

Plants religion essay sample

[Parts of the World](#), [Africa](#)



Santeria is an Afro-Cuban religion that stems from the Yoruba faith which originated in southwestern Nigeria; it also finds many inspirations from West African neighbors that share similar practices and beliefs (Brandon 1991: 55). Afro-Cuban religions often provide a unique mixture of traditional African religions intermixed with a few Christian or Catholic beliefs. This mixture is a direct result of the African Diaspora that saw African slaves being taken to the West Indies and elsewhere by European masters, who then exposed them to Christian religions and aspects. This led to the creation of various religions that are often found in Cuba and other countries. Santeria is one of those religions.

Traditional African religions often found plants to be quite useful for both medical and ritual purposes, an aspect that carries over to the Santeria faith as well. “ Plants play an important role in Santeria ritual, whether in communal ceremonies, the more private domain or healing rites, or individualistic practices of magic, witchcraft, and sorcery” (Brandon 1991: 59). In this paper, the use of plants in Santeria will be detailed, as well as the reasons behind their use in various rituals and customs related to the Afro-Cuban religion. The role of plants in Santerian religious ceremonies is typically one of healing and sacrifice, as plants are tied to the gods that the Santeria worship.

Santeria stems from many unique and signature aspects of Yoruba, including many of its fundamental aspects “ Yoruba traditions of divination, sacrifice, ceremonial spirit possession, and healing remain important in present-day Santeria” (Brandon 1991: 56). Orishas are the many spirits that are thought to dwell in the next world and in this one, and the priests who act as spiritual

leaders are the olorisha. Spiritual possession is thought to be common and a typical explanation for changes in personality as well as minor to major medical problems. According to studies, “ Practitioners may attribute disease, disturbing life events and bad luck to factors such as a person’s envidia (envy), mal de ojo (evil eye) the belief that certain individuals can inflict misfortune through their gaze, or, in rare cases, hechiceria (witchcraft)” (Potterf 2006: 88). These unique factors can all contribute to the various illnesses and bad events experienced by those practicing Santeria.

In order to remedy their ailments, Santeria rituals must be performed. The olorisha, or priest, would assemble the congregation to gather around someone who was thought to be possessed by an orisha, or someone who was experiencing divination. Plant concoctions created for the purpose of a ritual are typically called ozains or omeiros. These are mixtures of plants whose purpose is to “ cleanse, refresh, and prepare individuals and objects for contact with the orisha or Santos, the deities of Santeria” (Brandon 1991: 60). During these rituals, offerings of sacrificial blood, fruit, and valuables are presented to the orishas or Santos, as a means of gaining their favor. This is done in order to facilitate the body and prepare it for a possession by an orisha. Through this consensual possession, the orisha is thought to heal the person who is ill (Olupona & Rey 2008). Despojos are the common term for Santeria cleansing rituals, which typically remove harmful spirits from the body, and absorb the bad spirits and their influences into smoke, water, or an object. Plants are typically used in the smoking process, where the steam of the smoke sloughs out the bad spirits, fumigating them. Often, several

different methods of cleansing, including brushing the person with a broom made of spiritually significant branches, weeds or sprigs of flowers, are utilized to cleanse the body of unfortunate possessions.

Plants and herbs are called egwe in Lucumi, the base language from which the Santeria spoken language is derived. These plants “ are thought to have the power to help human beings lead healthful and abundant lives” (Brandon 1991: 58). Ache is the unexplainable, supernatural power that is emitted from these plants, which is utilized through ritual and medicinal use by the Santeria to improve their health. These plants are mixed together by the Santeros, each of whom “ is a competent herbalist who can cure practically every disease with an herbal brew or cast a tremendous spell with a few leaves” (Gonzalez-Wippler 1994: 22). The importance of plants to Santeria rituals leads to the intimate knowledge each Santero has with their medical and religious uses, which is borne of necessity.

Each unique plant has its own personality and level of divine power. Depending on the flower, they may wilt more easily, or remain strong throughout the year. The biological activities of these flowers are attributed to personality traits, and a wilted flower will merely be determined as ‘ shy’ until the next time they are enlivened by sunlight. The emphasis on plant growing is that egwes must be found wild, they cannot be cultivated or their healing powers, their ache, will be lost (Brandon 1991).

Plants and herbs are mainly used for folk remedies, as previously mentioned, but ritual uses are another chief utility for them. Various types of plants are used for different purposes. The primary purposes of Santeria plant usage

are medical, ritual, and a combination of the two. Medical uses for these plants in Santeria communities deal with particular health problems, such as gastrointestinal issues or respiratory difficulties (Brandon 1991). There is a plant for nearly every type of health problem imaginable in the Santeria canon of herbology and ethnobotany, but primary focuses are on the female reproductive system. There are remedies for abortion, for fertility, and even reducing placenta during childbirth and contraceptives. There is a very strong tie between the health of a Santero or Santera and the plants they use as folk remedies.

Not only are the plants used for communal worship and healing practices, they were also used to ward off sorcery and witchcraft. Amulets made from plants, which were called *resguardos*, are placed around the house of a Santero to ensure that no evil witchcraft comes into their home and messes up their good fortune. Plants are also elaborately used to fight witchcraft and exorcise it from people who have already endured it. Crushing, boiling, or consuming various plants are meant to clean a person or home in a spiritual sense, and remove bad influences that are hovering over them due to sorcery (Brandon 1991).

