

C. V. Wetli,¹ M.D. and R. Martinez,² M.A.

Forensic Sciences Aspects of Santeria, a Religious Cult of African Origin

REFERENCE: Wetli, C. V. and Martinez, R., "Forensic Sciences Aspects of Santeria, a Religious Cult of African Origin," *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, JFSCA, Vol. 26, No. 3, July 1981, pp. 506-514.

ABSTRACT: The anatomic, cultural, and legal aspects of Santeria, a religious cult of African origin, as experienced by the Dade County Medical Examiner's Office, are presented. Human skeletal parts are generally found in association with an obvious ritual or may be discovered in shallow graves. Their ritualistic use is often suggested by their association with pennies, chicken feathers, evidence of prolonged internment, rust, or accoutrements characteristic of the cult. Although some specimens were obviously purchased or were previously used as anatomic specimens, others have obscure origins. In one instance the source was proven to be a grave robbing that had taken place 30 months earlier. The potential for "voodoo death" and outright homicide is discussed. It is anticipated that evidence of Santeria rituals will extend to other parts of the United States as Caribbean immigration continues.

KEYWORDS: pathology and biology, Santeria, human behavior

"Voodoo" and "obeah" are terms used to describe religious practices of African origin. One such cult introduced into the United States by Caribbean immigrants is Santeria. The word literally means saint-worship, and the practice is a cultural union of Christianity and the West African religious system brought to Cuba by slaves originating in the Yoruba region of Nigeria [1-4]. A hallmark of their acculturation is the depiction of African deities in the facsimile of Catholic saints, a process known as syncretism.

The religion, as it is practiced today, is primarily regarded as a benevolent or neutral magic. The beliefs and traditions are variously interpreted by the believers, and there is no central dogma or bible. Nonetheless, certain tenets appear immutable. Among these are the syncretic depictions and the use of stones, herbs, and animal sacrifice for the rituals. Most practitioners regard themselves as Catholics "in their own way" [5], meaning they will readily seek the advice and follow the instructions of a *santero* (priest) when they desire supernatural intercession in their lives. The power of the *orishas* (gods) is feared, and personal calamity is often attributed to an angry god. Hence the approach to mental or physical illness is to seek medical attention as well as a *santero*. Minor problems or desires may require only simple rituals in the home (burning of candles, offering of certain fruits, and similar practices). Major problems may necessitate the direct participation of a *santero*, complete with divination (the Table of Ifa) using coconuts or seashells, singing, herbs, and the ritual

Received for publication 16 Oct. 1980; revised manuscript received 22 Nov. 1980; accepted for publication 5 Dec. 1980.

¹Deputy chief medical examiner, Dade County, Fla., and assistant professor of pathology, University of Miami School of Medicine, Miami, Fla.

²Research assistant, Department of Psychiatry, University of Miami School of Medicine, Miami, Fla.

sacrifice of animals. The type of ceremony depends on the problems to be addressed, which gods need to be invoked, and the approach or interpretation of the santero.

The characteristics of the most important deities, known as the Seven African Powers, are summarized in Table 1. The items described in the table are frequently encountered during investigations of the scenes of both violent and nonviolent deaths of Latins. Most often one finds statues, bowls of fruit, candles, herbs, strings of beads, and decapitated birds. Occasionally other ritually sacrificed animals, especially goats, may be found. In addition to beaded necklaces, the believer may wear anklets of cloth or metal, a multicolored cloth sash (indicative of the Seven African Powers), or a talisman known as a *resguardo*. The latter object is a pouch worn around the neck or pinned to the clothing. It contains a variety of small objects such as coins, a bullet, a lock of hair, stones, or whatever else may have a special meaning for the believer. Practitioners may purchase all their religious items (including skulls and animals) in local stores called *botanicas*.

The black magic sect of Santeria derives from the Congo region of Africa. It is known as *palo mayombe* and its practitioners are called *paleros* or *mayomberos* [4]. For personal gain or a fee, they will perform rituals to inflict mental or physical harm, or even death, on an individual. The practitioners are often locally reputed to be career criminals engaged in drug smuggling. A basic tool used by these paleros is the *nganga*—an iron cauldron filled with sacred dirt and containing human bones, blood, coins, and other items.

