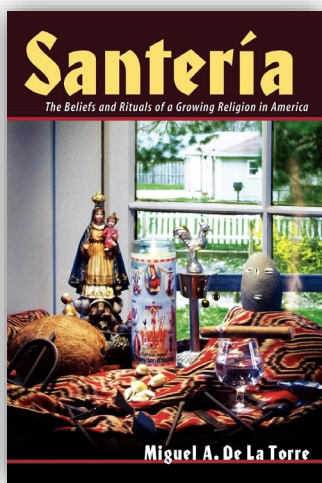


BOOK REVIEW

Santería: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America

By Miguel A. De La Torre

Reviewed by Anthony Kail



Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans
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Santería: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America by Miguel A. De La Torre is a breath of fresh air in the contemporary study of Afro-Cuban Santería. There is very little literature available on this growing tradition that combines cultural, theological and experiential writing. Professor De La Torre brings a much-needed perspective on the religion as a former practitioner. He begins the text by advising readers that he is not in the business of condoning or condemning the religion but wishes to inform readers of the culture. This is a nice balance as he notes that many books on the topic are either written from a perspective that seeks to find errors with the theology of Santería, or are written by new converts who in some cases allow zeal to affect their research into the culture.

The historical development and complex culture of 'Regla de Ocha' commonly referred to as 'Santería' is frequently overshadowed in the West with images of animal sacrifices, trance possession and ethnocentric images promoted by television and movies. The religion originated from the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria. As many Yoruba families were taken as slaves to regions like Cuba they were forced to give up their traditional approaches to healing and spirituality.

Africans from many regions including Nigeria, the Congo, and Dahomey were kidnapped and forced into slavery on plantations in Cuba. Colonialists forced many slaves to convert to Catholicism. As a means of keeping the indigenous traditions of Africa alive, many slaves practiced their traditions in secret under the guise of Catholic saints. Specific characteristics of saints contained elements seen in some of their indigenous deities known as Orishas. This syncretism was maintained in many communities as a means of spiritual survival.

The author brings readers into the religion by introducing some fundamental concepts of Santería. The concept of *aché* is explained as it is the primary energy that manifests from the realm of the Orishas. *Aché* gives life, power and protection. The cosmology of the Yoruba and the personalities of the Orishas are explained. This is very important as the personalities and characteristics of the Orishas affect many issues in the lives of practitioners from their personal spiritual directives to specific aesthetics in shrines and sacred spaces. The Orishas were once human beings and have many characteristics that are relatable to humanity including specific temperaments, favorite foods and favorite colors. The lives of the Orishas are traditionally recounted orally to practitioners through stories known as *Patakis*. These stories communicate topics including why a specific Orisha calls for specific

offerings and why specific artifacts are placed in sacred spaces. In his chapter, *The Orishas and their Legends*, the lives of the deities are presented with not only through traditional stories, but also with insights regarding their powers and relationships that come from an emic understanding of the culture through practice.

The chapter, *Rituals*, introduces readers to one of the most important aspects of the religion. As De La Torre remarks, “While many if not most of the religions can be understood in terms of their doctrines, Santería, having no central creed, has to be understood in terms of its rituals. It is a religion based on orthopraxis (right actions) not orthodoxy (right doctrine)” (102). As rituals are central to the practice of the religion, De La Torre walks readers through the initiations and ceremonies that take newcomers to the religion into the faith and ultimately into communion with their guardian Orisha.

Information on sacred artifacts of Santería including the sacred necklaces known as the *elekes*, the *Guerreros* or guardian Orishas, and the sacred stones known as the *otanes*, is thoroughly described for their aesthetic and spiritual significance. The author’s chapter, *Oracles*, is refreshing as it does not repeat many of the same criticisms of divination found in some texts about the religion but rather introduces readers to the various means by which practitioners seek wisdom from the Divine. The importance of the oracles cannot be stressed enough. While performing fieldwork among Santería communities in North America and Cuba, I have personally witnessed the significance of oracles in the customs, rituals and ceremonies. The use of oracles such as the coconut also known as *obi* is paramount in ceremonies where practitioners may use the oracle to ask the deities about accepting specific offerings, guidance in situations, and wisdom from the spiritual realm.

The author’s conclusion that the religion is to be understood as a way of life truly mirrors my personal journey to understanding regarding Santería. Many of the perceptions of the religion in North America look at it as one of the many choices among the buffet of American spirituality. Some devotees have claimed to read books and Internet websites in order to obtain guidance into the religion. The will and guidance of the Orishas is reduced to Youtube videos and mass-marketed paperbacks. In observing the lives of practitioners that have chosen to follow Santería through the ‘rules’ of the Orishas, the tenets of the tradition are connected to an historical lineage that can

be identified back to specific houses in Cuba and Africa where there is a very different approach.

Valuable insights into Santería’s perspective and worldview are found in the chapter entitled, *A Religion of Resistance*. It is here that De La Torre contrasts much of what is known in the academy with experience in the religion. He affirms that, “Regardless of how academics attempt to describe, codify and define Santería, in a real sense, it exists beyond the explication of scholars. Santería must be understood by way of the everyday” (190). In observing the practices and rituals of the religion it is tempting to lose sight of the presence of the religion in everyday life while noting the complex and intricate parts of the religion’s ceremonial life. The author closes the chapter with anthropological insights into the social functions of the religion as well as its role in the creation of community.

One of the highlights of the book that I consider valuable for anthropologists and those seeking to serve members of the Santería community is the author’s insight into the role that the religion plays in resisting oppression and empowering individuals promoting dignity and wellness in the lives of practitioners. The closing chapter, *An Emerging Religion within a Christian Environment*, looks at the variety of challenges that Santería faces in operating in North America. Challenges stemming from media depictions, legal challenges to the use of animal sacrifice, and encounters with Christianity are explained with contemporary examples. The author closes the text by posing thoughts about faith and Santería compatibility with Christianity and what he considers to be a changing religion.

After spending several years researching Santería, I can honestly say that this is one of the most important books about the religion I have read. The author’s insight as a former practitioner gives life to the sometimes ‘dry’ facts that are frequently repeated in many texts about the religion. His ability to take the reader on this journey while holding on to the railings of anthropological and theological concepts is a nice blend of these worlds. The book is not an anthropology book, theology book, or religious studies book. It contains elements of all three worlds while also keeping the attention of non-academic readers. After spending the last year with this much misunderstood religious community, I find myself burdened with the task of sharing the experiences of devotees whose stories need to be told. For there is a far greater depth of faith, integrity and complexity than we have been shown in the media. *Santería: The Beliefs and Rituals*

of a Growing Religion in America contains insights that not only resound with outside observers but also with members of the faith.



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