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fig.1 Santería fortune teller

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fig.2 Altar

Religions in Cuba

There is a variety of beliefs in Cuba that reflect different cultural elements. The main religions in Cuba are the Christianity of the Roman Catholic Church, the Santería and numerous Protestant denominations. However, the current figures on the spread of religions within Cuba are divergent. According to one, 57% of Cubans are baptized Catholics, while 5% of the population belong to Protestant churches.¹ In addition to the Christian churches, the practice of santería plays an important role for many Cubans. But there is no detailed information on the number of people belonging

to this religion. In addition to Catholicism, Protestants and Santería, there are also religious minorities: Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and Jews.

History of Religions in Cuba

The origins and development of these religions are deeply rooted in Cuba's history. Ten years after Christopher Columbus discovered the beautiful island, Cuba was conquered by Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar on behalf of the Spanish King and became a colony. Christian, especially Catholic, ideas entered Cuba and quickly gained a high level of authority.² During the Spanish colonial period, most of Cuba's indigenous people

(Taíno, Siboney and Guanahatabey) were massacred by the Spanish colonists, forced into labor services, or died of introduced diseases such as smallpox. Due to the labor shortage, Spanish Cuba began to import large numbers of enslaved Africans for work and the trade of enslaved people around 1800. Especially the number of imported Yoruba slaves in Cuba increased significantly. Between 1850 and 1870 it became the numerically biggest group of enslaved people (about 35%) in Cuba.³ The belief of the enslaved people from Yoruba, which was rooted in African culture, shaped the Cuban religion enormously at that time. In this context, the syncretistic Santería appeared, the religion of the colonial power Spain spread, the Catholicism spread by the colonial power Spain and mixed beliefs brought by the enslaved people. After the success of the third struggle for independence from colonial power with the participation of the USA in 1895, Spain lost Cuba to the USA. The American occupation of Cuba from 1895–1902 developed quickly with the help of American Protestantism, although Protestants brought it to Cuba at the beginning of Cuba's colonial era. In contrast to the Roman Catholic Church, which was firmly on the side of the colonial power Spain during the wars of independence, the representatives of the Protestant churches were not against the Cuban revolution. As a result, Protestantism was more anchored among the rural population than Catholicism.

Origins of the Santería

The origin of the Cuban syncretic religion began with the darkest chapter in European history. From around 1440 until the middle of the 19th century, it experienced one of the largest migration in history. It is believed that several million Africans were deported overseas. As a result, the African continent was depopulated. Some estimates even assume over thirty million deportations. The consequences of these deportations were also loss of life caused by inhumane conditions on the ships. All colonial powers were involved in these deportations and this criminal practice of the trade with enslaved people.

African influence and culture in Cuba

The Yoruba identity influenced the diaspora cultures mostly through religion. In the history of the Santería in Cuba, enslaved Africans and their descendants developed their Yoruba affiliation through religious practices, i.e. they were „not Yoruba in the biological-Genealogical sense, they were added through ritual initiation into various Yoruba cult groups and this process continues to this day.⁵

The Cuban religious researcher Lázara Menéndez mentioned the term Yorubización in an essay from 1995 to refer to the Africanization or return of the Santería to the Yoruba origins. She assessed the Yorubización as a current that

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fig.3 Babalao priest of Santería



fig.4 Trance ceremony



fig.5 Drummer

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came to Cuba from outside and did not play a major role.⁶ The religious followers themselves do not use the term Yorubización, they use the term Línea Africana and refer to the Babalaos, who practice their ritual practices in the African style. The most prominent representative of the Línea Africana in Cuba is the Babalao Víctor Betancourt Omolófaoró. Víctor Betancourt is the cult leader of the Ifá Iranlówó temple, founded in the 1990s, which means „salvation is in Ifá” in the Yoruba language. Víctor B. and Lázaro Cuesta (leading representatives of the commission for the Ifá annual prophecy) see themselves as an “independent Babalaos” organization and they are separate from that of the state-sponsored Yoruba Association of Cuba, “for one of the two major religious camps in Cuba”. Víctor B. is one of the most famous religious elites within Cuba and is also known outside of Cuba. With his reform projects he brought about a number of ritual innovations in order to renew the usual religious tradition of the Santería.⁷ Víctor B. is of the opinion that the cause of the traditional crisis with the historical constellation of slavery would have brought about the break with the original culture of the Yoruba. He sees the reasons in the fact that many ritual practices could not reach Cuba or could not be further developed due to the social conditions of the Catholic colonial society.⁸ The people came from different regions that also had different cultural developments. Religion and culture were also different in the groups. Their rites and customs were lost, which led

to the uprooting of the Africans. The newly developed kinship relationships within the Yoruba mythology, which did not yet exist in Africa, reflected the need of enslaved people for family ties that had been severed by slavery.¹⁰

“The Africans and their descendants contributed to the development of specific American cultures with their own characteristics. Because despite the trauma of the capture, the break in family and cultural ties, the transport and the forced labor, the enslaved people did not completely lose contact with the culture of their ancestors.”¹¹ Enslaved People and their descendants held open dances, which were initially rejected as pagan by the authorities. Nevertheless, the musicians and their chants and drums were often used at funerals and Corpus Christi processions, which made the enslaved people who could play instruments increasingly popular. This led to the fact that they also got to know and play European instruments and used them in their traditional music, whereby a mixture of European and African sounds developed.¹²

In addition to the mixing of the music, there was also a mixing of the rites of Africa with those of Christianity. This syncretism gave birth to typical Afro-American customs such as Voodoo in Haiti, Candomblé in Brazil and the Santería in Cuba. The predominant syncretic rites in Latin America that are still practiced today are the Candomblé in Brazil and the Santería in

