and sacred energy circulating in the cosmos), and about 20 *orishas* (deified ancestors) who have several avatars. *Orishas*, the main figures of mythological narratives, are respectively associated with elements of the social and natural world, and every human being is considered to be the "child" of one of

² Lefever, Harry G. "When the Saints Go Riding In: Santeria in Cuba and the United States."

³ Lefever, Harry G. "When the Saints Go Riding In: Santeria in Cuba and the United States."

⁴ Gobin, Emma, and Gobin. "Santería." In *Encyclopedia of Global Religions*, by Wade Roof, and Mark Juergensmeyer.

⁵ Lefever, Harry G. "When the Saints Go Riding In: Santeria in Cuba and the United States."

them. Santería's cosmology and rituals also attach specific importance to *eggún* (“deceased's spirits”)⁶.

(List of Saints and Orishas)

TABLE 1
ORISHAS AND SAINTS

Orisha	Saint	Principle
Agayu	Christopher	fatherhood
Babaluaye	Lazarus	illness
Eleggua	Nino de Atocha, Anthony of Padua	way-opener, messenger, trickster
Ibeji (twins)	Cosmus and Damien	children
Inle	Rafael	medicine
Obatala	Mercedes	clarity
Ogun	Peter	iron
Olokun	Regla	profundity
Orula	Francis	wisdom, destiny
Osanyin	Joseph	herba
Oshosi	Norbert	hunt, protection
Oshun	Caridad	eros, rivers
Oya	Candelaria	death
Shango	Barbara	force, thunder
Yemaya	Regla	maternity, seas

There are multiple levels of priests and priestesses, but their main responsibility is to serve as the communicator between mankind and god. They perform divination ceremonies which act as initiations into the Santeria community as well as commonplaces to grow their understandings of the faith and culminate new membership. These divination ceremonies are important to the Santeria religion, because they enable followers to build a communal bond. Though the practitioners of Santeria share lots of commonalities, it is a decentralized religion, meaning that there are no collective places of worship or unified method of practicing.

Santería has always evolved in a noninstitutionalized context and presents an acephalous and segmentary organization. Practitioners do not have, for instance, collective places of worship (“temples” are their own homes, with domestic space serving in fact as ritual

⁶ Gobin, Emma, and Gobin. "Santería." In *Encyclopedia of Global Religions*, by Wade Roof, and Mark Juergensmeyer.

space). Though initiates refer to a unitary notion of tradition, and despite the existence of shared common principles, ritual practice may thus vary in its details⁷.

Rituals

As a result of the decentralization within Santería, there is a lot of variability within Santería as a result of the different experiences both, historical and geographical, which has differed an emphasis of which rituals are observed. As in other religions, the ritualistic practices within Santería exhibit variability. Though there seems to be some division as to which rituals are more important to observe, there is a core of shared beliefs. These core beliefs include divination, sacrifices and offerings, and drum and dance.

Divination is an expression of the power of ashe--the life force of god--and is used to cope with everyday issues⁸. Believers of Santería practice divination by going to the local babalawo--high priest.

The adherents of Santería, some of whom are poor and lack money to pay physicians or counselors, others who are middle class, go to their santeros (priests) or babalawo (high priest) to get advice and to seek solutions for their problems of health, money, work, friendship, or love⁹.

Sacrifices and Offerings is important to Santería because it allows the orishas to continue serving as intermediaries between humans and the high gods as well as continues the act of divination--specifically the act of expressing praise and gratitude to the gods. In Santería, sacrifice and offerings are particularly food offerings. Food offerings are recognized as

⁷ Gobin, Emma, and Gobin. "Santería." In *Encyclopedia of Global Religions*, by Wade Roof, and Mark Juergensmeyer.

⁸ Lefever, Harry G. "When the Saints Go Riding In: Santeria in Cuba and the United States."

⁹ Lefever, Harry G. "When the Saints Go Riding In: Santeria in Cuba and the United States."

appropriate for each babalawo to praise the different gods. For example to praise Obtala, an babalawo would sacrifice and cook a female goat or duck¹⁰.