The forensic science aspects of Santeria are manifold and mostly emanate from the black magic sect. Besides ritualistic death wishes, outright homicide and apparent natural deaths have been associated with Santeria rituals. Of particular interest to the forensic scientist are those rituals requiring the use of human bones. When they are discovered by accident or by design, they are brought to the medical examiner's office as "unknown human remains" with the attendant problems of origin, identification, and so forth. This paper describes the anatomic, cultural, and legal aspects of Santeria as experienced by the Dade County (Florida) Medical Examiner's Office.

Illustrative Cases

Case 1

A farmer had an altercation with a Cuban tenant concerning the upkeep of the property and the lack of care rendered the tenant's animals (goats, pigs, and chickens). The next morning, the farmer found on his front porch a decapitated chicken (the head was shoved into the cloaca), a split coconut, and 14 pennies, all wrapped in white cloth. The farmer immediately went to the tenant's shack where he beheld a bizarre altar (Fig. 1). In the center was an iron cauldron filled with dirt. On top of that was a goat skull that supported a blood-drenched human skull that in turn supported a chicken head. A chain was draped across the front of the skull. To the left of the skull was a small doll with an appropriately sized sword piercing its chest. Behind the skull were deer antlers (draped with a red ribbon), an antique-appearing sword, and a machete. Two knives were also thrust into the dirt of the cauldron. Candles were burning in and around the cauldron, and some (on the floor) had the depiction of Saint Barbara. In front was a plywood board with a glyph drawn in chalk, a decapitated chicken, and a section of railroad track. Above this, hanging from the ceiling, were multiple strands of colored beads, with most strands having only two alternating colors. At the foot of the cauldron was a pan of water containing two split coconuts, a turtle shell, and an intact coconut. To the right was a smaller black cauldron filled with dirt, numerous railroad spikes, a knife, deer antlers, and a strand of yellow beads. A chain with amulets of agricultural tools was wound around the outside of the cauldron. Nearby was a box filled with dirt (about 30 cm square and 10 cm deep) with a small plastic skeleton on top. Another glyph was chalked on a nearby wall. Behind the door in a paper bag was a 30-cm-high figurine of the trickster god, Eleggua (Fig. 2).

TABLE 1—*Characteristics of the most important deities of Santería.^a*

God	Function/Power	Specific Punishment Inflicted	Christian Syncretism	Necklace	Symbols/Depiction	Propitiation
Eleggua	controls roads, gates, doors; allows communication between santero and orisha	...	Holy Guardian Angel; St. Anthony of Padua; Christ Child	alternating red and black beads	clay or cement image with eyes, nose, and mouth of cownie shells	blood of decapitated black rooster, rum, aguardiente
Obatala	father of all the santos; patron of hysterics and melancholias; source of energy, wisdom, purity	blindness, paralysis, and birth deformities	Our Lady of Las Mercedes; Holy Eucharist; Christ resurrected	white beads	the pearl; all white things, white clothing	white pigeon, white canary, female goat
Chango	controls thunder, lightning, fire; sometimes invoked in malevolent sorcery	death, suicide by fire	Saint Barbara	alternating red and white beads	sword; double-edged axe	lamb, goat, rodent, red rooster
Oshun	controls gold, money, sensual love; makes marriages; protects genitals and lower abdomen	abdominal distress, social and domestic strife	Our Lady of Charity	alternating yellow and white beads	gold, copper, seashells, mirrors, pumpkin	white hen, sow, female goat, honey
Yemaya	primordial mother of the santos; protects motherhood, womanhood; controls fertility and intestinal function; owns the seas	respiratory distress	Our Lady of Regla	alternating blue and white beads	seashells, canoe, Virgin Mary as black woman holding white Christ Child	duck, turtle, goat, watermelon
Babalu-Aye	patron of the sick, especially skin diseases	leprosy and gangrene	Saint Lazarus	alternating white and purple (or light blue) beads	man on crutches accompanied by dogs	cigars, pennies, glasses of water
Oggun	warrior deity; owns all metals and weapons; invoked in malevolent sorcery	violent death (such as vehicular crash)	Saint Peter	alternating black and white beads	metal necklace with 10 to 12 pendants of agricultural tools	blood and feathers, white or red rooster, steel knife, railroad tracks

^aNote: Santería rituals always begin by invoking and propitiating Eleggua and then Oggun.



