

Santeria: a religion of resistance, secrets, and solidarity

By Haley Moen

HAVANA--On a dusty back street in an outlying Havana neighborhood, a woman clutched a bag of squirming turkeys, chickens, and doves. A claw frantically reached through a hole in the bag and scratched her dark caramel shin.

“It’s worth the blood,” the woman, Yaquelin, said with a wink and a grin.

Besides live fowl, Yaquelin was shopping for amulets, honey, candles, potions, and medicinal plants. She was preparing for a secret ceremony. One of her friends was about to be initiated into Santeria, Cuba’s Afro-Cuban religion. She was in charge of buying the necessary objects and helping to perform the ceremony.

For centuries Santeria was suppressed. Spanish overlords feared its power. Communist leaders scorned it as primitive superstition. Nonetheless it survived underground. Now, as restrictions on Cuban life ease, Santeria has re-emerged as a major force in Cuban society.

African slaves brought Santeria to Cuba centuries ago. Since then it has evolved into a combination of the Yoruba religion of West Africa and Spanish Catholicism. Devotees seek good health and moral guidance from orishas, or spiritual deities. Often they practice cleansing rituals and ceremonies that summon the deities’ magical powers. These rituals, devotees say, increase their self-esteem and help them understand the mysteries of life.

“At any point in life, Santeria followers may decide to complete a year-long initiation ceremony to achieve a higher level of enlightenment,” Yaquelin explained as she tightened the knot around her bag of live fowl. “During this year, initiates must wear white to symbolize their rebirth into a new life.”

On the streets of Havana and other Cuban cities and towns, it is not unusual to see one of these white-clad initiates. They must not only wear white outer clothing, but also use white umbrellas, white wallets, white key chains, and even white-rimmed sunglasses. During this year, they must also follow a series of strict rules, including obeying a 6 PM curfew and avoiding physical contact with anyone other than lovers or Santeria priests.

Yaquelin paused in her explanation when she caught sight of the next stop on her shopping trip. She stopped in front of a dark doorway between two crumbling homes. Above the door hung a faded wooden sign reading, “Shop for Religious Relics.”

Inside the store, customers waited patiently as clerks retrieved religious objects from what looked like a Santeria treasure chest behind the counter. Rows of colorfully beaded jewelry hung from the ceiling. Piles of ceramic vessels, some empty and other filled with medicinal herbs, covered the floor. Bottles of rum and potions lined the shelves.

Yaquelin pulled out her shopping list. So far the turkeys, doves and chickens—all destined for sacrifice during her friend’s initiation ceremony—were all she had bought.

“Santeria costs money,” she said. “Each ritual requires you to buy specific objects.”

Everyone in this store, clerks and customers alike, shared more than a religious identity. Most Santeria practitioners are Afro-Cuban, so their religion also provides them with a cultural network, a sense of belonging, and a reverence for their ancestry.

“Everyone has different personal reasons for practicing,” said a hotel bartender named Reynial who is also a Santeria priest. “Santeria helps me be a better person in dealing with others. It helps me understand why others may act a certain way, and how I should respond.”

Today Santeria is not only widely and freely practiced, but has even become a tourist attraction. Foreigners find it exotic, and tour agencies often bring busloads of the curious to Santeria temples. Since Santeria rituals are practiced only in private homes amid strict secrecy, these temples are inauthentic. Nonetheless they cater to tourists’ curiosity.

On a recent morning in Trinidad, a colonial town in southern Cuba that is a main tourist draw, a bus full of Scandinavian tourists pulled up outside one of these temples. About two dozen filed in and took seats in pews. They faced an altar on which a dark-skinned porcelain doll presided over a heap of offerings from the sea: shells, rocks, coral, and an anchor.

An evidently bored Santeria priest named Israel explained basic aspects of the religion. Then came a question he often hears.

“Can you explain more about the animal sacrifices?” a woman in the front row asked.

Israel, who sometimes speaks to as many as 30 tour groups in a day, rolled his eyes and began his studied reply.

“We only perform animal sacrifices every once in a while,” he said. “Anyway, all religions have a history of animal sacrifice, even Catholicism. It’s just not as well known.”

After the tourists filed out, Israel sat down to await the next group. “Sites like this are just folklore,” he said. “They’re cultural attractions for foreigners, who see this religion as voodoo or witchcraft. These sites don’t reflect the real religion. That happens in homes, and those practices are secret.”

Yaquelin was preparing for just such a ceremony. She had returned home with every item she had sought. The birds, perhaps anticipating their fate, had gone quiet. Yaquelin, exhausted from the morning of shopping, left her bags on a table and collapsed onto a thin mattress pad that she uses as a living room couch. The initiate would arrive soon.

As Yaquelin waited, her cousin, a Santeria priest, poured water over the door’s threshold and recited chants intended to purify the room. With a hatchet, he broke the coconuts into pieces, arranged the pieces next to pebbles and shells, and spread them over a bed of flat green leaves. The initiate was about to arrive. It was time to close the door to all who are not part of Santeria’s private world.