The food sacrifices and offerings are only eaten after the priests have practice the ritual of consuming the invisible ashe---blood---of the sacrifices. The last of the important ritualistic aspects of Santería are the drum and dance festivals. In Santería, they are commonly called bembé. They are held in the open living quarters of the santeros' house. The purpose of the bembé is to honor the orishas by playing specific drum rhythm and dance posture; each action is associated with an orisha.

Part II. Perceptions of Santeria

The island of Cuba gained its independence in 1898, and spent an additional three years under the occupation of the United States, until the Cuban people were able to form their own constitution in 1903. After the occupation of the United States and up until after World War I, the Cuban people were governed by a series of leaders that were involved in the war for independence. During this time, the leaders integrated the Afro-Cubans populations as well as the indigenous populations into the political processes. Furthermore, the Cuban people had the right to practice religion freely and openly, as well as allowed the United States to have oversight over Cuban affairs. The 1903 Constitution enabled Cuba and the Cuban government to be more progressive as a to be a progressive nation; which allowed people to freely practice what they wanted to. This, however, began to change when Fulgencio Batista¹¹ and his regime came to power.

¹⁰ Lefever, Harry G. "When the Saints Go Riding In: Santeria in Cuba and the United States."

¹¹ Batista governed twice, from 1933-1944 and then again from 1952-1959. I will be focusing on the second term.

Fulgencio Batista, was born to impoverished farmers in January 16, 1901. After working in various industries, he became a member of the army in 1921 and rose to the rank of sergeant by 1933. During his time with the army, he became the most powerful and respected man in Cuba; and was seen as the de facto leader.

Batista worked in a variety of jobs until he joined the army in 1921, starting as a stenographer. He rose to the rank of sergeant and developed a large personal following. In September 1933 he organized the “sergeants’ revolt”; it toppled the provisional regime of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, which had replaced the dictatorial regime of Gerardo Machado y Morales. In the process Batista became the most powerful man in Cuba and the country’s de facto leader¹².

From 1933-1944, Batista governed the country democratically. It was not until the end of his first term and the entirety of his second term in office, that Batista became more oppressive and corrupt. Batista suspended the 1940 constitution, and revoked most of the political rights of the Cuban people. His governance shifted from a democratic rule to an authoritarian rule. Batista, received financial and logistical support from the United States, and as a result he created a hierarchy within Cuban society.

He then aligned with the wealthiest landowners who owned the largest sugar plantations, and presided over a stagnating economy that widened the gap between rich and poor Cubans. Eventually it reached the point where most of the sugar industry was in U.S. hands, and foreigners owned 70% of the arable land¹³. During this time, Batista also created dissention amongst the Cuban people with each other, through religion. The catholic church had somewhat of an influence over Cuban political affairs, but it was not until the start of the Batista regime that Catholic influence was solidified. The

¹² The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, "Fulgencio Batista," Encyclopædia Britannica, December 12, 2016, , <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Fulgencio-Batista>.

¹³Stuart, O. James, “Historical Dictionary of the 1950s” Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000,

Catholic church made sure to send representatives as soon as the regime was established, to fortify their relationship.

Within days after the coup, contact was established between Cardinal Arteaga and Batista. In the Cardinal's initial note, he gave his personal respects to Batista as the honorable Prime Minister and complimented him on his "worthy" government (*digna dirección*). A few days later, the Minister of State, Miguel A. Campa, visited the Archbishop's residence to pay respects on behalf of Batista and was received by the Vicar General in Arteaga's absence

Batista openly building a relationship with the Catholic church, isolated those who practiced other Christian religions as well as the practitioners of Santería. As a result of this intentional alienation, the Castro was able to win the support of the Santeros and other religions, and overthrow the Batista regime. Though Batista had established seemingly open relationships with the Catholic church in Cuba, it was under his regime that all religious practices were banned and dismantled. This occurred after he suspended the Constitution in 1940. As a result of the Batista regime's actions towards religious groups, rebels gained a lot of support from religious entities.