FIG. 1—Ritual altar found in Case 1; see text for description.

Comment: Despite assertions to the contrary by the responsible santero, the scene typifies the malevolent aspect of Santeria. The skull appeared to be that of a middle-aged black male. The tenant (dressed all in white, which is typical of a santero) produced a receipt for the skull. It was purchased at a local botanica for \$110. The receipt further indicated the skull was from a 39-year-old African male and was sold for educational purposes. Although the State of Florida does not prohibit the owning of a skull, it does have statutes prohibiting the trafficking in human remains [6]. However, no charges were brought against the botanica. The santero was charged with animal cruelty, not for the ritualistic decapitation of chickens or goats but for the living animals that were uncared for at the scene. It is noteworthy that the farmer (the presumed target of the ritual) did not die in the ensuing weeks or months.

Case 2

A cemetery work crew was to complete a grave site that had been dug the previous day in preparation for a burial. They discovered human bones in two plastic garbage bags at the



FIG. 2—Depiction of Eleggua (one of the Seven African Powers) found behind the door of Case 1.

site and called the police. One bag contained a skull with mandible and a few vertebrae. The other contained a nearly complete skeleton. The overall morphologic features were those of a black male. One skull was covered with chicken feathers and blood (Fig. 3). The other skull was covered with dirt and apparent rust. The distal ends of some of the long bones had been sawed off.

Comment: The source of these human bones remains a mystery. The presence of rust, dirt, and chicken feathers leaves no doubt that these were used for the rituals of Santeria. It is possible that the bones were placed in the cemetery after the dismantling of a nganga (the source of power for the santero). This is done after the death of a santero to destroy completely any powers that might remain. Other possibilities are that the bones were part of a rejuvenation ritual for a nganga [1] or an offering to Oya (African goddess who owns the cemetery).

Case 3

Cemetery workers, picking up debris along a low cemetery wall, discovered a plastic bag buried just beneath the surface of the ground. It contained two human skulls and 15 pennies. One skull had a 2.5-cm-diameter area of bright copper oxide staining. Both had adherent dirt and dried grass. The skulls were small but from adults. One had a broken spring attached to the mandible by a screw, and another screw was in the maxilla.

Comment: Both skulls resembled those obtained from biologic supply houses and therefore may be of East Indian origin. The pennies are included as a symbolic payment to

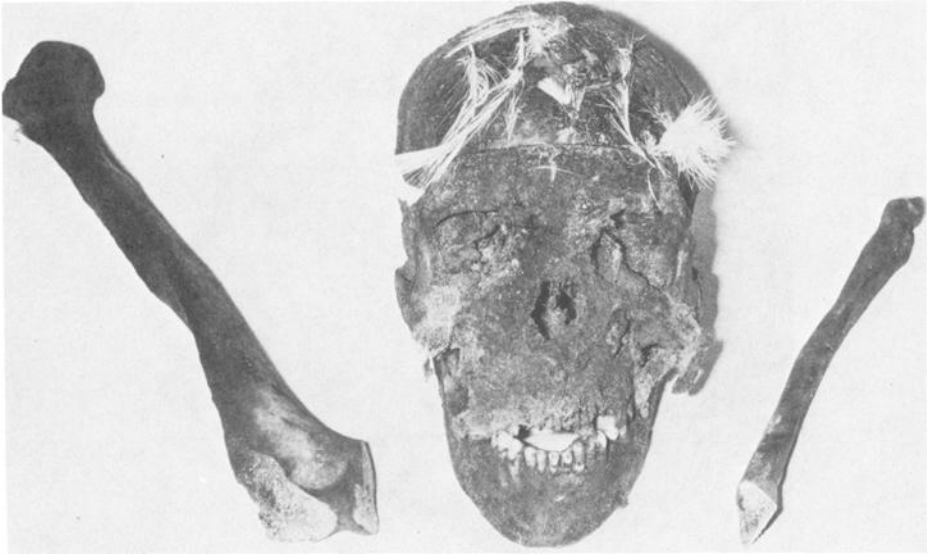


FIG. 3—Skull caked with dirt, rust, and chicken feathers. Portions of long bones have been sawed off (Case 2).

the gods. Frequently the number of coins is in a multiple of seven (as in Case 1), symbolizing the Seven African Powers. Whether the incident reflects the dismantling of an nganga or was part of some other ritual is not known.

