



## Latino Religion, Ritual and Culture

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To understand the role that religion plays among Hispanic people in the United States, we must first place the various Hispanic religious modes in a historical and social context. This will be done by providing a brief overview of three ways that religion has influenced the development of Hispanic culture. The first covers the role that Catholicism played in the colonization of the Americas. The second perspective covers the role religion played in the development of national identity. The third examines alternative Hispanic religious institutions found in contemporary North American society and the relationship of those Hispanic religious institutions to each other, as well as to the Catholic Church and other aspects of the dominant society.

### The Origins of Religion and Slavery in the Americas

Most of the Iberian Peninsula was retaken from the Moslems in the twelfth century. During this period, the Christians, Jews and Muslims lived among each other. After the Reconquest, however, the Christians became intolerant of this religious pluralism and forced Jews and Muslims to convert to Christianity. The Spaniards later prevented the entrance of Muslims and Jews to the Americas in order to control the diffusions of non-Christian religious ideas (Gibson 1966). In the fifteenth century, the Spaniards and the Portuguese entered a period of "Great Explorations." They were interested mainly in the long distance trade network of spices from Asia and gold from Africa. In addition, the Spaniards and Portuguese wanted to establish new colonies where they could spread their Christian faith. Portuguese explorers landed in a region which has loosely been called Guinea, West Africa. They attempted to raid villages along the African coast and tried to take peasants and Muslim merchants as slaves.

Soon, the Portuguese discovered that they could not colonize the Africans on the coast because they were part of large, powerful military states in the interior. The Portuguese had no choice but to develop a trade relationship which eventually contributed to the underdevelopment of Africa. According to Wolf (1982), at the beginning, the Africans traded ivory, spices, gold, beeswax and leather for European textiles, wheat, brass utensils and glass beads. The slave trade was not as important during this time.

The African slaves who were taken to Portugal by these explorers began to move into the Spaniard's territory and later were sold to the Americas. Spaniards required that slaves spend two years in residence in a Christian home before they could be brought to the Caribbean. The Spaniards were concerned with preventing the diffusion of non-Christian religious ideas. As a result, they denied entrance to Jews, Muslims and bozales (black slaves recently brought from Africa) to the Americas (Gibson 1966).

As Spaniards began to explore other routes to Asia in search of spices and gold, they encountered the Amerindians. The King and Queen of Spain had been convinced by Christopher Columbus that the Caribbean islands were, in fact, in east Asia. The conquistadores arrived at the end of the fifteenth century and began to colonize these islands. The process of colonization was conducted by transplanting the Spanish state military force and bureaucracy, as well as Christianity—the dominant ideological tools to justify colonization. As soon as the indigenous population realized that the Spaniards came as conquerors and not as trade partners, they responded with rebellions throughout the Caribbean islands. However, the military superiority of the conquistadores put an end to these rebellions. The indigenous population was pacified; others escaped slavery by fleeing to the hills and the forests. The Dominican Bartolomé de las Casas left much documentation of the cruel and violent way in

which the conquistadores treated the indigenous population in the Caribbean (Wolf 1982).

Other reasons for the rapid disappearance of the Amerindians was due to the rapid spread of European disease, to which they had no immunity, and their subjection to maltreatment and long hours of labor, especially in gold and silver mines. The system of *encomienda* provided conquistadores with the Amerindian labor for the cultivation of crops and the raising of animals. The Amerindians were considered serfs, more or less, but in reality, they became *de facto* slaves and were treated accordingly. The conquistadores ignored the laws which the Crown established to prevent the disappearance and maltreatment of the Amerindians. According to the laws of the *encomienda*, the conquistadores were responsible for the well-being and the Christianization of the Amerindians. The indigenous population was allowed to control some of the land which they could cultivate for daily subsistence and the conquistadores were ordered to give the Amerindians agricultural tools. The fact that the Amerindians were removed from their lands, overworked, poorly fed and exploited caused them to die rapidly.

One of the Cuban folk heroes is Hatuey, a cacique from La Hispanola who had fought the conquistadores and gone to Cuba to organize the Amerindians on the island. Hatuey failed in his mission because they had no sense of political unity. He fought until his death and has been incorporated into Cuban history as the first person to stand up against slavery and the Christianization of Amerindians. When Hatuey was captured by the conquistadores, a priest asked him if he wanted to be baptized so he could go to heaven. Hatuey reflected for a while and then asked the priest if conquistadores also went to heaven. The priest replied that if they were Christians they could go to heaven. Hatuey then said that he would rather not go because he did not want to go where those cruel men go (Las Casas 1974, 55).

For "infidels," death by burning was very common at the beginning of the colonial period. It was also the punishment for those who ran away from Christianity. As mentioned previously, the Crown and the Church had joint interest in the colonization of the Americas. The Crown wanted gold and silver, and the Church wanted to teach the world the true faith. Brutality and violence were justified as the means to that end. Christianization of the indigenous population had to take place, even if it meant burning them at the stake. Thus, the rapid extinction of the indigenous population continued.

It is important to mention that during the sixteenth century one of the greatest debates among the mem-

bers of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church focused on the concept of the soul. The common opinion at that time was that the Amerindians had no soul and were incapable of reasoning. Church officials maintained that the Amerindians were closer to the animal kingdom than to civilized Europeans. One of the marks used to place the Amerindians at the very bottom of religious evolution was their lack of temples and the absence of belief in a supreme God. The key question was whether the Amerindians could be baptized since this privilege was reserved for those recognized as civilized Europeans, with souls and a concept of a supreme being (Ortiz 1975).

Many of the religious orders, such as the Dominicans in the Caribbean and the Jesuits in Central and South America, argued that Amerindians were capable of reasoning and that they had some concept of a supreme God to whom they prayed. According to the Dominicans and the Jesuits, it was the responsibility of the Church to rescue the souls of Amerindians from their pagan state and to show them the true faith. Finally, a papal bull of 1537 declared that the Amerindians were human and capable of being baptized (Ortiz 1975, 463).

Although it has appeared that the abolition of the *encomienda* system was the result of the struggle of Las Casas, it was also related to the attempt of the Crown to keep the conquistadores from gaining too much power in the Americas (Wolf 1959; Lang 1975). Padre de las Casas requested that the Crown bring some of the slaves from Sevilla to the Americas. Many historians affirm that he was responsible for the enslavement of Africans in the New World. Las Casas asked for slaves, but he did not say that the slaves had to be black. The institution of Iberian slavery had not been restricted to one particular race or ethnic group. Slaves in the fourteenth and fifteenth century were white or black. It was only with the importation of Africans to the Americas that the association of slaves with race emerged. Las Casas wanted to transplant the individuals who were enslaved in Sevilla. This group would be more suitable for slavery than the Amerindians, and so the Crown began to import slaves from Sevilla in great numbers (Aimes 1967, 66).

One of the differences to be seen between the Christianization of the African slaves and the indigenous populations in America is the approach the Spanish took toward their religious conversion. These approaches were prevalent until the end of the eighteenth century. The Spanish believed that they were rescuing the Africans from the sinfulness in which they lived in Africa. The slave trade was seen by the Spanish Catholic Church as a way of saving souls. For the Africans themselves, Catholicism became a way to

become part of the Spanish culture. Religion became the means of their acculturation into Western culture.

In the case of the indigenous populations of Central and South America, the Spanish attempted to enslave them by forcing them to stay in closed communities. The Spanish Crown and the Spanish Church felt that they had a genuine responsibility to convert the Amerindians of the new world to Christianity. Particular holy orders such as the Dominicans and the Franciscans claimed that they had discovered a new territory that offered them a rare opportunity to create true Christians, even utopian communities; a heaven on earth. These religious orders took their models for these communities from the ancient biblical tribes and communities of the scriptures (LaFaye 1988).

