

## Santería

Enslaved Yoruba from southwestern Nigeria, brought to Cuba in great numbers between 1790 and 1865, carried with them numerous powerful divinities called *orisha*. In Cuba the Yoruba were called the Lucumí, and their worship of the *orichas* (Spanish spelling) came to be known as La Regla Lucumí, La Regla de Ocha, or Santería. Santería appeared in Cuba not as a static survival or retention of African practices but as a dynamic Afro-Caribbean religion shaped by the needs of creole communities that emerged and changed in slavery and freedom. At first Santería was the exclusive religion of colonial Cuba's Lucumí "nation" (ethnic Yoruba and their early direct descendants), but it evolved as a spiritual path available to all Cubans in the 20th century. Santería also flourishes in Puerto Rico, Miami, New York, New Jersey, Illinois, and California, in communities of Cuban migrants. Its adherents now include White and Black Americans and other immigrants from the Caribbean.

In the 19th century the emerging creole religion creatively borrowed or remade Catholic elements, icons, ritual, and mythology within an Afro-Cuban ethical context. As Santería grew up inside the larger society, the Lucumí *orichas* came to be celebrated on the feast days of their Catholic saint counterparts—a creative use of the Church calendar as an armature to reconstitute the sacred festival cycle. Spanish military attire and courtly costumes and crowns, which had earlier entered Afro-Cuban carnival processions, appeared in the sacred Lucumí initiation process called the coronation. Saints' images, votive candles, and flowers appeared on altars alongside Yoruba-derived beadwork and sacrificial offerings. Ornate porcelain soup tureens came to contain the *orichas'* sacred objects—stones and cowrie shells embodying the *orichas'* power (*aché*). Layers of European-derived materials adorn and guard a secret, essentially African, sacred core.

The *orichas* are understood as so many refractions of a distant, incomprehensible Supreme Being or Creator. Each *oricha* is



Domestic shrine for *orichas* and saints with offerings, Guanabacoa, Havana, Cuba, 1986. Saints' images traditionally stand above the porcelain *soperas* (tureens) containing the deities' "secrets." (Photo by David Brown)

seen to own or control a domain of nature and human experience; is distinguished by legends, attributes, colors, and favored foods; and is praised with distinct drum rhythms and chants in the Lucumí ritual language. Santería's principal ritual goal is the effective tapping and channeling of the *orichas'* power for the health and benefit of the community, within a moral context sanctioned by the ancestors (*egun*). This task belongs to corps of specially initiated and trained priests or *santeros* who, as mediators of ritual power, discern the *orichas'* will through sophisticated divination systems and solicit the *orichas'* aid with proper tribute and sacrifice (*ebó*). As the *orichas'* servants, they act as "mounts" or "horses"—mediums of spirit possession—when the gods come down in the heat of drumming celebrations to dance, eat, and prophesy.

Santería ritual practice centers in the "house of Ocha," which refers to both the place where a shrine is maintained and the ritual family of Santería worshippers—a circle of "godchildren" initiated by an elder "godparent." The ritual family provides mutual support to its members; godchildren owe respect to their ritual elders and are obliged to assist in house rituals such as drummings and initiations. In their homes initiated priests establish altars for their ancestors and *orichas* and conduct consultations and spiritual cleansings.

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