In medical use, *olorishas* would administer these drugs to their followers in order to provide homeopathic remedies and nothing more. Examples of these include *irabiri*, which is a series of barks and roots which are used to treat bladder issues, as well as acidosis. *Chauko* is meant to remove the effects of intoxication from alcohol. *Agebeye* is for tired and irritated eyes, as well as other ailments (Brandon 1991: 69). Plants used for both medical and

ritual use include kotonlo or ewe ofi, which are used in omeiros. These rituals see these plants used as a dentifrice intended to take out tartar in the teeth. It is also used for upset intestines and liver. Liniddi is used for despejos and lustral baths, meant to treat contagious fevers and rheumatism. It was also used as an abortion aid (Brandon 1991). "Cuban herbalists use *Pluchea Carolinensis* (*Salvia*) to treat stomachaches, headaches, migraines, and as a Haemostatic" (Hodges 2006: 80).

When a plant is not thought to have a direct method of treatment, their supernatural powers are relied upon "those plants that do not help through some pharmacological efficacy are thought to help through the efficacy of their magical powers" (Brandon 1991: 58). There are some plants that are merely used as part of a ritual, and have no primary or secondary medical utility. Ewereyey, or cupa, is used in both good and bad magic. The leaves represent good rituals, but witchcraft uses the seeds in order to perform sorcery. Obi kola is used for initiation rituals to become an olorisha, as well as divination. Tabate defends against witchcraft through weaving the plant into a cross in their doorway (Brandon 1991: 72-73).

The origins of these plants are just as much a product of the Diaspora as the origin of Santeria, "some cultivated plants were brought by Africans to the New World during the slave trade," which provides an explanation of the parallels between plant species used between the Caribbean and Africa, including limes, wild licorice and castor bean (Brandon 1991: 65). Despite this fact, many plants used in Santeria were found in the New World natively, leading to a dramatic adaptation of these plant-based rituals to the

vegetation found in Cuba. At the same time, most of these plants were given Lucumi/Santeria names, stemming back to an African-based sympathy and familial connection. It is theorized that this was due to a need for the Santeria to make additional links to Africa and maintain further ties (Brandon 1991).

The disconnected nature of the actual origin of the plants and their African attributions by the Santeria is indicative of the importance they play in the religion itself as the use of plants is strictly an African practice that carries over to this Afro-Cuban faith, it makes sense that the plant lore would remain exclusively African. The plants themselves do not derive their names from the African tradition, but it cannot be said that the Santeras who were brought to America from Africa lost their traditional religion due to the African-based herbs and plants that made up their worship, through the simple fact that they still exist (Brandon 1991).

The future of plant usage in Santeria is uncertain, if not perilous. “ Knowledge of the properties and uses of plants is as important to the Santera as knowledge of rituals and songs, but use of this knowledge is hampered by the lack of many of the plants” (Brandon: 67). There are unique geographical and climate differences in the United States that are making it harder to grow plants such as the ozainista, which is used as a divination tool. The emigration of Santeras into the United States from Cuba is also leading to a lessening of Santerian traditions remaining in use, including plant-based rituals. Studies have shown that Haitian migrants and their descendants are even finding trouble locating their plant-based

remedies in certain provinces of Cuba (Volpato et al. 2009). This places the future of traditional ethnobotany in all Afro-Cuban religions and cultures, including Santeria, in danger of extinction.

The continued mixing and modernization of Western culture is slowly leading to the death of this plant-based homeopathic practice. There are many Santeros now who choose to go to doctors and take prescribed medication to cure their ills, but will still use the plants for ritualistic purposes (Olupona & Rey 2008). In this way, Santeria is diminishing as a health delivery system, where once it was a mighty resource for both Santeros and non-Santeros to receive effective, homeopathic treatment (Iglesias & Iglesias 2006).

Regardless of the eventual fate of Santeria medicine, it cannot be denied that many of the homeopathic remedies found by folk cultures such as this Afro-Cuban religion create the basis for modern, scientifically examined and created medications. Due to the established efficacy of many of these plants, it allows for a more specific starting point from which to work in creating feasible, widespread medications that can help many who would not use them in a traditional Santeria religious ceremony.

Not only are these plants used in spiritual rituals and for medicinal purposes, they were decorative “ seeds were often used to make jewelry and body ornament, and they frequently served as beads in necklaces and bracelets for the wrists and ankles” (Brandon 1991: 65). Of course, these ornaments also carried religious overtones, as leaves, beads, and the orisha ozain were inextricably linked symbolically, tying this act of decoration with a spiritual practice.

The use of these plants for many different purposes makes it clear that the plants are tied to the various orishas that control actions, luck and fortune among the Santeria people. Whether they are used for medicinal or ritual purpose, the idea is to tie the biological and the natural aspects of home with the spiritual by taking control of the natural forces that surround them, and using the plants that are linked to the pertinent orisha, it is possible to exorcise orisha, heal illnesses, and facilitate rituals. It is probable that the use of plants even in the New World is just as important, if not more so, in Santeria than it is for their Yoruba predecessors given their forced relocation during the time of the African Diaspora, it is important for the Santeria people to have some sort of tie to their homeland. In this case, it is in the form of the use of plants for their rituals and medicines.

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