

CUBAN RELIGIONS OF AFRICAN ORIGIN

The complex religious rites of Regla de Ocha, or Santería as it is more widely known, offer a fascinating glimpse into the ancient traditions that permeate modern Cuba's ancient African soul.

The practice first took root in the 17th and 18th centuries when thousands of Yoruba slaves transported from West Africa brought with them a system of animistic beliefs that they hid beneath a Catholic veneer. Keeping tribes together in order to pit one group against another, the Spanish – who summarily baptized their new brethren on arrival – unwittingly allowed the practice of African religions to persist and prosper. Their survival depended on the convergence of ancient Yoruba beliefs with those of traditional Catholicism into a practice that came to be known as Santería (a derivative term invented by the Spanish).

By the 18th century, tribes such as the Arará, the Lucumí and the Congo were allowed to organize themselves into *cabildos* (associations). These *cabildos* provided entertainment, involving dance and music, on feast days for Catholic saints. Meanwhile, away from the spotlight, the slaves had begun to practice a crude form of their own religious worship, replacing each Catholic saint with an equivalent Yoruba *orisha* (a Santería deity).

Among the most important *orishas* is the androgynous creator god Obatalá, who is always dressed in white and associated with Christ or Nuestra Señora de la Merced. Obatalá's wife, Odudúá, goddess of the underworld, is replicated in a similar way by the image of the Virgin. Obatalá's son, Elegguá (St Anthony), is the god of destiny. Yemayá, the goddess of the ocean and mother of all *orishas*, is identified by the color blue and associated with Nuestra Señora de Regla. Changó, the Yoruba god of fire and war, lives in the tops of the royal palm trees and controls the lightning; his color is red and he's associated with Santa Bárbara. His son Aggayú Solá, god of land and protector of travelers, is associated with San Cristóbal (St Christopher). Ochún, wife of Changó and companion of Yemayá, is the goddess of love and the rivers, and is associated with Cuba's patron saint, the Virgin de la Caridad del Cobre (whose color is yellow). Ogún is associated with John the Baptist. Babalú Ayé (St Lazarus) is the *orisha* of disease.

It's likely there are more followers of the Afro-Cuban religions than practicing Roman Catholics in contemporary Cuba and although Regla de Ocha is by far the largest group it is by no means the only strand. *Orishas* in Santería, differ significantly from Catholic saints in the sense that they are fallible. The concepts of original sin and a final judgment are unknown. Instead, ancestral spirits are worshipped.

The rites of Santería are controlled by a male priest called a *babalawo*, of whom there are estimated to be 4000 in Cuba. The *babalawos* are often consulted for advice, to cure sicknesses or to grant protection, and offerings are placed before a small shrine in his home. Other rituals involve ecstatic dance, singing chants and animal sacrifice. The blood of animals such as chickens, doves and goats is offered to the *orishas* along with fruit and herbs at elaborate ceremonies as the *babalawo* sprays rum onto the altar from his mouth.

Cubans are surprisingly open about Santería, and travelers are welcome to inspect household shrines and attend ceremonies. Many hotels stage special Santería shows for visitors, but to uncover the real essence of Regla de Ocha you'll have to scratch a little deeper underneath the surface. Get talking at your *casa particular*, hang around the urban hotbeds (Guanabacoa in Habana, or Matanzas) or take to the streets and follow the sound of the drums. Don't forget to take a gift for the *orishas*.