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Animal Sacrifice in Santería

Santería is one of the most misunderstood religions in the United States, and animal sacrifice is probably santería's most misunderstood practice. Because santería is a syncretic religion derived from roots that are completely foreign to the mainstream American public, the religion and its practices are seldom encountered outside of sensationalistic news stories, television specials, sinister local crimes, and even recent court cases. The practice of animal sacrifice is usually the reason for this negative media attention, and consequently it is the cause of much suspicion and discrimination against santeros, or santería practitioners. Sacrifice has come up as an issue of freedom of religion, as an animal rights violation, as a potential sanitation problem, and even as a sign of involvement in illegal drug trafficking.

But despite all of the obstacles and prejudices santeros face in the practice of their most important religious activity, they continue to sacrifice goats, birds, chickens, and other animals to their gods. Why this dogged determination to pursue an activity that is, in the eyes of the American public, cruel, primitive, and completely unnecessary? Is sacrifice so essential to the proper practice of santería that it cannot be disentangled from the santeros' beliefs, even in the name of cultural assimilation, acceptance, and legality? What do adherents to santería accomplish spiritually through the sacrifice of animals? How do they overcome the obstacles set in their path when they come to the United States to continue the free practice of their religion in an urban setting? These are the questions I will attempt to answer.

The presence of santería in South Florida has grown increasingly strong over the past two decades or so, with the religion at its most visible during the 1993 *Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah* Supreme Court case. While the court ruled in favor of the Church and the religion faded out of the limelight somewhat, the controversy and misinformation surrounding santería animal sacrifice remains throughout the United States. Reading about this issue sparked my interest in the history and adaptation of the practice among santeros, from the religion's beginning in Cuba to its current practice in America.

The origins of animal sacrifice in santería are complicated, as are the origins of the religion itself. Santería is a syncretic religion, meaning that it is derived from more than one 'mother' religion. It has even been questioned whether santería can truly be classified as a religion, since it is simply a "diasporic version" of traditional African religious practices (Ayorinde 7). Santería was not officially recognized as a religion in the United States until the closure of the Hialeah case, which extended protection to santeros under the First Amendment.

The practice of animal sacrifice most likely comes from the worship of the Yoruba oracle *Ifa*, although santería is also made up of Dahomey and bakongo beliefs from Africa and some elements of the Catholic Cuban culture in which it formed (Zellner & Petrwoosky 118). Ifa "constitutes a symbolic system of communication between gods and human beings", and the important balance between heaven and earth must be maintained through him (Murphy 86). The priests of Ifa, called *babalawo*, a word also used in santería, interpret the signs sent to them through Ifa using cowrie shells to divine, and decide whether or not sacrifice is necessary for the gods' appeasement, and if so,

what the proper sacrifice will be. “The objective of Ifa divination is to determine the correct sacrifice necessary to secure a favorable resolution of the problems confronting” the practitioner (Murphy 98). According to Murphy, sacrifice among the Yoruba occurred often, for “a good fortune requires a sacrifice to ensure that it comes to pass, and a bad fortune necessitates a sacrifice to avert the worst consequences” (Murphy 92-99). In the Yoruba tradition, the practitioners celebrate the sacrifice and encourage the gods to consume the blood of the animal (Murphy 99). In both santería and Yoruba tradition, “there is an intrinsic link between divination and sacrifice” (Gonzales-Whippler 159). As we will soon see, santería derives many elements of its religious practice from the Yoruba traditions, the only obvious difference being that the Yoruba propitiated both the *ajogun*, or evil spiritual forces, and the orishas. In santería, only the orishas receive sacrifices (Gonzales-Whippler 5). Santería itself was formed when members of the Yoruba culture were brought to Cuba by force to provide slave labor for the sugar cane industry. The traditional Yoruba beliefs of the enslaved people mixed over time with Catholic beliefs and practices, and, eventually, santería emerged (Zellner and Petrowsky 117-118).