When the revolution first began, Fidel Castro was able to gain the support of various religious groups because of the Batista regime relationship with the Catholic church; which led to the oppression of other religious groups.

At the time of the revolution, Catholicism was the most influential organized religion in Latin America, and Cuba was no exception. Many clergymen subsequently joined in the anti-Communist clamor of those whom the revolution was sidelining. Practitioners of Protestant faiths faced similar circumstances. Babalawos, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Baptists had all participated in the anti-Batista insurgency.

The Castro revolution invited the support of all the various religious sects, and ran on a platform of inclusion when rallying his case for revolution. Many of his rebel groups also practice Santeria, and carried with them symbols of the religion.

Castro enjoyed the support of Santeros, priests of santeria, a popular Afro-Cuban syncretic religion. Many rebels carried with them both rosaries and Santería bead collars. Santeros place “protections” in Castro’s path, and Castro came to be known as “El Caballo” or “the horse of saints”

His support of the syncretic religion helped established a cultural resistance to the Batista regime, by including the “outliers” of their society. Castro, however, only supported the Santeria during the Revolution.

After Castro gained control of Cuba and the implementation of the 1976 Constitution, his administration governed as a Communist regime. He eliminated the practice of all religions, including syncretic religions. He outlawed the open practice of religions, shut down religious sites of worships, and banned religious symbols.

While the constitution and government that Castro and his bearded rebels established after taking over the island in 1959 allowed for freedom of religion, that wasn't the case in practice. The Communist Party that has ruled the island ever since closed churches, nationalized properties owned by religious organizations and forced the faithful underground¹⁴.

It was not until the Constitution of 1992, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, that religions were once again visible in the state of Cuba. The Constitution of 1992 disavowed the formerly

¹⁴Gonzalez, Edward, and McCarthy, Kevin F.. 2004. Cuba After Castro : Legacies, Challenges, and Impediments. Santa Monica:

aesthetic nature of the Cuban state by recognizing the freedom of religion¹⁵. As a result, participation to all religions have seen a revival.

Since the end of religious discrimination in 1992, all former active religions in Cuba have undergone a revival. Surveys from the 1990s reveal that over 80 percent of Cubans believe in the divine. Surveys also show that thirty percent of the Cuban population, identify as practitioners of Santeria.

Part III. Analysis:

As demonstrated in the second section of the paper, the Batista and the Castro regimes both had pivotal roles in suppressing religious freedoms of the Cuban people in the twentieth century. Their regimes either favored one religious sect over all others or prohibited the practice of all of them together. However, the argument that there is a direct link between the perceptions of Santeria and the influence of government's policies is false. The growth in visibility is a result of the 1992 constitution and the recognition of religious liberties.

My methodology is also lacking ways of accurately measuring negative and positive perceptions of Santeria, which affects the validity of my paper. Through the research, it proved difficult to find actual data on these negative or positive attitudes towards Santeria; because of its integration into Cuban society. Santeria, in Cuba, has always been seen as more favorable than other syncretic religions as a result of their integration of Christian concepts. Furthermore, many followers of Santeria do not identify explicitly as just followers of Santeria or followers of just

¹⁵ Sweig, Julia E.. Cuba : What Everyone Needs to Know. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Christianity. They do not face discrimination or perceived negatively by others in their country, as a result of most people having exposure to Santería. Santería is an integral part of the Cuban culture, and has been around since the era of colonization. As a result, even if one does not practice Santería--it is not seen as foreign or strange to the Cuban people.

The paper does not prove my thesis. My paper focused more on policy impact on the visibility of Santería as well as all religions. The main policies I was able to focus on, is the suspension of the Constitution, allowing the Batista regime to act however they felt was appropriate towards religious groups. The second policy was under the Castro regime, which banned any type of religious practice all together. While the examination of the link between government censorship of religion and Santería is plausible and can be examined, the link between government censorship and perceptions of Santería is one that is assumed but difficult and not possible to measure

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