Case 4

In January 1978 the remains of a 55-year-old white woman, who had died in 1939, were disinterred for transfer to a mausoleum in another cemetery. That night the tomb was robbed. The casket had fallen upside down and the perpetrators broke through the bottom of the casket to steal the skull, femurs, tibiae, humeri, right innominate bone, and right scapula. The mandible was left behind. In June 1980, in another cemetery, workers found a burlap bag containing a mixture of avian bones and human bones. The bag was tied at one end with a red cloth and at the other with a black cloth. The human skull was covered with wax and at the vertex was the wax-formed imprint of the site of a candle (Fig. 4). A shrunken mummified brain was in the cranial cavity. The dentition was excellent, with many gold fillings. Other human bones in the bag were the humeri (with distal ends sawed off), the right scapula, and right innominate bone. Neither femurs nor mandible was present.

The mausoleum that had been desecrated in 1978 was again opened and the bones compared. The mandibular teeth also had multiple gold fillings, and the dental occlusions of the maxillary and mandibular teeth established identity (Fig. 5). The bones were returned to the casket and the mausoleum was sealed.

Comment: The symbolism of the red and black cloth ties is that of Elegua (see Table 1). Why the bones were taken and then returned to a cemetery is not known. However, there are rituals that require a skull with a (decomposing) brain to be removed from a grave [2]. This case emphasizes the importance of canvassing police records of vandalism or local cemeteries for instances of grave robberies, especially when it is obvious that the bones were not originally anatomic specimens.



FIG. 4—Skull with adherent streams of wax and the imprint of a candle base at the vertex (Case 3).

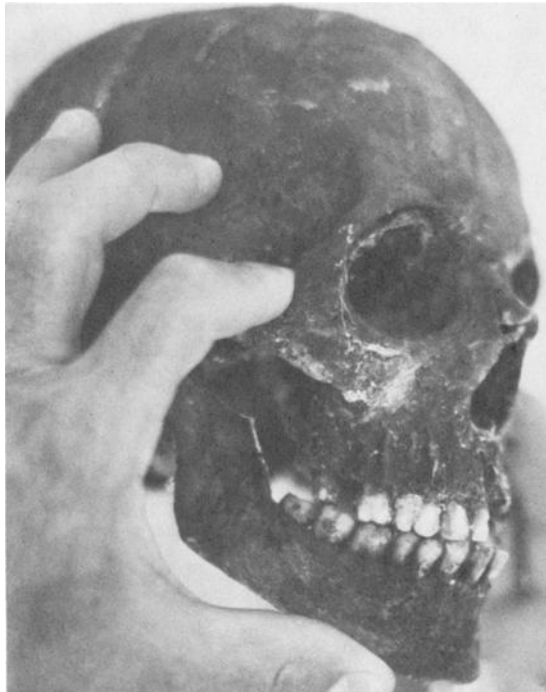


FIG. 5—Skull found in shallow grave matched with mandible left behind from grave robbing 30 months earlier, thus establishing identity (Case 3).

Case 5

A cemetery caretaker found portions of a human skeleton behind some bushes near a grave. The bones were wrapped in a white cloth and buried about 50 mm (2 in.) below the ground. An inventory revealed a skull (without mandible), the left hand and wrist bones, right humerus, right radius, and right ulna. The long bones and those of the wrist and hand were wired together, and a hole in the top of the skull indicated these were, at one time, part of an assembled skeleton. However, that the calvarium had apparently been cut off at a later date was suggested by the inexpert sawing marks and lack of the appropriate hardware found in professionally prepared specimens. The bones were stained with dirt and had fine roots and dried grass attached in various places. The skull had a faint red stain in several areas near the base.

Comment: The morphologic features and the circumstances under which these bones were found strongly suggest they were initially obtained as an anatomic preparation and subsequently used for the rites of Santeria.