Church officials were interested in accomodating the religious beliefs of the indigenous population. They began to learn the languages of the native Americans in order to be able to study their religions and translate Christianity into these indigenous beliefs. It was felt that native Americans had very poor abilities for abstraction, that they could understand more through feelings and sensations than through their intellect. Therefore, a sort of intellectual imitation of Christianity in the indigenous beliefs was attempted. The ultimate goal was to eradicate the indigenous belief systems. As can be seen in the religions of the Maya and Aztec, this experiment was unsuccessful, because we can still find that these religious systems exist within the Christian belief system in Latin America. So we find that the conversion of the indigenous population to Christianity was primarily a process of political pressure. An interesting case from conversions in Columbia show how slaves were converted or evangelized. Jesuit Alonzo de Sandoval visited the *barracones* (long huts built for plantation slaves) every day at the docks of Cartagena and brought the catechism to the slaves. He would approach a slave, and even before baptizing him or her, Sandoval would put around his neck a medal called *medaille de estagno* (tin metal), marking the slave as a Christian. The book that he wrote discusses African history and culture and also outlines the steps through which African slaves arriving in the Americas could become Christians. Sandoval would ask if an African slave had a Christian name. If so, he would conclude that the slave had been baptized. The individual slave that was identified as not being baptized would then receive training concerning the Trinity, preservation of the dead and the immortality of the soul. Sandoval states that the slaves received his Christian teaching with tremendous joy, and particularly as they understood that they would have a peaceful life after death. Of course, the Christian training of the slave would end when they were sold, and any further

religious instruction depended fully on their master (Sandoval 1956).

One of the major influences of Catholicism on the Americas has been the belief in the Virgin Mary as a mediator between individuals, groups, nations and God. This belief was transplanted by both the clergy as well as representatives of the Crown. In the early period of the colonization in the sixteenth century, many colonies in the Caribbean and Latin America had their own religious miracle where the Virgin Mary had appeared in their own land, transforming herself into the image of the conquered people (LaFaye 1988). The ethnic transformation of the Virgin Mary was used by the clergy as a vehicle to demonstrate to the oppressed population, the Africans and Native Americans that the Virgin would intercede on their behalf, that the mother of God would be compassionate to their suffering and would pray for their salvation. This belief contained the promise that life after death would be peaceful and without the brutality that they were experiencing in their present life. The oppressed believed that they were also the children of God, even though they were enslaved (Wolf 1958).

This devotion to the Virgin Mary played an important role during the wars of independence in the Caribbean and in the development of a national identity. It became a way to legitimize the struggle of Creole groups against the Spanish colonial government. The Creoles used the apparition of the transformation of the Virgin Mary, such as with the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico, to mobilize many of the popular classes to join them in a political struggle and to rally the masses to advance their own interests. The apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico was used to argue that the Mexican identity was unique because the Virgin had chosen to appear to Mexicans. This proved that the Mexican people had an important role to play in the world (Lafaye 1988). In a similiar way in the Caribbean, the Cuban elite population used the appearance of the Virgin Mary and her transformation into a mulatto Virgin as a symbol that Cuban identity was blessed by the Virgin. The struggle against the Spaniard was a struggle for the establishment of a separate national identity, guided and protected by their own Virgin Mary.

In discussing the Virgin of Guadalupe, Eric Wolf states that the site at which the shrine of Guadalupe stands is not the first religious structure that existed there, and neither was Guadalupe the first female diety associated with that sacred site. He points out that in pre-Hispanic times Tepeyac had been the site of an earth and fertility divinity named Tonantzin, who, similar to the Virgin of Guadalupe, was associated with the moon. The temple of this indigenous divinity was, like

the Virgin of Guadalupe, also a site where large scale pilgrimages took place. The Spanish friars used the sacred site as a way to peacefully infiltrate the religious systems of the Amerindians. During the same period of the sixteenth century in Cuba, the Virgin Mary also appeared in the hills of the eastern part of Cuba where early slaves worshiped an ancestral spirit named Chola Anguenge. This Congolese ancestral spirit was syncretized with the Virgin of Charity. These are two cases in which the Christian symbols became, in a peaceful manner, blended with indigenous religious symbols (Wolf 1958, 33-34; Lachatanere 1961, 3-5).

In the period following independence and the establishment of a national identity, the role of the saint became extremely important in the Hispanic religious experience. Beginning in this period and continuing into the present, children learn from very young the stories of the different saints, either from Catholic school, or through catechesis in preparation for their first communion. In Hispanic Catholicism, there has always been more emphasis placed on having knowledge of the saints than about the gospel, the Bible itself.

For most Hispanics today, the saints are a link between themselves and God. They have personalized relationships similar to their relationships to other human beings. Wolf and Hansen (1972) have said that this relationship is a patron-client relationship similar to the relationship that peones have with the *hacendados*. It is a relationship based on dependency and the granting of favors by those who are more powerful. The Hispanic perception is that saints are to be depended on for favors, curing illness, facilitating problems that emerge in daily lives. It can be said that Hispanic Catholicism, for the majority of people, is a practical religion (Office of Pastoral Research and Planning 1982). Individuals are allowed access to spiritual powers to solve problems through praying and worshipping the saints (Christian 1989). This devotion to the saints has emphasized the Catholic sacraments more than any need for mediation by clergy. This belief, however, has further contributed to the discrimination of Hispanics in the United States. Many have seen the religious participation of Hispanic Catholics to be different from that of Italian, Irish and other European Catholic immigrants. The perception is that Latinos are not really practicing Catholicism, but rather a form of spirit beliefs which blend folk Catholicism with *Espiritismo*. Catholic priests in the United States have tended to see Hispanics as "converts," similar to how the newly Christianized Amerindians and Africans were seen by the Spanish. The Church in the United States has also seen its mission in Latino communities to uplift the people spiritually from a level of semi-paganism. This is

particularly so due to the survival of non-Christian beliefs and rituals from the religions of African and Amerindian people. This syncretism with the Catholic Church has been a way to mark the Hispanic Catholic at a lower level of religious and spiritual development. Presently, this attitude is changing as the popular expression of Catholicism among Hispanics is beginning to gain some legitimacy (Office of Pastoral Research and Planning 1982, 12-13).

Even though Catholicism was no longer the only religion that predominated after independence, its influence on Hispanic culture has been tremendous. Time and season are still conceptualized in terms of the saints' feasts dividing the Latin American calendar. Some of these are popular holidays in which even non-Catholics participate. One example, as mentioned earlier, in the United States has been the tradition of *fiesta patronal* in New York—the Catholic holiday in honor of the Puerto Rican community. Similarly, the San Juan fiesta is a Catholic festivity, but open to non-Catholics. It usually includes a gigantic field mass, the ritual which officially opens the festival, followed by Puerto Rican cooking, songs, dances and children's games. The fiesta patronal in the United States has become a way to unite religion and ethnicity.

## Religious Institutions and Associations

The Hispanic communities in the United States have several religious institutions that play different roles in the community. Sometimes these roles overlap; sometimes each institution plays a unique and specialized role. Foremost among these is the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church provides stability by continuing to reinforce the norms and the values that people have transplanted from their homelands. The inhabitants of most Hispanic neighborhoods in the United States are Catholic and continue to look to the Catholic Church as a vehicle ensuring stability and order throughout their life-cycle. A recent study on religious denominations in the United States indicates that 65.8 percent of all Hispanics who participated in the survey were Catholic. The second largest denomination among Hispanics was Baptist. A case study below explores some of the reasons why some Hispanics are finding that the Catholic Church does not meet their needs as immigrant families, and why some of these Hispanics are gravitating toward the Baptist faith. The third largest denomination cited in the survey is the Pentacostal Church with 2.7 percent; this is followed by the Methodist denomination and Jehovah's Witnesses which both shared equal percentages of 1.7 percent. Other denominations with small numbers of Hispanic participation were Mormon and Lutheran (.8% each),