The basis for santería animal sacrifice lies in the nature of the orishas. Like many gods of various religions, the orishas are anthropomorphized spiritual beings, each one associated with a different aspect of nature or daily life. Each saint has different preferences when it comes to sacrifice: “Yemaya, the ocean-mother, prefers duck, turtle, and goat. Ogun, the virile iron master, insists on red and white roosters” (Murphy 254). The sacrifices are made, if possible, at a place of significance to the specific god, such as sacrificing a turtle next to a river to please Yemaya. Many other places are associated

with specific orishas, including crossroads, forests, farms, and even markets (Murphy 100). Divination is completed through the use of cowrie shells, thrown on the ground to reveal different patterns. A santero priest interprets these patterns, and the message of the orishas is thus revealed (Lucumí- Santería).

Sacrifice can best be explained as a communion between santeros and the orishas, much like the Catholic Eucharist. Through sacrifice, the practitioners can obtain the *aché* of the orishas: their fundamental energy and power (Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert 33). This power can then be used to control the environment by adding and removing energy from various places and living and non-living things. While the universe as a whole is unchangeable, portions of it can be controlled through a careful balance of removing and adding *aché*. Santeros “[learn] to use *aché* for the benefit of the individual, the community, and the universe as a whole” (Zellner & Petrowsky 119).

The orishas do not give up their *aché* without exchanging it for a sacrifice, although it is important to remember that the santeros never consider their exchange with the gods a bribe; they believe that humans cannot exist without the orishas, and vice versa. A Lucumi proverb says that “without human beings, there would be no ocha”, or orishas (Murphy 253). The orishas need the sacrificial animals in order to survive, and humans need the *aché* of the orishas to survive as well (Zellner & Petrowsky 123).

This dynamic is complicated and extremely important to the santería religion as a whole. Human praise and sacrifice are what generate the *aché* of the saints, and so the blood of sacrificial animals strengthens their power. “The animals, say the santeros, ‘son mensajeros que van a reunirse con los ocha’, ‘are messengers who go to be joined with the ocha.’” The animals bring the saints renewed power and evidence of the santeros’

devotion, which triggers the exchange of *aché* between the world of the spirits and the world of humanity. (Murphy 253). The saints consume the *aché* of the sacrificed animals only through the spilled blood, leaving the meat for their followers to partake of: "... the saints 'no comen. Son espíritus y sólo absorben el espíritu de la sangre' (The saints don't eat. Their spirits and only they absorb the spirit of the blood)... 'La sangre para el santo, la carne para el santero' (Blood for the spirit, meat for the santero)" (Murphy 255). This meat is believed to have remedial powers, and it is a great honor to consume it after the sacrificial ritual (Gonzalez-Whippler 178). Like the Eucharist in Christianity, and in Catholicism particularly, sacrifice is the focus of the *santeros'* religion. Gonzalez-Whippler points out that "The ritual of circumcision and Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son are only two examples of the importance of blood to establish a covenant with the deity." Christ highlighted this fact by making the consumption of his own blood Christianity's most sacred ritual during the Last Supper (Gonzalez-Whippler 176). Like the blood sacrifices in the Christian tradition, the blood sacrifices of *santería* serve to link humans with the divine.

Not only does sacrifice serve to connect the energy of Earth with that of the spirit world, it is also used in *santería* in two different yet equally important ways. Sacrifice can serve to cleanse *santeros* of impurities and negative vibrations, and is an important element in *santería* initiation ceremonies, or *asientos* (Zellner & Petrowsky 123).

The cleansing ceremony is usually performed when an individual *santero* has experienced physical illness or mental or physical upset, and also at the beginning of initiation ceremonies in order to avoid contamination of the sacred area by negative energies. It is believed that these problems, usually minor, can be remedied by

transferring the negative energy within the santeros' body into a sacrificial animal. The negative energy is destroyed along with the animal's life. The santero is grateful to the sacrificed animal, and the cleansing ceremony is not taken lightly. In Gonzalez-Whippler's own asiento ceremony, she addresses the cleansing ritual performed beforehand to rid her of negative vibrations. She describes her female initiator, or *madrina*, passing a live chicken over her body, holding it by its legs. "Do you know why I am doing this?" she asked me. "To transfer any negative vibrations around me to the chicken", I answered" (Gonzalez-Whippler 168). Some psychologists even refer patients to santeros to undergo these cleansing rituals, particularly if the patient is Hispanic and believes in the power of the orishas. These clients, usually with mental or nervous disorders, "... respond better psychologically to the santeros' treatment than to that of a conventional psychologist alone" because of their faith in santería healing, and sometimes their generalized distrust of conventional American psychological treatment (Gonzalez-Whippler 91).