Cuba, which also had a strong influence on the music of Latin America.¹³

Santería in Cuba

The traditional implementation of Catholicism turned out to be difficult in Cuba, because due to the great distance to Spain, there was a small number of priests in Cuba. Catholicism, which was brought to Cuba, had deviated from its original form, as a result of which "ethnic elements and practices" were integrated. Hence it was called People's Catholicism. Open interpretations of the events of Catholicism have led to new types of worship or Forms of worship of the saints.¹⁴

At the beginning of the 17th century, fishermen found an image of the Holy Virgin, which was then placed in a church but had inexplicably disappeared. This image was later found elsewhere, and therefore several legends arose about the Merciful Virgin of Cobre. As a result, a church was built at the site, which was visited by pilgrims from all parts of Cuba in order to be blessed and in return to donate or sacrifice valuables. The enslaved people who made pilgrimages with masters found similarities in these practices with their own ritual Orisha worship, and not only these. Recurring fasting days, holidays in honor of the saints paralleled the Orisha cults, which also wandered from place to place and worshiped other Orishas. The syncretism of Cuba is a mixture of African

and European religions. Whites tried to impose their religion on the enslaved people, but this turned out to be difficult because their religious understanding was different. The main difference is that the Christian religion is oriented towards the hereafter, and therefore „orients its beliefs and behavior towards the afterlife“. The basic African understanding is more oriented towards this world. Their faith helps them to cope with their lives. No distinction is made between the mortal world and the hereafter, for them death is nothing more than another phase of life that brings them to the land of the ancestors. According to their belief, even the land of their ancestors is oriented towards this world. They believe that their ancestors, through their mystical and spiritual powers, can help them to cope with all the difficulties of everyday life. The only thing they cannot stop is death.¹⁵

Commonality of African religion with Christian gods

The African religions have some things in common with Christianity, such as belief in a Higher Being who created the world. The numerous saints present in Catholicism come to meet the Santería, because the African religions have a large number of gods. In order to integrate their own gods into Catholicism, they assigned these gods (orishas) to the Catholic saints. This was also a cover to be able to continue practicing their orishas and their

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fig.6 Santería followers in Cuba

cults. The gods and saints were merged according to their qualities, which then made Jesus, in syncretism, the African god Obatalá. Saint Barbara in Catholicism, who is supposed to protect against storms, was equated with the African god of thunder, Changó. The virgin Regla is Yemayá, Babalú Ayé is Saint Lazarus and San Pedro is Ogún to name a few examples.¹⁶

In Catholicism there are places of pilgrimage or pilgrimage sites where worship is connected to the place. With the Orishas no specific places are connected, but potentially all caves, hills and crossroads. The Christians could live with this amalgamation of deities and saints, which led people of colour to adorn their saints with objects such as shells, stones or other objects. Thus

it was possible for them to maintain their customs, rites, chants and dances for centuries. With this type of mixing, other variants of the Santería in Latin America emerged, such as the Candomblé in Brazil and the Shangó in Trinidad.¹⁷

Ceremonies and practices

Religious rituals have hardly changed. These include, among other things, the questioning of oracles and the offerings to the orishas, which were an integral part of everyday life. The drumming and dance ceremonies are the highlights of their practice. The ecstasies and trances held in groups were considered miraculous cures that were supposed to heal the sick and a little joy to feel a more dignified life, which served as relaxation after

the hard hours on the plantations.¹⁸ The music plays a big role in the Santería gatherings, because the Afro-Cubans celebrate with heavy drumming, singing, dances and drum rhythms. The three drums of the Yoruba / Santería are sacred and are called batá or ilú. Playing on the drums gives magical powers, or there is something magical in them, which is supposed to establish order and fulfill requests or prophesy. Their magic was kept a secret and only the one who built the drums knew about it. These drums were built according to strict rules in order to become sacred. Not everyone is allowed to play these drums, because only the selected drummers had the energy to make their drum beats belong to the gods. Each god was entitled to his own song and dance, which in turn led to diverse dance choreographies. One wanted to appease the gods with their variety of expressions, so that they should bring them wealth and prevent mischief. Through rhythmic drumming and dancing the heartbeat is increased and the trance state is brought about.¹⁹

Religious freedom in Cuba

After Cuba's independence from the USA, the religion in Cuba was always affected by political unrest. With the government of Fidel Castro in 1959, Cuba becomes a socialist state. In the 1976 Constitution, Cuba was officially declared an atheist state. Religious practice was restricted and church property was expropriated. With the

cessation of Cuba's religious ban in 1992, it seems that the difficult times for believers has come to an end. At the same time, this led to the fact that many people turned to the Christian faith. However, it is worth noting that religious freedom in Cuba is legally and practically severely restricted, despite religious freedom having constitutional status.¹⁹ For example, religious communities must be recognized and registered by the Religious Affairs Bureau. The various aspects of religious life are also regulated by the Religious Affairs Office, e.g. approval of construction, use of vehicles, purchase of the building, etc.²⁰

Conclusion

From a religious point of view, Cuba is a country that is heavily influenced by race, history and politics. The religions and politics influence the life of the residents. The advent of Santería is the best proof. This religious system, which was developed from the descendants of enslaved African-Cubans and integrated into the Catholic faith, changes constantly in the course of social development. In response to the economic crisis, the state discovered Santería as a tourism product. Travelers can enjoy folklore shows and ceremonies. Today it has also crossed the borders of Cuba and reached various places, such as the USA or Europe. It is to be expected that with the constant changes in Cuban society and politics, their religion will also adapt.

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fig. 7 Santería ceremony

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Sources

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