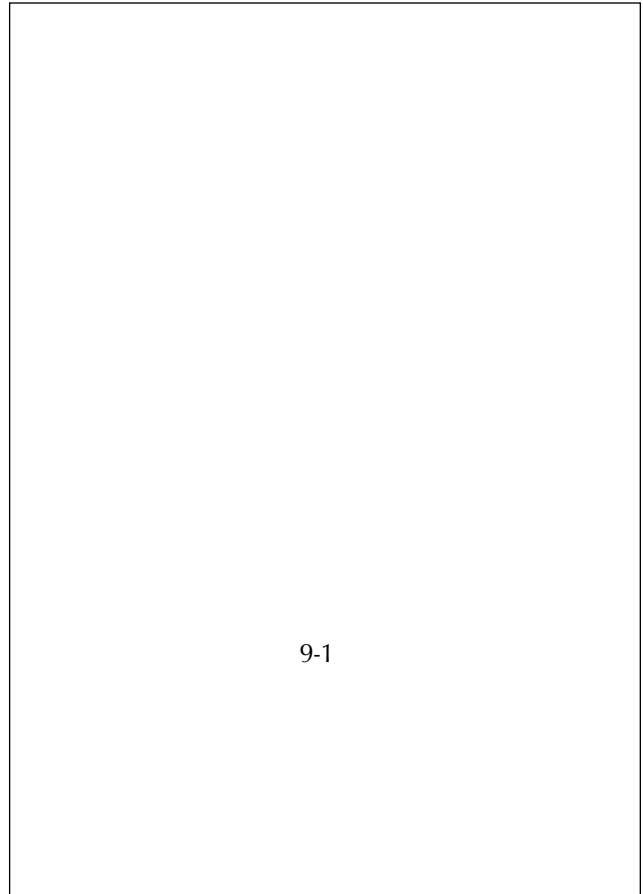
Jewish and Moslem (.3% each), and Hindu (.01%) (CUNY Graduate School and University Center 1991). In the case of religious denominations such as *Santería* and *Espiritismo* which have no official membership records, it is difficult to estimate how many are involved. According to one estimate in 1984 in Dade County, Florida, there were 50,000 *Santería* practitioners. Robbins estimates that there were 6,000 in New York in 1970 (Marks 1974). Other anthropologists have estimated more recently that there are 250,000 to 1,000,000 practitioners of *Santería* in the country. (Brandon 1983, Gregory 1986).

Catholic Church practice is based on participation in the sacraments. Socially, this begins with marriage. Marriage is a major event in all Hispanic communities that not only establishes new households, but also extends networks. Every Catholic wedding calls for the selection of godparents for the wedding. This strengthens ties between families and friends by placing certain obligations under the direct authority of a God considered omniscient.

The Church has maintained that premarital sex is wrong. However, the study conducted by the Archdiocese of New York, Office of Pastoral Research and Planning, points out that, while 60.6 percent of Catholic Latinos believe that a woman should be a virgin at the time of her wedding, a larger number of Protestant Latinos held this view, 85.7 percent (Office of Pastoral Research and Planning 1982, 78-79). It seems that with migration, attitudes are changing, and most Hispanics responding in the study think of marriage as just a union between two people that are in love and want to have a family. The study points out that among the Protestant population, they saw marriage with more of a religious understanding. The marriage ceremony was viewed as having more of a link to religion. The Catholic population thought that the marriage ceremony was important, but these ceremonies have decreased rather rapidly among young Hispanic adults (Office of Pastoral Research and Planning 1982, 78-79).

Interfamilial ties are similarly strengthened whenever the new couple expects a child. To prepare for the rite of baptism, another pair of godparents will be selected from a group of relatives and friends. This system of *compadrazgo* brings the group even closer together. Later, a single godparent of the same sex as the child is selected as a sponsor in the rite of confirmation.

Baptism is the religious ritual in which Hispanics participate most commonly. Most of the baptismal ceremony takes place in Spanish, and it is done as a group, not as part of the mass, but as a separate ceremony. The baptismal ceremony is one in which non-Catholics may participate. They may be chosen as godparents,



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**A priest in the *Santería* religion celebrating the birthday of Yemayá or the Virgin of Regla, the patron saint of Havana. (Photo by Beatriz Morales.)**

and in this way become part of the family. The study points out that Hispanics do not select godparents because they are Catholic, but because of their human qualities and personality. Providing a good role model for the child as well as being a good friend of the family, are the main qualities upon which a selection is based. Only one-fourth of the respondents stated that they considered the faith of the person in choosing a godparent (Office of Pastoral Research and Planning 1982).

Baptism and selection of co-godparents plays a vital role in forming linkages between the Hispanics living in the United States and their relatives back home. Many Hispanics travel back to the community of their country for weddings, baptisms and funerals. This helps to maintain familial ties and reinforces familial obligation although the family members are far apart. These practices can also take place in a crisis situation when Latinos need to immigrate, or need to send their children back home. Religion serves to strengthen these kinship ties in situations of migration.

In the First Communion, as in the wedding, co-godparents are selected, providing further linkage between the nuclear family's friends and relatives. The Catholic religion plays a very important role in providing family stability and cohesion.

At the next level, the Catholic Church also has associations called *cofradías*—brotherhoods, sisterhoods, or fraternities— which encourage membership and a more active role in the Church. Among Hispanic people, these associations organize processions and ceremonies to honor a particular Catholic saint. Members also take care of and clean the churches. The participation of Hispanic people in these associations, provides them with the opportunity to meet new members in the community. They are able to feel solidarity due to the fact they are most likely to participate in group activities with other Hispanic people who come from the same countries or regions in Latin America.

The study by the Archdiocese of New York further indicates that present rituals are divided between folk practices and institutional Catholic practices. The study

also found that only a few Hispanics (7.2%) have little understanding of the sacraments. Half of first-generation Hispanics depend on prayer in asking for intercession by the saints, but only 31.6 percent of second-generation Hispanics do so. This belief also decreases with education. It was projected that 30,000 or 3 percent of New York Hispanics practice animal sacrifice and 70,000 patronize *botánicas*, specialty stores that offer religious goods and services (Office of Pastoral Research and Planning 1982, 55).

The language factor also plays an important role in building more of an integrated sense of community among Hispanic people at the local level. The participation of Hispanics in the Church hierarchy is still very marginal; however, the Church does draw together those who speak Spanish, allowing them to meet, therefore creating a sense of unity as part of a larger whole. This is very important. Many Church activities serve to help different Hispanic peoples to honor and celebrate the patron saints of their respective countries. Furthermore, the Church's role as a community center and its use of Spanish allow Hispanic people to think of themselves as an ethnic group. Being able to organize in the United States as a distinct group is generally a new experience for the Hispanic population. At the same time, the participation of various Hispanic groups in these associations and brotherhoods also allows for Hispanic people to actively meet with one another and begin to appropriate a Hispanic identity for themselves. They have common interests and goals for the community which they channel through the activities of the Church. Brotherhoods and Catholic associations not only link the family to other individuals from their homeland, but also link the particular nationality into a larger global community where the Hispanic identity will weigh more than the particular ethnic group which the individual represents. This process now taking shape represents a new possibility that the various Hispanic nationalities can organize beyond their particular ethnic group to form a new, larger identity which would include all Spanish-speaking people.

The Catholic Church has also organized charismatic-like groups that are very similar to those of the Pentecostal Church. Some of the programs that have attracted Latino participation in the Church are programs such as *Cursillo*, *Luz y Vida* and Charismatic Renewal. The *Cursillo* has attracted Hispanics because it is group-oriented and focuses on the development of leadership. These leaders then bring Catholic theology to the community. *Luz y Vida* offers further training to those leaders which will help to develop the spiritual awareness of the Latino community (Office of Pastoral Research and Planning 1982, 55). Many Hispanics

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An altar on the day of the Virgin, September 7, with all the offerings of fruits, flowers and candles. (Photo by Beatriz Morales.)

have also been attracted to the Catholic charismatic associations within the Catholic Church. Members of Catholic charismatic churches participate in testimonials, reading of scripture, preaching, speaking in tongues and healing. Through this movement, Catholic Hispanics experience an emotional raising of the spirit, or "charisma" within the Catholic religious framework (Office of Pastoral Research and Planning 1982, 164).