Animal sacrifice as used in initiatory ceremonies is probably the best-known form of santería sacrifice, although it is practiced less often than the cleansing ritual. Of the initiatory ceremonies, there are two types requiring animal sacrifice: the advanced *Pinaldo* ceremony, in which the initiate receives the *cuchillo*, or knife, and the asiento ceremony, in which the initiate is officially inducted into the santería faith.

The Pinaldo ceremony is performed only on priests who seek to receive the *cuchillo* in order to hold authority over sacrificial ceremonies. Prior to the Pinaldo, a priest is only officially permitted to sacrifice animals without four legs, which means, in santería, chickens. However, the divination process often reveals that the orishas require

four-legged sacrifices, usually goats, and so the cuchillo ceremony is necessary for the priest to become a full-fledged santería priest. It is believed that the “knife” bestowed upon the priest during Pinaldo belongs to the orisha Ogún, the orisha of iron and killing. The Pinaldo requires a major sacrifice to be made, called *ebó*: “One major reason why the ritual is ‘confirmatory’, as Ernesto Pichardo explains, is that this major sacrifice (*ebó*) is effected through the recognized priestly authority of *Pinaldo*’s conferring elder and is grounded, by extension, in the spiritual authority of that elder’s extant orishas” (Brown 110). Pinaldo must therefore be considered one of santería’s most important ceremonies, as it prepares new priests for the duties of initiating new members and for the duties of giving other more junior priests the ability to perform all religious ceremonies, as well.

Asiento, however, appears to be santería’s most important sacrificial ceremony of all, considering that it initiates new members into the santería faith, and sets them on the path towards full religious understanding and potential priesthood.

In asiento, the initiate, or *iyawó*, symbolically dies and is reborn as a santero. In order for an asiento to be considered complete, there must be a *matanza*, or major sacrifice in the initiate’s name. The animal to be sacrificed is identified with the *iyawó* through the touching of the animal to the primary points on the initiate’s body, and so is identified with the *iyawó*, so that the *iyawó*’s “death and rebirth are reenacted in objectified form” (Brown 167). During initiation, the santero receives symbolic objects representing the saints Obtala, Yamaya, Ochun, and Chango; the *aché* of these objects can be renewed occasionally by sprinkling them with herbs and the blood of future sacrifices (Murphy 257-258). According to González-Whippler, most modern santeros

sacrifice chickens on a regular basis, and goats and rams only on special occasions; the most obvious of much is the asiento ceremony (González-Whippler 156).

In addition to the sacrifice itself, some of the blood of the animal that is not symbolically consumed by the gods can be used to create a liquid called *omiero*, which is used in most rituals of santería as a cleansing agent, including during asiento and Pinaldo. Omiero is made from the blood of sacrificed animals, ashes from burned sacrifices, and water. This substance serves to “prepare individuals or objects for contact with the saints.” For example, knives used in sacrifice are washed with omiero, as well as the hands of santeros involved in the rituals (Murphy 257).

It quickly became obvious to me through my research that the sacrifice of animals is and always has been one of the central and most important practices in santería, and that the santeros’ belief in its positive effects are far too deep to be uprooted by immigration to the United States. I found it necessary to examine both the realities of animal sacrifice and the stereotypes and oppressive measures against the practice in America today. The second half of my paper addresses the technicalities of santería sacrifice, the portrayal of santería by law enforcement and popular media, and the Supreme Court’s 1993 ruling concerning the practice of sacrifice.

