



Hialeah v Lukumi Babalu Aye: Santeria, Anti-Blackness, and Identity

Israel Herndon

Overview

- Enslaved Black Cubans combined Yoruba (West African) religious practices with Catholic elements to birth the religion Santeria.
- In the aftermath of the 1959 Cuban revolution, an influx of Cubans immigrated to the United States. Most of the Cubans that arrived were white, and had not previously practiced Santeria, but used Santeria to reconnect with their homeland.
- In 1980, the population of Hialeah, Florida consisted of a 73% Hispanic demographic and of those 60% were Cuban. In 1987, Ernesto Pichardo, a Santeria leader, planned to build a church, the Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye (CLBA), in Hialeah.
- Despite the large Cuban population, public outcry led the city to ban animal sacrifice, an essential element of Santeria used to honor the Orishas, deities of the faith. The CLBA sued the city. The case eventually went to the Supreme Court, and the laws were overturned in 1993 because they inhibited religious freedom.

Argument

In Cuba, Santeria has been **demonized** because of its associations with blackness. This demonization continued in the United States, despite there being fewer Black practitioners. In the American context, Santeria, Blackness, and Cubanness stood in opposition to Christianity, whiteness, and **Americanness**. The themes of **identity** and **anti-Blackness** were captured in the Hialeah community's reactions to the establishment of CLBA.

Methods

For this project, I used two Florida newspapers. The first is *El Heraldo*. Founded in 1992, this Miami newspaper quoted Pichardo and other key players, such as the mayor, with their reactions to the developments in the case. The other, the *Sun-Sentinel*, covered the Southern Florida region and printed its first issue in 1910. The earlier print date allows for more initial reactions from Pichardo and the Hialeah community to the establishment of CLBA.

Literature Review

“Santeria Copresence and the Making of African Diasporic Bodies”

Aisha Beliso-De Jesus elaborated on the way that the Santeria incitation created a “**Yoruba- diaspora religious body**” regardless of a person's own identity. In the ceremony, participants became intertwined with the Orisha. This act created a connection to an Africana past regardless of a person's race. Her work provided some context for why reactions to Santeria remained anti-Black.

Literature Review

“An Emerging Religion in a Christian Environment

In the 10th chapter of Miguel De Torre's book *Santeria: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America*, he demonstrated how the demonization of Santeria made its way from Cuba to the United States. He then expressed his rationale for the reaction of the Hialeah community to CLBA. He concluded that Cuban Americans were embarrassed by Santeria and the church made that shame public. DeTorre concluded this shame came from fear and ignorance but did not describe how this feeling anchored itself in anti-Blackness.

Analysis

“Church Fights Hialeah Beliefs of Group Cause for Uproar”

“Critics, including neighbors and city officials, accuse church members of practicing **witchcraft**...”

According to Rebecca and Phillip Stein, when a society deemed a spiritual practice to be witchcraft that practice existed in the margins of society. Witchcraft also denoted presumed evil and misfortune being brought into a culture. Additionally, Michael Mason argued that in Cuba, Santeria represented a “**Black problem**” that existed in the margins of society. The employment of this terminology served as a method to reject the legitimacy of Santeria and position it as unamerican and demonize it because of its origins in Black Cuban society.

Analysis

“Corte Suprema Estudiará Caso de Santeria en Hialeah”

“But I do not consider the rituals of animal sacrifice **typical of this country** or of this century...”

Julio Martinez, the acting mayor of Hialeah in 1992, conveyed his opinions on Santeria. Martinez had relatives in Cuba who practiced Santeria, but he did not speak to them because of their beliefs. Which added to DeTorre's argument that Cuban Americans were embarrassed by Santeria. For Martinez, rejecting Santeria allowed for him to embrace a Cuban **American** identity.

Results and Conclusion

The majority Cuban community of Hialeah responded negatively to the establishment of the CLBA because it stood in the way of an idealized American identity. Santeria, regardless of the racial makeup of the practitioners, represented Blackness. When Cuban Americans rejected Black Santeria, they became more acceptable to a predominately white American society.

Future considerations on this topic:

- How did Americans outside of Hialeah react to the creation of a Santeria church? Where Cuban Americans more, less, or equally reactionary to the CLBA?
- Did Black Americans respond with anti-Blackness to the CLBA?



Figure 1: 2014 photo of CLBA leaders