The development of patron saint festivals is another manifestation of religious experience in many of the Hispanic neighborhoods in the United States. For example, New York has the *Fiesta de San Juan*, which throughout the 1960s and 1970s drew thousands of people to Randall's Island every June. The same fiesta continues now in Central Park. This has been a way to bring the community together to celebrate both their Puerto Rican identity as well as their relationship to the Church. The same has happened with the Virgin of Guadalupe in the Southwest where Mexican American communities assemble in their local neighborhood parishes to celebrate this patron saint. The Church also accepts this as a tradition of many other Hispanic people that come from Central America who have devotions to the Virgin of Guadalupe. The Church opens up its door to all Mexican Americans and Hispanic people to organize and arrange the festivals of the Virgin of Guadalupe within the Church. This tends to bring Mexican Americans, as in the case with Puerto Ricans, closer to each other as an ethnic group. The celebrations in New Orleans for the Virgin of Guadalupe provided an opportunity for Mexican Americans and others living in the city to come together and share with people of their culture and feel brotherhood and solidarity with them; it is through the fiestas to the Catholic saints in the United States that the Catholic Church plays a role in integrating the ethnic identity for Hispanic people and, at the same time, keeping this identity tied to the Church.

## A Pan-Hispanic Festival

The cultural interaction between the traditional Catholic groups and the groups that have been influenced by liberation theology appears to be a new point of tension within the Catholic Church of the Hispanic community of Atlanta. Pan American festivals organized by the Catholic Church have combined different Hispanic nationalities into a single Hispanic group. However, new interpretations of the meaning of Christianity held by different groups have begun to separate these groups from each other. A case in point is the conflict that developed between the senior members and the young members during the organization of a Pan Hispanic Festival. The conflict began when

immigrant Colombians and Nicaraguans began to transplant religious ideas of liberation theology into the Catholic youth association. They began to demand that the Church take a more politically active role in the Hispanic community in Atlanta. According to new liberation theology groups, the Catholic Church does not represent the interest of the poor Hispanic immigrant who lives in Georgia. They argued with the Church officials that liberation theology is an integral part of their Hispanic religious thinking. The liberation theology group decided to present their interpretations of liberation theology in a controversial play that criticized the Church's role in the colonization of Amerindians. The senior members of the Church attempted to prevent the play from being presented during the Pan American Festivals. After a long battle, the liberation theology group was allowed to present the play inside the Church. It is obvious that, as more Hispanics arrive from Latin America, they will continue to transplant liberation theology religious practices and to apply them to the situation of Hispanics in the United States.

Outside the Church, the feelings and the mood established were not tied to separate nationalities. Rather, the common language and the collective Catholic identity predominated. Significantly, Hispanic people from different ethnic groups cooked the traditional foods, creating a spirit of collectivity and mutual assistance. A Cuban man had cooked roast pork that was being sold in the Dominican booth. The Dominicans had made a traditional chicken and rice dish being sold in the Guatemalan booth. A necessary transformation underlying this event was that various Spanish-speaking nationalities had actually adopted a new, official Hispanic identity and had begun to support each other in bringing about this festival of unity, with the Church providing linkages as the dominant institution.

## Altars

Closely related to the patron saint feasts are those activities in homes where *altares* (altars) have been dedicated to a particular saint. Throughout the year, these homes serve as religious centers for ceremonies, devotions and rosaries. Especially significant are the large communal meals offered to the saint in gratitude for granting of a request for the resolution of a problem. These meals are sponsored by the individual who requested the assistance of the saint. Many neighbors come to these altars for the devotions to the saints honored, contributing to the ceremonies with flowers or candles. They may also make themselves available to the altar keepers for other necessary support for the altar.

Altars are located in many of the Hispanic communities. They offer Catholic Hispanic people as well as

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**The Virgin of La Caridad del Cobre with offerings of flowers. (Photo by Beatriz Morales.)**

others an opportunity to come to a home where they can worship a particular saint at any time and also be assisted by the altar keeper who claims to have a special relationship with the patron saint. Usually these individuals may have a slight economic advantage within the community. This is seen as evidence that the patron saint has selected this person as one who will be benefited with improved social and material conditions. The altar keepers are not directly connected to the Catholic Church or to the local parish. At other times, they provide support to families or individuals in crisis. The altar-keeper usually has had past involvement with the Catholic Church. Membership in a fraternity or *cofradía* may have provided the ability to act as an intermediary between different groups of Hispanics and their patron saints.

On special religious days when the patron saint is honored or rosaries are prayed, individuals petition special favors from the saint. In return they bring a gift such as cake, pork, fancy cloth or jewels to the house in gratitude. The food is always redistributed among those who attend.

Rosalina, a Honduran woman in New Orleans, provided us an example of how she prepared an altar to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico.

When I first came to the United States, my husband could not find a job. His friends tried to help him, but most of the jobs he found were only for one or two days. I found a job

working for a lady from Nicaragua ironing clothes, but soon I had to stop working because my legs were swelling up due to my pregnancy. My husband began to drink and stayed out of the house till late because he was so frustrated over our financial crisis. A friend of mine took me to a lady who had an altar to the Virgin of Guadalupe. I started to pray that he would stop drinking. I attended every Thursday for the rosaries and lit a candle. My husband got a job on a ship and stopped drinking. By the time the baby was born my situation had improved. (Morales 1989)

## Curanderismo

*Curanderismo* is a system of health care dating back to Spanish colonial Mexico. Based on sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish medicine and folk systems, *Curanderismo* was the only medicine available to both colonists and missionaries who supplemented it with indigenous Mexican herbs. Modern *curanderismo* is practiced more in the mountain communities of New Mexico than elsewhere, but every town or city of any size in the Southwest United States has its *curanderos*, curers. Every mother and grandmother in the New Mexican communities is a *quasi-curandera*, using many of the traditional techniques to care for sick members of the household.

Prayer and religious life are important aspects of modern *curanderismo*. Whether Catholic or Protestant, the *curandera* is usually the most respected person in the community and, by necessity, leads a spiritual life. To the *curandera* and her patients, there is an undeniable, inextricable connection between healing techniques, medicines and God, and the healing process can only be effective and complete with God's help.

For those who will become *curanderas* there is a long period of apprenticeship. The novices, (called *sobadoras*), first learn massage and diagnosis. As they learn more about herbs and medicines about parturition, they are called *parteras*, midwives, or *curanderas*. By this time, most are older women or grandmothers. Men specializing in the treatment of witch-caused maladies are known as *arbolarios*, but there are some women who also fill this role. It is in treating this category of illness that healers have been known to resort to some magical and mystical beliefs and techniques. There are those who believe that *arbolarios* (and even *curanderas*) can cause witchcraft or illness if provoked, and that they can also invoke the devil or other evil spirit(s) to gain power over their enemies (Weaver 1970).

## Centros Espiritistas (Spiritual Centers)

Much of the worship at the household altares is similar to that at *centros espiritistas*. In addition to leading devotions to the patron saint, the person who heads the *centro* is also a medium. Not only does the individual have a pact or special relationship with a particular patron saint, but also the ability to communicate with spirits (Trotter and Chavira 1981).

This is an interesting institution, and many *centros espiritistas* are found in the Caribbean Hispanic community, composed of Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and Cubans. The *centros espiritistas* also exist among Mexican Americans who have adopted the *Espiritismo* tradition. The *centros* are central places of convocation in which spirits of deceased relatives of community members return in order to communicate their wishes and to help their families. Again, social reciprocity similar to that explained above between patron saint and petitioner is established between an ancestral spirit and a family, or one particular member of that family.

*Centros espiritistas* have other functions, different from the Catholic Church and patron saint worship at the household altares. They provide instruction in becoming a medium as well. Furthermore, the *centros* serve Hispanic people going through emotional crises, providing a place to discuss their problems in a familiar and comfortable setting. Here, where other people have similar problems, a kin-like support network is easily formed. The *centros* can be seen as providing the emotional stability necessary for many who suffer from the instability and problems of adaptation common to the Hispanic diaspora. A case of a Dominican mother in New Orleans describes how some Hispanics use the services of the spiritual center (see discussion of Ta José temple below).

## Tradition of Spirit Belief

The tradition of spirit belief is the belief that one can communicate with spirits. It is found in almost all cultures and varies according to different social contexts. The tradition of spirit belief emphasizes a connection between the material and spiritual worlds. European, Amerindian and African forms of the tradition of spirit belief shared the religious ideas that there was no separation between the spiritual and the material. These various forms of the traditions of spirit belief were based on the idea that the body died, but the soul continued to live for generations. In these three traditions, there were special people who communicated with the spirits and requested their assistance in solving daily problems. There were also evil spirits who could bring much misfortune to humans such as war, drought,

famine and the betrayal of close friends and relatives. Moreover, the spirits could take revenge on those who had harmed them in previous lives. The form of spirit belief was reinforced by the nineteenth century emergence of *Espiritismo*.

