RELIGION

Miguel A. De La Torre. *Santeria: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004. xviii + 264 pp. Illustrations. Tables. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. $18.00. Paper.

The study of Yoruba *orisha* religion and the various diasporic permutations of it has become a popular yet complex field to navigate. In *Santeria: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America*, Miguel A. De La Torre speaks lucidly about Santeria, a variant of orisha worship developed in Cuba by enslaved Africans and their descendants. Interested primarily in the growth and evolution of Santeria in the United States as a result of the migration of large communities of Cubans after 1959, he writes as a former practitioner, now academic, intending to dispel stereotypes about the religion. De La Torre returns us to a debate already put to rest in many academic circles yet still very prevalent within popular discourses—the question of whether Santeria is a syncretic, confused form of Catholicism. He suggests this label was imposed on Santeria by a "Eurocentric mind" attempting to "subordinate it to the self-perceived purity of the dominant culture's religion" (7). By drawing comparisons and differences between the two practices and explaining the basic tenets of Santeria—such as the myths of the various orisha (deities), related saint hagiography, sacrifice, spirit possession, divination, steps to initiation in the orisha priesthood, and the layers of understanding acquired "as the believer's understanding of orisha mysteries deepens"—De La Torre explains that for Santeria practitioners there is no confusion about the difference between their religion and Catholicism.

The cornerstone of De La Torre's analysis is the idea that Santeria is a religion of liberation. He asserts that the Latin American liberation theologians of the 1960s focused solely on Christianity, thereby disregarding forms of African-inspired popular religiosity, which were practiced by "the most marginalized within their society: the descendants of slaves" (201). Although he maintains that "it is beyond the scope of [his] book to develop a Santeria theology of liberation," the notion of religion as popular resistance undergirds his analysis, as he attempts to show how Santeria has helped dignify oppressed individuals and empower a counterhegemonic community of Cubans and other Hispanics who feel socially alienated and economically marginalized within a "dominant Euroamerican culture" (199–200).

Santeria was professedly written for an audience that "possesses little if any knowledge about this growing religious movement" in the United States (xvii). As such, the book does an exceptional job of presenting the complexity of Santeria as well as the rich interplay that has developed between Catholicism and orisha worship in the context of slavery and postcolonial religious suppression in Cuba. Moreover, using examples of the

establishment in 1987 of a legally registered "Santeria church" in Hialeah, Florida, and the Supreme Court's legalization in 1992 of animal sacrifice, De La Torre pushes his reader to explore the ways in which the religion is further adapting to its environment in the United States. By highlighting these events, he demonstrates a keen insight into the ways in which Santeria is compelled to change as it is rerouted through and around American legal and social institutions that are grounded in a "broadly 'Christian' ethical perspective and [Christian] principles" (223).

However, in focusing mainly on the tension between marginalized Hispanic practitioners and a dominant Euro-American culture, he neglects to address other dynamic movements that are currently affecting the development of Santeria in the United States. For instance, one of the more startling aspects of De la Torre's analysis is the omission of the African American presence in Santeria. With at least a couple of thousand initiated African American priests in the New York area alone, many of whom have enough ritual knowledge to initiate other people, it is surprising that their existence is summarized in one line of the text (180). Like many Cuban Americans, most of these African Americans became interested in Santeria in the early 1960s as a form of cultural resistance, although what they sought to honor was their African heritage in the face of American racism. Given his desire to understand Santeria as a religion of liberation, it is regrettable that De la Torre does not highlight parallel themes of resistance in their religious practice. But perhaps this silence is testimony to the unfortunate perpetuation of decades of ideological conflict between some Cuban American and African American practitioners.

While highlighting the religion as a form of resistance, De La Torre also seems interested in making the religion appear more palatable to what he considers the dominant cultural group in the United States. In an attempt to dispel media slander perpetrated against Santeria, De la Torre emphasizes the point that Euro-Americans are increasingly involved in Santeria and that "what was once the religion of the uneducated black lower economic class [in Cuba] is becoming the religion of educated middle class whites" (224) in the suburbs of America. He is partially correct, in that many practitioners in the United States are college graduates and professionals. However, his reduction of Santeria to a religion of white suburbia obscures the presence of complex intranational and transnational orisha networks that link people, many of whom are of African descent, living in distant cities within the United States and widespread locations outside the United States such as Nigeria, Cuba, Brazil, and Trinidad, as well as other countries of the second orisha diaspora like Mexico, Venezuela, Spain, Italy, and Great Britain. In order to capture the increasingly global processes upon which Santeria practice in the United States is contingent, we must be attendant to new technologies and sites of knowledge production, such as Internet chat rooms, Web sites, e-mail, cinematography, book publishing, international conferences, and increased access to rapid trans-

port, all of which create the possibility for these linkages to be conceived and executed.

Furthermore, identity has always been important to the way in which Santeria has been adopted and incorporated within Cuban and American society and now within transnational networks. It might have been useful, then, if De La Torre's project had also involved examining how the identity of Santeria practitioners is constructed. In this process, we might find that for many people, including some Hispanic Americans and Euro-American practitioners, what constitutes legitimate identification with Santeria is still articulated within a variety of discourses that seek to resist other discourses of belonging and existence by valorizing "Africa" or what is perceived as an African cultural contribution to the Americas.

In spite of this difference of focus, De La Torre offers many insights into the beliefs, rituals, and institutionalization of Santeria in the United States that will be of interest to academics and nonacademics alike. The book is a solid introduction to the religion for those "who until now have never heard of Santeria," as well as a provocative invitation for people outside of the faith, namely Christians, "to learn more about their own faith as they learn about and contemplate the religious expression of marginalized groups (xvii).

Sheriden Booker
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

Correction

The last paragraph of Josef Gugler's review of Melissa Thackway's *Africa Shoots Back* (48:1, April 2005), should have read:
"After the pioneering works of Manthia Diawara, Françoise Pfaff, and Frank Udechukwu Ukadike, and Olivier Barlet's more recent *African Cinemas: Decolonizing the Gaze* (2000), Indiana and its co-publishers...." Francoise Pfaff's book was published by Greenwood, Frank Ukadike's by the University of California Press, and Olivier's Barlet's by Zed.

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