The popular opinion of santería and the reality of its practice contrast sharply with one another. In Hialeah, Florida, when Ernesto Pichardo opened his Church of the Lucumí Babalu Aye, the people living in the surrounding rural area expressed concern that the “church” would be the site of satanic rituals, and even fears that house pets and young children would fall victim to sacrifice (Ayorinde 167). The idea that santería is a satanic cult is spread through ignorance of santería’s true beliefs and through

sensationalistic news stories, such as 1980 articles in *The New York Times* and *New York Post*, which called santería sacrificial rituals “bizarre ritualistic activities” (González-Whippler 152). González-Whippler also points out that this kind of negative media attention makes santería vulnerable to blame for gruesome murders which may have been committed by true satanic cults or drug dealing gangs (González-Whippler 153).

Law enforcement organizations also contribute to the persecution of santeros by conducting raids on buildings in which asientos and Pinaldos are taking place, in order to confiscate the sacrificial animals, because santeros rarely hold the permits required to kill animals within most cities’ limits. Local health departments often become involved as well because of the hazards posed by the dead animals, which are often disposed of using unsanitary methods (González-Whippler 154).

During my research, I came across a book of interviews with law enforcement officials, which revealed much about attitudes towards santeros’ religious practices. Cults That Kill seemed to me to be a perfect example of sensationalism, ignorance, and racial discrimination when it came to santería. While the author admits that “most santeros are law-abiding”, he also claims that animal sacrifices “are insignificant when compared with human sacrifices, drug trafficking, and other felonies that are being committed by people using Santería practices before, during, and after the crimes” (Kahaner 112). He goes on to interview an officer who compares santería to black magic and claims that there is a “darkest side” to the religion in which witches called “Brujas” cast “curses and spells and that kind of deviant behavior” (Kahaner 112). Another officer calls santeros “Mexicanos”, and still another decides with his partner, after viewing the scene of a sacrifice, that “we should be looking for a bunch of Cubans that are selling drugs in the

apartment complex right behind us” (Kahaner 113-114). While it may be true that some santeros are also involved in the drug trade, just as members of any other religion may be, nowhere did I find that there is any sort of “black magic” involved in santería, nor did I find that there have been any true cases of santeros sacrificing humans. These claims are usually the result of unsolved murders combined with media hype about santería’s “satanic” roots.

Animal sacrifice itself is often portrayed as cruel and inhumane, involving much pain and suffering for the animal that is killed. However, santeros take care to kill their sacrifices in ways that do not cause the animals to suffer any more than they would if killed for food in an American slaughterhouse. A wide variety of animals, including opossums and turtles, have traditionally been sacrificed, but there is little information on rituals except those pertaining to chickens and goats (González-Whippler 159-161). These are the two most commonly sacrificed animals in santería, particularly in the United States where access to live animals is very limited. Before the sacrifice, the animal is rinsed with water to make it clean and fit for consumption by the orishas. In the case of chickens and other fowl, sacrifice is made either by tearing the bird’s head off with a flick of the wrist, or by cutting off the head with a designated knife. Both methods kill the animal instantaneously, and the blood is allowed to fall on the place of sacrifice (González-Whippler 157). After the ritual, feathers are plucked from the bird and laid over the area “to ‘cover up’ all the negative influences” (González-Whippler 158). In the case of cleansing rituals, the chicken’s body is then opened, stuffed with a variety of food and religious items, and delivered to whatever location was specified by the orisha in the divination preceding the ceremony. In other rituals, the bird is eaten after the ceremony.

González-Whippler describes her madrina performing a sacrifice by "... [flipping] her wrist, tearing the chicken's head with one swift motion. And then there was a stream of blood falling..." (González-Whippler 169).

Goats and other four-legged animals are sacrificed differently, but no less humanely. Non-fowl animals meant for sacrificial ceremonies are traditionally castrated at birth, although this is done less often outside of Cuba. Castrated animals, or *chivos capones*, were thought to prevent illness, and as castration prevents reproduction of the animal, it was thought to prevent reproduction of any sickness as well (González-Whippler 159). The animal's throat is slit with a sharp designated knife straight through the carotid artery, causing quick and virtually painless death (U.S. Supreme Court). The legs are grasped, the animal is held in the air, and its blood is allowed to fall onto the ground and onto the saints' symbolic objects, including cowrie shells, coconut rinds, and ribbons.