## Espiritismo (Spiritism)

Various forms of spirit beliefs co-existed and interacted for two centuries. In the nineteenth century, a variant form of European spiritualism known as *Espiritismo* (Spiritism) influenced the early Caribbean tradition of spirit belief. *Espiritismo* was spread through the books of Allan Kardec, a Frenchman who claimed that spirits dictated his books. At first it was practiced only among the Latin American intellectuals who rejected the Catholic Church because of its association with the colonial government. These individuals were attracted to the ideas of progress and change, and saw *Espiritismo* as a way in which they could express their opposition to the Catholic Church in supporting the colonial powers in Latin America. After independence, *Espiritismo* diffused to the popular classes in the Caribbean.

After the birth of the Latin American nations, many of these beliefs were combined with ideas of Catholicism and folk Catholicism. Among Hispanics today, *Espiritismo* refers to the beliefs in saints which are associated with Catholicism, and particularly folk Catholicism, combined with the tradition of spirit belief, which brings the ideas that individuals can communicate directly with saints through a medium, and can request their help. This is found mainly in Mexico and the United States-Mexican border region. In summary, the religious foundation of Mexican *Espiritismo* can be seen in folk Catholicism. In the Southwest, *centros espiritistas*, such as those described previously, are considered to have developed much later. According to Trotter and Chavira, *curanderismo* has also been influenced by *Espiritismo*:

Because of the strong orientation toward spiritual and supernatural forces in Mexican American folk medicine, religious symbols are very evident in *curanderismo*. Special invocations are commonly directed at saints or spirits to bring about special results. For example, San Martín de Porres is asked to relieve poverty, San Martín Caballero to help in business, San Judas Tadeo help in impossible situations and Santa Marta to bring harmony to a household. Besides officially recognized saints, *curanderos* also call on spirits who may be considered folk saints—spiritual beings believed to have miraculous powers and

given popular respect and veneration without official sanction from the Church. Recognized folk saints such as Don Pedrito Jaramillo and El Niño Fidencio are called upon to help the curandero in both difficult and routine situations. Other benevolent spirits, such as Allen Kardec, the founder of the spiritualist movement, or relatives and friends of either the curandero or the patient, may also be called upon for help (1981).

In the Caribbean variant of *Espiritismo*, the *espiritistas* are more likely to work with Amerindian and African spirits than with Catholic saints as in the Mexican variant of *Espiritismo*. Caribbean *Espiritismo* in the northeastern United States was elaborated by both Puerto Rican and Cuban immigrants as they tried to cope with problems of adapting to a radically different culture that challenged the basis of their identity. Puerto Ricans described how they suffered considerably from ascribed inferiority. In the United States, the Puerto Rican culture marked its carriers with what was deemed an inferior status and impeded their escape from the bottom of the labor market. Puerto Ricans were told by teachers and counselors that to improve their position in society they needed to assimilate. The schools forced them to speak only English and to adapt to Anglo culture, eliminating their Caribbean background which was considered inferior, partly because of its African content. The Puerto Ricans were also engaged in a political struggle for self-determination. It is important to recognize the role that mediums played in comforting those who suffered from a loss of identity; they helped their clients discover alternative self-identification in their indigenous heritage. This provided Puerto Ricans with a sense of their history.

One Puerto Rican medium said that most of her clientele suffered from having been separated from their kin. The extended family and *compadrazgo* were traditional institutions that had provided support to individuals under stress. The practitioner of *Espiritismo* emerged as one who could provide spiritual relief to those who, in the process of adaptation, had lost their previous social locations and sense of who they were. Mediums also helped Hispanic immigrants to discover the causes of problems that prevented them from taking advantage of resources in their environment.

Another Puerto Rican medium described how she met the first Puerto Rican mediums in New York by going to the social clubs organized by people from her hometown. She says that in these clubs one could always meet someone who would help you uplift yourself spiritually. According to Bonilla and Campos (1981), these voluntary associations played a critical

social and political role in the Puerto Rican community. It is not surprising, then, that a hometown club would have a medium who could assist people suffering the mental stress of adaptation to a harsh new life and separation from family and friends.

One Puerto Rican medium whom I interviewed had brought Indian spirits with her to the United States. These Indian forces gave those who visited her an inner strength and the hope that things could get better. The fight for cultural identity was conducted each time the Puerto Rican medium became possessed and an Amerindian spirit was able to visit the earth to remind those in stress that they were not alone in their struggle for survival.

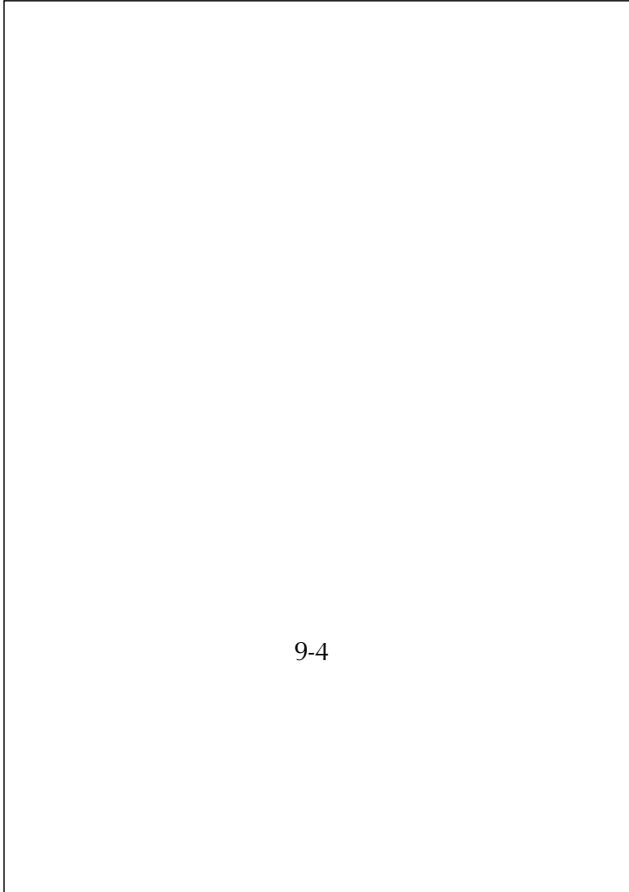
One of the mediums reports about her works in the following manner:

I tried to solve the problem very simply by sprinkling Luisa and her son with holy water and 'agua de florida' [from the botánica] but that did not help. I dressed all in white, covered my head and prepared a spiritual table with six glasses of water and a large glass in the center for the 'Espíritu Santo.' I believe strongly in the power of the 'Espíritu Santo' and in the power of the *santos* in order to help my people.

*Espiritismo* is founded on the idea that understanding spiritual forces gives a person more control over life. Men and women are seen as being in a constant struggle for survival. The spirit world and the material world exist within a single universe. In contrast to Western religions in which the spiritual and material are clearly divided, traditions of spirit belief see spirits and humans sharing the same space.

According to the Puerto Rican medium's world view, humans are born with their own personal power. Personal spiritual power can teach individuals to relate to high spirits such as the ancestral spirits of the Africans and Amerindians who lived in the colonial period. But, everyone has at birth the personal power that will allow him or her to contact the spiritual world. Once a personal pact has been made with an ancestral spirit, the individual can make his or her own personal power more potent. A person can reinforce his *cuadro espiritual* (spiritual "field") by making contact with more powerful spirits.

An individual's personal power needs to be regenerated because it weakens in the daily struggle for survival. One way to make this personal power more potent is to establish a dyadic relationship with a powerful spirit. At the highest level, an individual is completely changed into a medium, in which case she or



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**A home altar of the Santería religion. (Photo by Beatriz Morales.)**

he can empower others. A medium can teach others how to bring power from above for self and community through possession. Once a person becomes open to the spiritual world, he or she can seek power by possession under the supervision of a senior medium.

