

**Santeria—A cultural thing;
Occult practice challenges evangelical churches in Miami**

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LAM News Service

The recent conviction of Henry Cuesta on charges of a contract killing of Dulce Diaz, both Santeria practitioners, highlighted the growing presence of the African-Cuban Santeria cult appearing among south Florida's diverse ethnic population.

In addition to Santeria and voodoo groups brought by immigrants from the Caribbean, church workers say that they are seeing an increase in Islam and secular religions which are taking their place along side the traditional Jewish and Christian groups in one of America's most cosmopolitan cities.

Drawing the most curious interest in Miami, however, is Santeria, a blend of Catholicism and African religion that has its origins among the Yoruba people of western Nigeria. Santeria was born out of slavery, evolving when slaves who brought it to Cuba, Brazil and other Caribbean countries were discouraged or forbidden from practicing their religion. Santeria literally means, "saint worship."



"Santeria is a third-world religion," explained Dr. Mercedes Cros Sandoval who teaches anthropology at the Interamerican campus of Miami-Dade Community College and is writing a book on the subject. With its magical and spiritual dimensions, Santeria attracts those who are facing health, job, family or other problems or those who are in "risky" professions such as politicians or artists, she said. "It is a mental health and crisis intervention system and attracts those who are in a crisis over values," Dr. Sandoval said.

The religious practice was easily able to take root in the Roman Catholic cultures of Latin America, especially Cuba and Brazil, where the Catholic church venerated a multitude of saints with whom the African deities could be equated, she explained.

In countries such as Brazil, spiritist religions such as Santeria are reported to be widespread inside and outside of the dominant Roman Catholic Church. "If anybody makes the statement that Brazil is a Catholic country, he is completely out of the game," states Dinho Pereira, an LAM missionary in the interior city of Tres Ranchos. "Brazil is a Spiritist country, not a Catholic country. If you ask people, they say they are Catholic. But, if you really start to analyze, they are Spiritists but they are ashamed to say that, so they say they are Catholic."

Sandoval estimates that there are several-hundred places of Santeria worship in Miami, mostly among Cuban immigrants.

“I think that Santeria is as widespread in Miami as it is in Cuba—affecting up to sixty percent of the Cuban population,” estimates Rev. Tom Willey who was raised as the child of missionaries in Cuba and has worked extensively with Cuban and Haitian refugees through his position as Miami director for World Relief. “Now it’s spreading in the United States attracting ‘gringos’ who want to experiment with it,” he said.

Santeria worship occurs mostly in the houses of priests where practitioners sacrifice animals, consult oracles and worship one divine being, Olodumare. While visitors are welcome, Santeria congregations do not welcome publicity nor overtly evangelize.

“We sell all kinds of religious goods,” says Evelio Ruiz, the owner of Botánica Chichi in the heavily Cuban-populated city of Hialeah. “We have rocks, snails and bowls which we use in our Santeria rituals,” he says as he advises a customer on the correct type of incense to use in an upcoming meeting. A Botánica is a religious supply store that provides both Roman Catholic and spiritist supplies. Santeria goods can also be purchased alongside Roman Catholic supplies in many grocery stores in Miami’s Cuban neighborhoods.

Ritual sacrifices, involving the collecting and offering of animal blood to please the saints, bring good luck, purification and forgiveness of sins and are a common part of Santeria practice. Santeria worship occurs mostly in the houses of priests where practitioners sacrifice animals, consult oracles and worship one divine being, Olodumare. Worship involves the use of rhythmic sounds and feverish dancing.



While no evangelical churches in Miami specifically target Santeria practitioners, many report that they minister to members who come into contact with the practice. Pastors say that they find little infiltration of spiritist practices into their churches. “It is a cultural thing,” said Al Ortiz, a Puerto-Rican born missionary with LAM’s Christ for Miami program. “A lot of people do it, but they don’t know what they are getting into. They are just playing around with it.”

“I have run into people who are frightened by it,” said Pedro A. Martinez, pastor of the one hundred member Iglesia Cristiana Amor church in Miami. He often has to calm

down church members who find animal parts or other Spiritist paraphernalia in neighbor's yards. "But, there is no toleration of it in the evangelical Christian movement," he said. "When one converts to Jesus Christ, they give up their practices."

"However, many new believers carry demons from their previous experience," Martinez said. He often works with new believers in a healing process and casting out those demons.

"There is a social stigma to being involved in Santeria," says the Rev. Silvia Fernandez, who, along with her husband, Jorge, pastors a Pentecostal church in Miami Beach. She explains that Santeria adherents are not always obvious unless one sees the beads that they wear. However, Santeria practitioners often hide the beads under their clothes.

There are no special ministries targeting Santeria, Fernandez explains. "You cannot target Santeria in the same way that organizations such as Jews for Jesus target the Jewish community," she says. "You have to work with them as you would with people from the Jehovah's Witness, you work with them one-by-one."

Fernandez says that she and her husband, a former practitioner of Santeria, work with adherents individually, looking for "their weakness and applying Jesus to that wound."

While Santeria leaders have no problems with their adherents attending Catholic services, and often the Catholic Church, particularly in Latin America, tolerates spiritist practices, evangelicalism and Santeria are mutually exclusive according to Dr. Sandoval. "Fundamentalism is quite rigid," she said. "It is Bible oriented and is a culture in itself, often isolating people from other cultures," she adds, indicating that evangelical churches do not tolerate participation in other religious practices.

Willey agrees. "A priest in Cuba once told me that the one group that Santeria's can't tolerate are Evangelical Christians. They are mutually intolerant."

"One of the reasons that many of our older evangelical Cuban pastors reject contemporary music and Pentecostal expression is because they associate it with Santeria practices," Willey explains. "As part of their experience with demon possession, Santeria followers speak in tongues and roll on the floor."

Fr. Juan Sosa, a Roman Catholic priest in Miami who has written about Santeria, says that the official position of his church "is one of not accepting the beliefs of Santeria but being in dialogue with its leaders and promoting the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the true stories around the Saints and the Blessed Mother so that the belief in other divinities may begin to disappear."

"The Church wishes to invite those in Santeria to know Jesus," Sosa explains. "The church does not tolerate, but does not condemn; it rather announces Jesus to all and invites all to know Jesus."

Sosa is critical of evangelical groups who, he says, “echo the devil and all demons as being behind Santeria. They understand neither the anthropological nor the pastoral ramifications of this syncretism.” Sosa says that “The Catholic Church may offer a doorway to those in Santeria through the popular piety of the faithful.”

Along side Miami-Dade’s majority Hispanic population, a growing populace of Haitians have introduced voodoo practices into the area. “Voodoo is different than Santeria,” Willey explained. “Voodoo is black magic, concerned with an evil intent, while Santeria is white magic, focused on a religious intent.

Santeria has its down side however, according to Willey. “It’s very closely related to the drug culture,” he said. “Most drug dealers cast shells to see if the signs are favorable for a drug run.”

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Santeria—A cultural thing; Occult practice challenges evangelical churches in Miami, *LAM News Service*, April 30, 2003