

Abstract

Santería Healing in Cuba

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In Cuba, from the early twentieth century up until today, the Afro-Cuban religious tradition *santería* has stood for health, protection, and a meaningful life for many Cubans. *Santería*, which has its roots in Africa and the religious beliefs of the Yoruba slaves, is currently flourishing, with both Cubans and foreigners turning to it for help in instances of ill-health. Healing in *santería* differs radically from Western biomedical curing. It employs rituals that include divination, sacrifice, possession trance, and herbal medicine and emphasizes the meaningful and transcendent experience of illness. Healing is tailored to the particular form of illness and its underlying causes, and addresses relations between the afflicted and other people, spirits, and divinities.

The aim of the study is to develop an understanding of how *santería* healing works. Through emphasis on the deeply religious and meaningful dimensions of people's experiences of healing, and examination of how *santería* healing is performed, it is suggested it constitutes a transformation of the self in which the ill person begins to experience the world in new ways. *Santería* healing implies developing a relation to a spirit-world manifested in mythology, divination systems, elaborate rituals, and nature itself. *Santería* healing also implies the recognition of the importance of social relations, both in terms of new forms of social support, and in terms of social explanations – such as when illness is understood as originating in disturbed relations and sorcery.

The dissertation shows that *santería* healing reshapes the world for the initiate who thus comes to experience the world in a different and deeply meaningful way. The outcome of the healing process is not absolute, but is often achieved gradually and it is dependent on the subjective experience of the person being healed. As mind, body and social others are presented as intimately interconnected and the nature of healing as grounded in bodily experience, the self becomes understood as part of the healing process. Through *santería* healing, illness is turned into a constructive and positive experience; the individual is given not only the possibility to begin a new life, but also access to new forms of knowledge that may be used to heal others. The study is also intended to contribute to the study of religious healing in general. As such, it seeks to show that *santería* healing is not only a challenge to Western medical theory, but also an important contribution to our understanding of the human condition.

Key Words: Anthropology, Cuba, Santería, Afro-Cuba, Religious Healing, Medical Anthropology, Medicine, Rituals.