In *Espiritismo*, the opportunity for possession is open to anyone, in contrast to the *Santería* religion, which requires the presence of a priest or priestess. *Espiritismo* also sees each person's spirit moving along a path of personal development at death. In contrast to Western religious thought, death is not perceived as a final stage for humans. Death is viewed as one among many steps that an individual must take in order to accomplish his purpose in life. The dead person's spirit strives to establish a close relationship with an individual who will help him return to the world of the living. Spirits and humans thus empower each other as a result of their relationship. They will give each other strength to struggle against daily problems.

In Caribbean variants of *Espiritismo*, many of the mediums are women. Seeking to interact with humans, the spirits appear to favor women between the ages of

15 and 40 to serve as intermediaries. Not all women selected by the spirits become mediums. The vocation of medium requires the protection of powerful guides who are either of African or Amerindian origin. These spirits are passed down through family lines. They cannot be acquired through ritual or ceremony. A Puerto Rican medium "pulls" the spirits down to earth in an effort to solve personal problems. The spirit empowers as it comes to earth. Both spirit and medium become empowered in the process of possession. Individuals seize the opportunity to take power, yet also open themselves up to power (i.e., become the focus for spiritual power), become mediums. They make contact with the spirit world and bring the power from above to their community.

Mediums are able to keep some power for themselves. Clearly, while the medium achieves power in the spiritual world, she or he also achieves power in the social world of everyday life. Spiritual power is both inherent in the individual and can be acquired with the assistance of a medium. Inherent power is normally passed down from mother to daughter and aunt to niece. The spirits that are transmitted in the female line are usually the spirits that initiate the individual into the role of medium. The process can be seen as a way that the dead medium continues to participate in the society of the living—by giving her spirits to a chosen younger female of her family. Under modern conditions, the women who tend to be selected to inherit the spirits are often undergoing emotional stress such as a divorce or the death of a husband. Deceased relatives send spirits to younger women to give them support in their struggle with life's problems. During possessions, in fact, the spirit of a female relative tells relevant stories about her experiences in the world. Although most mediums are women, there are also male mediums. The gender of the medium, or "horse" as she/he is called by the spirits, has no influence in determining who is selected.

*Espiritismo* provides a synthesis between Christian beliefs and nineteenth century progressive ideology. In *Espiritismo*, it is believed that spirits share both the material and spiritual world. Spirits have the capacity to become incarnate in human form. Every human has a spirit which represents his or her own essence. Spirits are said to want to advance themselves spiritually by moving through different stages of enlightenment, purity and wisdom. Spirits are seen to seek light; this correlates to the ideas of nineteenth century enlightenment.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the practice of *Espiritismo* is that it allows for individual creativity. An *espiritista* can use the *Espiritismo* doctrine as a base for their own religious beliefs.

Hispanic Catholic festival in Atlanta, Georgia. (Photo by David Brown.)

### Espiritismo: As a Form of Self-Protection for Women

The arrival of Cuban immigrants in New Orleans and their interaction with Honduran and other Central Americans also influenced the formation of new traditions of spirit belief. An interesting aspect of this new variant is the absence of most of the flowers, perfumes and water, and the exclusion of men from the spiritual sessions. In the traditional spiritual sessions, individual *espiritistas* transcend the material world by inhaling tobacco to place themselves in a state of spiritual possession. These women establish communication with the spirits by holding hands while dancing and singing in a circle. The song and dance are called *areitos* after the Arawak dance forms in which they retold the history of their battle. The actual songs are folk songs of the Cuban peasantry known as *Guajiro* blended with Protestant hymns. Lydia, the *espiritista* of this group, claims that these *areitos* were taught to her in dreams by her spiritual guide.

At the end of the session, those assembled discuss their daily problems among themselves. Lydia offers

suggestions on how to solve some of these problems. Through their interactions at these spiritist sessions, the participants are provided with a network of social support for each other.

Lydia is from a small rural community in the mountains in the eastern part of Cuba. She has an Indian protector, a leader (*cacique*) from the region where she was born. She has three other spirits of lesser rank that accompany her *cacique*. These three Amerindian spirits were warriors who fought under his leadership. Lydia is now in the process of teaching some of her godchildren the art of mediumship and dreams that one day some of her godchildren may become strong enough to receive the spirits of these warriors. She believes that economic and social pressures in her community have increased in the last ten years and that women have developed the gift they need to help other women maximize the chances of surviving in difficult times.

Lydia explains her own version of spirit belief which excludes males:

I am more concerned in developing the gift the God has given me to the maximum. God

has given me a spiritual vision to see the world more clearly. My goal is to improve this vision so that I may see better and better and more clearly. I have been given the power to solve problems and I am interested in getting much better so that I can solve more difficult cases. This is the aim of my spiritual sessions, to improve my spiritual abilities to the maximum. Since most men are more interested in becoming spiritually stronger than to further develop their spiritual gift, I prefer to exclude them.

The case of this *espiritista* indicates the flexibility of *Espiritismo* to be organized to serve the interest of individuals or groups. Lydia's case demonstrates how she has used *Espiritismo* to create a space in her own house. *Espiritismo* in this case can be a source of power for women. It is not surprising that most of the problems discussed in Lydia's center were related to the problems that women had with their husbands. Most of the women that I met in Lydia's center were trying to cope with maintaining a united family in spite of their abusive husbands. The *Espiritismo* variant developed by Lydia provided many women with the strength to remove themselves from abusive situations. In particular, *Espiritismo's* ideas of individual development attract women that are in search of self identity.

## Palo Spirits

Cuban mediums work mostly with Congolese spirits rather than Amerindian Taino spirits of the Puerto Rican mediums. Most of the Cuban mediums or *espiritistas* have spirits who were priests in the *Palo Mayombe* religion. *Palo* was brought to Cuba by Congolese slaves during the colonial era. It emphasized control of the spirits of the dead and healing with herbs and roots through the use of charms. Congolese spirits that follow the Palo Mayombe tradition know how to cure because of a complex system of sacred medicines (*minkisi*) over which they have control.

Religious practices consisted of prayers to spirits or deceased ancestors and spirits of nature, such as rivers, bushes and mountains. The Congolese spirits, like the Amerindian spirits, have a very forceful personality. The Congolese spirits enjoy cigars and rum, and demand that their mediums dress themselves in a particular style during possession. For example, mediums who are possessed by Congolese male spirits wear pants rolled up to their knees and demand that their shoes and socks come off. A Congolese spirit must be barefoot because he must touch the ground. According to an informant, the Congolese spirits come from the

mountain forest, where they do not wear shoes, and must present themselves as they were when they lived on earth. Female spirits sometimes also request that their socks and shoes be taken off, but not as often as the male Congolese spirits. Many spirits request that a scarf be placed around their shoulders or waist while they are possessing a medium. Others place scarves on their lap covering their knees. The color of the scarf tends to be red for many of the male spirits and white, yellow, or blue for females. A few of my informants have told me that the colors represent *Santería* divinities, but others say that scarves are simply the colors that the Congolese spirits like to wear.

## Ta José Temple: A Palo Mayombe Spirit

Hermiña is an *espiritista*, healer and *Palera* (practicer of the Palo Mayombe religion) who works with Ta José, a Palo Mayombe spirit very famous in New Orleans. People come from different parts of the South to visit her at the Ta José Temple. One of her most devoted followers is Carmelia who comes every six months from California to consult with the spirit of Ta José. She provides an account of how Ta José helped her and her son when they were living in New Orleans.

I am a widow. My son Rafael felt that he had to be the man of the house. There was little I could do but fight with him when I saw him in bad company. My son is now a very responsible father and husband. But, I had to visit Doña Hermiña, an *espiritista*, to bring him to the good path (*el bien camino*). When he turned 15 years old, he said that he was too old to go to church. He told me that he did not like going to church because young people could not do what they enjoyed, such as smoking and drinking beer. I knew Doña Hermiña and went for a consultation. She told me to bring him to consult with her spirit. Rafael liked the spirit Ta José better than the Pentecostal Church that I went to. He liked the fact that Ta José was said to drink and smoke. One time Ta José warned my son to be careful, that he was going to be involved in a threatening situation.