Santeros believe strongly in their right and need to sacrifice animals. Their "only concern is to serve God and the orishas by observing certain natural laws. Sacrifice is sometimes necessary because it too is a natural law" (González-Whippler 172). There is absolutely no brutality or sadism involved in santería rituals, and adherents do not take sacrifice lightly. It is used only as a mode of commune with the orishas and for the benefit of santeros and their surrounding communities. Animals are respected and appreciated for giving their lives for the greater good.

Santería has a history of being a difficult religion to practice, and not only in the United States. While animal sacrifice was never against the law in Cuba as it was in America before 1993, Cuban santeros faced other conditions that made sacrificial rituals

more difficult to practice. For a long period of time, the Cuban government prohibited transfer of live animals from rural to urban areas, and rationed livestock for many years. “The slaughter of livestock such as cows, bulls, and sheep was prohibited and carried a jail sentence of two to five years”, as did possession of black-market items such as powdered eggshell used in santería ceremonies (Ayorinde 131). The state was also known to dislike santería practice in general, and often targeted practitioners in order to jail them (Ayorinde 167). These issues led santería to adapt and change even before its journey to the United States with Cuban immigrants. The history of santería in its entirety “is a history of creative responses to an ongoing interaction between and among alien cultures” (Zellner and Petrowsky 118).

In America, santeros faced intense opposition to animal sacrifice, an issue that only came to the fore during and after Ernesto Pichardo’s formation of the Church of Lukumí Babalu Aye in Hialeah. While “religions” in general are protected under the First Amendment, santería is often considered a cult rather than a religion because of its syncretic traditional roots. Pichardo faced persecution, often from other santeros, for his interest in the Yoruba roots of santería; practitioners had long emphasized santería’s similarities to Catholicism in order for their religion to be more easily accepted and understood. Pichardo attempted to “claim greater authenticity within an increasingly diverse, competitive, politicized, commercializing, and transnational religious marketplace” by identifying African traditional similarities rather than by denying them. (Brown 285).

In the case of *Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah*, the court reversed the ban on animal sacrifice because that practice seemed to be the only one targeted in the

current law, constituting religious discrimination (Zellner and Petrowsky 122). The court's ruling defined santería as a "religion, which employs animal sacrifice as one of its principal forms of devotion. The animals... are cooked and eaten following all santería rituals except healing and death rites" (U.S. Supreme Court). Where the previous law demanded persecution of every person who killed an animal "unnecessarily or cruelly", the 1993 law recognizes the necessity, in the eyes of the legitimate religion of santería, of sacrifice, and the lack of cruelty involved in the practice (U.S. Supreme Court). The decision that the animals were and are killed humanely carried great significance because of the involvement of animal rights groups including People For the Ethical Treatment of Animals and the International Society for Animal Rights. Ernesto Pichardo's petition under the Free Exercise Clause was successful (Church of Lukumi).

Despite the Supreme Court's ruling, santería remains a secretive religion, both due to necessity and to tradition. Some santeros even felt that Ernesto Pichardo, santería's crusader for religious rights, was stepping outside the boundaries of tradition by opening the Hialeah church and bringing santería into the spotlight, "believing, perhaps rightly, that becoming more open about their practices would only attract further attention" (Ayorinde 167). The Supreme Court case has indeed been a double-edged sword for santeros. On the one hand, they have earned the right to sacrifice animals legally, and increased attention to the religion has fostered further understanding of its beliefs and practices. On the other hand, the santeros' traditionally secret practices are now widely known, and as knowledge has increased, so has sensationalism surrounding the practice of sacrifice.

During my research I came to much the same conclusion as the United States Supreme Court: that santería animal sacrifice is neither cruel nor unnecessary, and that its practice falls squarely under the protection of the First Amendment. The roots of sacrifice extend not only to Cuba, where santeros were enslaved, but also to Africa, where they lived as Yoruba even before their enslavement. Religious beliefs and practices with origins so deep should not be foreign to Americans practicing any other ancient religion; the fact that santería itself was not legally defined as a religion until 1993 does not make it any less valid than Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. Animal sacrifice must be understood as fundamental to santería, and santería must be understood as a valid belief structure, with devoted adherents who must be allowed to practice their religion freely and without fear of persecution in the United States.