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H26 Rituals Among the Santeria: Contextual Clues and Forensic Implications

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The purpose of this paper is to present contextual and taphonomic evidence to identify the ritualistic use of human skeletal remains and other artifacts found in association with Santeria shrines. In addition, information regarding the geographic distribution and historic beginnings of the Santeria religion are presented.

Originating in Cuba, the Santeria religion has been operationally defined as a syncretic fusion of Afro-Caribbean religions and Roman Catholicism. Development of the Santeria religion began in Cuba during the early 16th century when Spanish colonialists forcefully acquired slaves from Nigeria, the Congo, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti. In particular, slaves originating from the Yoruba region of Nigeria and to a lesser extent the Bantu from the Congo are considered to have been the major carriers of the African religious beliefs and practices that contributed to the Santeria religion.

Non-practitioners often describe the Santeria religion as a religion that is primarily based upon oral traditions, rituals, and animal sacrifices. Yet, growing conservatism among the Santeria has shown that many regard themselves as Catholic, having a belief system that is in line with "the ethical principles of Christianity" (Lefever 1996:2). Nevertheless, practitioners still seek Santeria priests (*santero*) in order to receive relief from physical pain, mental anguish, and protection from evil. The type of ceremony performed by the *santero* depends upon the type of problem to be solved: minor problems may be handled through the use of ritual objects, music, movement, and even esoteric words. Conversely, major problems require the invocation of the most important deities, necessitating additional propitiation including animals, rum, food, cigars, and water (Wetli and Martinez 1981). *Paleros* or *mayomberos* who perform rituals that stem from the black magic sect of the Santeria (the *Palo Mayombe*) are said to invoke injuries and deaths. Such rituals require the use of human skeletal remains.

According to González-Whippler (1994) skeletal elements from different ancestral groups are associated with special abilities. In particular, the crania of Whites and Asians are thought to invoke special powers. These associations suggest that certain skeletal material may be more desirable and should have a different frequency if the practitioners are truly able to select skeletal material for its magical powers.

Since the Mariel boatlift in 1980, the numbers of Santeria practitioners in the U.S. has increased. Researchers have estimated that as many as 300,000 practitioners live in New York City and nearly 70,000 practitioners live in Florida (particularly Miami and Tampa) with clusters of Santeria practitioners noted in Detroit, Chicago, Atlanta, Gary (Indiana), Savannah, and several cities in California (Lefever 1996). As such, medical examiners and law enforcement agencies may encounter Santeria shrines and their attendant problems regarding the origin and identification of the human remains with increasing frequency. Therefore, illustrative cases from the C.A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory (CAPHIL) and the Florida District 11 Office of the Medical Examiner are presented in order to shed light on the associated contextual data that can be used to determine whether the human remains used in religious ritual settings are of contemporary medico-legal significance. Beginning with casework conducted by Drs. Wetli and Martinez (1981), cases presented in the seminal article were reexamined, supplemented by at least thirty additional cases from the District 11 Office of the Medical Examiner and CAPHIL. Specifically, each specimen was examined for taphonomic clues of their origin and cataloged associated artifacts when the information was made available.

The skulls, crania, and occasional postcranial bones were recovered from a variety of contexts, including cemeteries, wooded areas, and homes. In some instances the human bones were found in association with black iron caldrons (called *nganga*) or wrapped in cloth or burlap bags and as centerpieces of altars. Artifacts in association with the skeletal material included knives, chains, locks, nails, beads, seashells, coins, candle wax, and mercury. The most commonly associated nonhuman bones included bird (chicken, parrot, and pigeon), bat, lizard, cat, turtle, fish, deer, pig, sheep and goat. Chicken feathers and blood were also noted on many of the bones and artifacts. No pattern was found in the application of chicken blood and feathers to any of these ritual items. Many of the human bones were acquired through grave robberies or biological and/or teaching specimens.

Citations:

Gonzalez-Whippler, M (1994) *Santeria: the Religion, Faith, Rites, Magic*. St. Llewellyn Publications, St. Paul, Minn.

Lefever, H.G. (1996) When the saints go riding in: Santeria in Cuba and the U.S. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35: 318-330.

Wetli, C.V., and R. Martinez (1981) Forensic sciences aspects of Santeria, a religious cult of African origin. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*: 26 (3): 506-514.

Santeria, Skeletal Remains, Artifacts