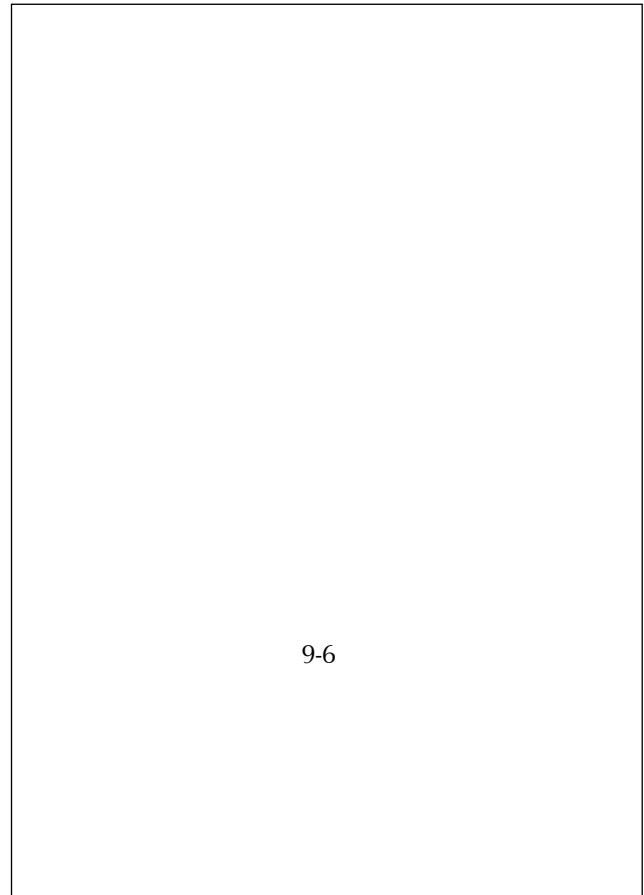
That week, one of his friends was shot on the corner where they all used to stand. My son told me that he had left the corner a half hour before the shooting. I told him to go to see Hermiña that night. The Ta José Centro was very crowded that day. We stood outside the big living room where Ta José descended. It was very crowded, but Ta José

asked my son to come through the crowd and stand in front of him. He told Rafael that he was no longer under his protection. Ta José said that the bullet was for him, but did not get him because he had been walking with him for protection. But from that moment on Rafael was alone. He was so sure that Ta José had abandoned him that he decided to end his friendship with that group of friends. Now he brings his friends to the house to watch football and spends less time out in the streets. He knows that if he does not obey the warning of Ta José, something really bad could happen.

## The Tradition of Santería

*Santería* derives from an older religion known as *Lucumi* which was organized by Yoruba priests who were slaves in nineteenth century Havana. The *Lucumi* religion was developed in religious organizations known as *cabildos* which emerged as organizations devoted to the Catholic cults of saints. Each *cabildo* was associated with a particular African nation. The Yoruba religious tradition was rebuilt by two different priestly groups. The first of these, the all male *Ifá* priesthood of *babalaos*, was an exclusive and privileged category considered by all Yorubas to constitute the highest level in the hierarchy of religious specialists. The second was the *Ocha* priesthood known as *babalocha* (male) or *iyalocha* (female). Both the *Ifá* and *Ocha* priesthoods dedicated themselves to the worship of the Yoruba pantheon in the framework of the *cabildos*; however, while the former was exclusively male, the latter was a mix of men and women priests.

After Cuban independence from Spain in 1898, the *Lucumi* religion was even more repressed, but it managed to survive by incorporating symbols drawn from other religions such as folk Catholicism and traditions of spirit belief. In this way, it won support from the large white Cuban population, nurturing the religious form of *Santería* (Lachatanere 1942). As did the *Lucumi* tradition before it, *Santería* championed the cause of the oppressed. Meanwhile, *Lucumi* continued underground as the exclusive and private religion of a small group of Cubans in Western Havana. It is difficult to delineate the boundaries clearly between the two, since *Santería* has the same deities as the *Lucumi* pantheon. The most significant difference is its greater tolerance for other religious traditions, in particular Catholicism and the tradition of spirit belief. *Santería* appears to allow more innovation. As a result, we find the emergence of many ritual entrepreneurs who move between the different religious systems as opportunity permits.



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### An altar honoring Bolivia at the Hispanic Catholic festival in Atlanta, Georgia. (Photo by David Brown.)

The arrival of Cuban immigrants to the United States in the 1960s brought numerous followers of *Santería*. This religion has spread rapidly in the United States. In New York City alone, it is estimated that more than 250 house members a year are initiated and establish their own house temples. *Santería*, or *Regla Ocha* as it has also been called, involves rituals, ceremonies, trances, prayers, songs, music and dances and worship of an extensive hierarchical pantheon of *orichas* or Yoruba deities. It involves singing, dancing and drumming for each of the *orichas*. The *orichas* are potent, vibrant and mysterious powers each representing a single major deity with many different variants. The pantheon of *orichas* is one way to understand the devotees' conception of the world and their way of life.

### Oricha Power: Aché and Eledá

For many *Santería* priests and priestesses, the concept of *oricha* expresses vitality, strength and the *aché* (spiritual gift that all humans are born with) that derives from the universe. The *orichas* are felt by the *Santería*

devotees to be part of their extended family. The priesthood perceives the *orichas* to be their universal parents. Moreover, the African powers are expressed in the *Santería* religion as part of the identity of the person—a divine force that exists inside our mind. The *eledá*, which is the personal manifestation of this force, is believed to motivate and influence the goals, ideas and actions of individuals and groups. The *eledá* is the force that drives humans into action and shapes change in their society. This life force, existing within all humans, is governed by the supreme power of Olofí.

## The Orichas

The supreme God Olofí, the universal power, controls all forces in the universe. Olofí has created all present forms of life. Olofí has *orichas* which express his universal power—a power that also exists within all. This power is summoned by praying to the *eledá*, which is the Olofí power inside of us. Most *Santería* priests consider the *eledá* an *oricha*. Among the followers of the *Santería* religion, it is extremely important that their children become aware that the power of the *eledá* lives in the head. The child learns that personal identity is closely linked with an *oricha* and is taught to protect his head. The *eledá* represents the destiny of the person.

Obatalá, the “owner of all the heads,” is the father of all the *orichas*. He has been designated to be the representative of Olofí among them and has set the standardized rules by which everyone must act. The color white of Obatalá is the color used to convey intellectual power and feeling of peace and order. *Yemayá* is the power that gave birth to all the *orichas* in the pantheon. As the mother of most of the powers, she has influence over all the *orichas*. She represents “coolness” and controls all the seawater. She has as her purpose to “cool” the world by reducing conflict between individuals and groups.

Ogún is said to be a warrior and is perceived as one of the most powerful and fearful gods in the pantheon. He controls the forest upon which the *orichas* must depend for their empowerment. The *orichas* cannot collect their *aché* from forest vegetation unless he allows them access. Ogún also controls iron, giving him an even more strategic position in the pantheon. A person who receives Ogún as part of the Warrior Shrine will also receive Elegguá and Ochosi. The three are believed to be united in ritual kinship. The Warrior Elegguá is the *oricha* that best represents action and change in the *Santería* religious tradition. He is also considered one who disrupts the order established by Olofí and causes confusion in the traditional order for which Obatalá is responsible. Ochosi represents the

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### An altar honoring Cuba at the Hispanic Catholic festival in Atlanta, Georgia. (Photo by David Brown.)

hunter and is very close to Ogún. Like Ogún, he is aggressive and combative with regard to other humans.

In the *Santería* pantheon Ochún, Changó and Oya are also considered warriors. Like Elegguá, Ogún and Ochosi they are thought to be important in insuring victory against injustice. Changó is an *oricha* that encourages a war-like attitude in his devotees. Different from Ogún, he is more concerned with victory than with justice. Changó is a military power and takes vengeance by burning with fire. The most political of all the powers, he never forgets who has done him wrong.

Ochún, although female, is also a warrior. Conflicts are won by her use of the art of lovemaking and dancing. As a warrior, she is irrational and engages in battles with other *orichas*; she is not concerned with maintaining harmony among powers. Like Changó, Ochún is described as having unlimited sexual freedom, a privilege of her Warrior class. Both reject monogamy and feel free to explore all sorts of sexual emotions. Orula is the *oricha* that reveals the past life of all the *orichas*. He is the *oricha* of the *Santería* oracles and a prophet because he is able to discover the

future and all new things to come. He is the moral force of Olofi on earth and is the *oricha* of all Ifá priests. He is the centralizing force for all the *orichas*.

Corresponding to the hierarchical pattern of the *orichas* is a highly structured and disciplined path of initiation. As a person moves along his ritual path, he or she gains *aché*. The first stage of initiation involves the imposition of *collares* (necklaces). An already initiated priest or priestess then takes the devotee to have a divination, or reading, ideally performed by an Ifá priest using 16 nuts or a chain of eight seeds.

The ritual *collares* become the vehicle by which the devotee will follow the path of his or her particular *oricha*. The *collares* ceremonies focus on consecrating the devotee's head where the *eledá* is found. The *collares* will help to transform or to activate the *eledá* in order that the person may find their goal in life. The *collares* ceremonies are a way for individuals to identify a purpose in life similar to the life of the *oricha*. They are a step towards building a close identification with the *oricha* that will determine the person's character. The *collares* initiations are mainly performed by a priestess.

In the *Santería* religious tradition, strict rules of asceticism are maintained to prepare a devotee for the *collares* ceremony. The *collares* have the *aché* of the *orichas* because they have been consecrated in sacrificial ceremonies and baptized in a sacred liquid called *omiero*. In the Ifá House-temples of Cuba, only four *collares* were given, representing four *orichas*, each with a particular color: white for Obatalá, red and white for Changó, blue and crystal for Yemayá, and yellow and amber for Ochún. In the United States and in some Ocha house-temples in Cuba, devotees practice a more modern form of *Santería*. Five *collares* are given: the fifth is black and red for Elegguá.

The *Santería* House-temple is a religious institution in the Hispanic community. These temples serve various purposes, similar to the Catholic Church and the fraternal associations. The *Santería* house-temples concentrate on the worship of African divinities, Catholic saints and spirits. Like the Catholic Church, *Santería* house-temples provide a mechanism for building social ties at the family and community level. Like the spiritual, the temple provides individuals with a place to go for relief from emotional strain and personal problems. Still another significant feature of *Santería* temples are the frequent ties to an indigenous healing system similar to that of the *curandero*.

## The Tradition of Santerismo

The present form of *Espiritismo* continues to be transformed in the context of Hispanic migration to the

United States. From the interaction of Puerto Ricans and Cubans in New York has emerged a new Caribbean spiritual form known as *Santerismo*, a blend of Puerto Rican *Espiritismo* with the deities and rituals of Cuban *Santería*. The rituals and ceremonies of *Santerismo* take place in the apartments and private homes of Puerto Rican *espiritistas* in New York City. It is also common to find *Santerismo* temples in storefronts similar to the *centros de espiritistas*. Most of the head *espiritistas* who operate house-temples are women, but storefronts are usually run by men.

The development of *Santerismo* is partially due to the demand of the Hispanic community for a simplification of the beliefs and rituals of *Santería*. The complex rituals and hierarchical organization of *Santería* was structured in such a way that ritual knowledge was understood only by a small, elite priesthood. The synthesis of *Santería* and *Espiritismo* created a new, more accessible religious form. For example, *Santerismo* has reduced the high cost of entering the *Santería* priesthood. The Puerto Rican ritual specialists have improved their own indigenous form of psychotherapy by adding another cultural system. The absence of the *babalao* and hierarchy of priestly officials has simplified the practice of *Santería* ritual. The development of *Santerismo* ritual performed by spiritists provides mental health services to individuals in need of emotional assistance.

Although the degree to which Catholicism in Latin America and the Caribbean has been closely intertwined with cultural and national identity has prevented, in many cases, the spread of Protestant sectors in Latin America, their numbers are increasing. In the United States as well there is a rise in the number of Hispanic converts to Protestantism, although the overwhelming majority continue to practice Catholicism.

## From Catholicism to Protestantism in a Latino Urban Neighborhood in the Southeast U. S.

In Latin America, Catholicism has strongly influenced the present form of Hispanic family structure. Hispanic families living in the United States are in constant need of new ways to improve their lives. Many who have converted have said that the Catholic Church has failed to help them deal with the external factors impinging on the household. Participation in the sacraments of the Catholic Church was not enough to provide some Hispanic immigrants in New Orleans with a way to solve the problems they faced as minorities. Many Catholic priests did not take an interest in the problems of their community. Meanwhile, Baptist ministers

tended to be from the community where they remained and played a key role in organizing individuals and groups during a period of rapid transition.

One explanation for the cohesiveness of this Hispanic community was the result of the important role of the Baptist Church in religious services in the enclave, such as baptism, marriage and funerals in Spanish and at reasonable cost. According to the new Baptists, their minister helped families build ties with the Church. They felt that, unlike Catholics, Baptists were actively involved in the social problems of the community. Although the community is predominantly Catholic, half of the newly married couples were changing from Catholicism to Protestantism.

Respect for traditional values was easily observed among all those who live in the neighborhood. The involvement of Honduran individuals and families in the various Church rituals supported the family institutions. The participation of women in the organization of ethnic Sunday communal cooking pulled their husbands and sons into the Church. (The Catholic Church had failed to include men in many of their activities.) The communal dinner also provided a vehicle for the young women in the community to meet young men who were present with their families. Courtship was controlled within Church activities which allowed parents to have social control over their children. For example, most teenagers participated with their mothers in organizing the communal dinners where they could show their cooking ability to potential mothers-in-law. Pre-marital sex was not uncommon among these young couples. Before gossip developed questioning the honor of the young woman, the couple married.

The new family usually lived with his or her parents, whoever had the most space or needed the financial support of an extended family. Most new couples moved within two to three years to a new house near their family. Soon after marriage, the new couple was pressured by their families for the birth of a baby. However, after marrying and leaving the control of their parents, many of the new wives were not ready to be controlled by their husbands. They soon rejected the role models of their mothers and mothers-in-law. Most of them chose to delay having children. Many believed that babies would tie them to the kitchen, like their mothers, while their husbands would be in the street drinking and having fun with their friends. Many mothers were very upset that their daughters were delaying starting a family and were using birth control. When the wives refused to become pregnant, the Catholic priests became involved in order to mediate. The husbands were being pressured to demonstrate their manhood by getting their wives pregnant. These new wives

followed the feminist models of Anglo women—learned in schools, books, magazines and on television—which promote the rights of women to govern their own bodies. One woman said that she was a virgin when she married but had no interest in being placed on a pedestal like the Virgin Mary.

The refusal of the younger women to accept this pedestal and an inferior position in the family led many of them to leave the Church in search of new alternatives. Hispanic women rejected the place that Catholicism offered—to follow the Virgin Mary, the model of motherhood. Several newly married couples shifted from Catholicism to Protestantism. One wife of a Hispanic Baptist minister told me that the Catholic Church does not care about the behavior of the men in the house. The husband can have as many women as he wants and drink all he wants because the Church has no rules for acceptable conduct for men, only for women. In the Protestant Church, machismo is discouraged, and that is the reason more young couples are leaving the Catholic Church to become Baptists.

## Conclusion

Understanding Hispanic-American religion provides a key for comprehending other aspects of Latino society and the development of Latino culture. This chapter has provided the necessary overview to place this development in its historical and social context. Through observing the role of Catholicism in the new world, we can see the roots of adaptation and survival through religion. This use of religion remains a thread throughout the development of Hispanic culture, including, as we see later on, the development of and struggles for national identity. Finally, we see how religion has been one of the strongest forces influencing the social organization of Spanish-speaking communities in the United States. Gaining an understanding of the complex relationship of alternative Hispanic religious institutions to the dominant Catholic Church and to other aspects of the dominant society provides us with an important link to understanding Hispanic culture in the United States more broadly.



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