Case 6

A mulatto Cuban man died from multiple gunshot wounds after being chased by another Cuban man. The victim was clad in pants and sport shirt covered with multicolored glitter, which was also found in his shoes. In his possession was a small gold-plated tack hammer and a gold-plated flashlight. Background investigation revealed the victim was a practitioner of Santeria and would often wear shoes of dissimilar colors and eye glasses with one dark and one clear lens. Three days earlier he had threatened to cut off the head of his eventual assailant and offer it to the saints. This later proved to be the actual motive for the shooting.

Comment: The defendant was found guilty of second-degree murder and sentenced to 20 years in prison. The case emphasizes that the threats and beliefs of this cult are regarded seriously and there is at least the potential for homicide. Also, violent retaliation is feared by those who would betray some of the secrets of Santeria or intimidate the santeros.

Case 7

A 42-year-old Cuban man was a primary defendant in a celebrated drug conspiracy trial. He visited his *madrina* (a Santera godmother) one evening for a ceremony to cleanse his spirit. A dice throw indicated the trial would not go well for him. Shortly after midnight he was dressed all in white and left alone in a room as a concluding or transitional phase of the ritual. He was found dead the next morning.

Comment: A postmortem examination was performed, and his death was attributed to a cardiac dysrhythmia secondary to hypertensive cardiovascular disease. Although the death is regarded as natural, practitioners of Santeria may well attribute supernatural powers to the death. Thus, the ceremony to cleanse the spirit implies appeasement to a particular orisha. The failure to satisfy or appease the orisha may result in punishment, such as bad luck (the trial for drug smuggling) or death. The dice throw was a divination ritual. However, it is more likely that coconuts or seashells were used for this instead of actual dice.

Discussion

Information concerning the beliefs and rituals of Santeria is difficult to obtain because there is no bible and because many practitioners fear public ridicule or police retribution. Nonetheless, the basic tenets of the cult have been described in recent publications [2,5]. At present the practice of Santeria is mostly centered in South Florida and New York City where there are large populations of Cuban immigrants.

Most human bones used in conjunction with the rituals of Santeria appear to have been

purchased locally or were originally biologic specimens. However, in some cases the origin may be obscure or may have been a grave site (Case 4). Although no current instances of murder (to obtain bones or organs) have come to light, such an event may be a possibility, as suggested by our Case 5 and the case reported by Ortiz in 1906 [7] of an adolescent white female killed to obtain her heart to cure the sterility of a black female.

Since voodoo death appears to be real [8,9], it would be interesting to speculate on just how such an occurrence would be handled in our contemporary American society. Could a fatality, the target of a voodoo ritual, be considered analogous to murder by heart attack [10]? If the victim has no other apparent cause of death, could the death be certified as homicide? Could such a case be prosecuted?

Bones found outside the context of an obvious ritual may be perplexing. However, some common features and clues usually suggest their ritualistic use. Most frequently the bones are discovered in a cemetery, often one located in a Latin neighborhood. Although wrapped in plastic or burlap, they are usually covered with dirt containing dried grass and fine roots and may have an appearance of rust caked on the surface (possibly from prolonged interment in an iron cauldron). Almost always there are other peculiarities, which include coins (often in multiples of seven), chicken feathers, blood stains, adherent wax, commingling with avian bones, sawed-off portions of long bones, and beads or cloth in the symbolic colors of one of the Seven African Powers.

To our knowledge, the only laws regulating Afro-Caribbean religious practices exist in the Cayman Islands [11]. However, the question of whether or not ritual sacrifice of animals legally constitutes cruelty to animals is frequently raised. In the State of Florida such ritual sacrifice is specifically exempted from the statutes so long as the death of the animal is virtually instantaneous [12].

Thus far the forensic science aspects of Santeria have been mostly concerned with the identification and origin of both human and nonhuman remains. Whether this type of investigation will change in scope or become more frequent and widespread with continued immigration from the Caribbean remains to be seen.

References

- [1] Cabrera, L., *El Monte*. Mnemosyne Publishing, Miami, 1954.
- [2] Gonzalez-Wippler, M., *African Magic in Latin America Santeria*, Julian Press, New York, 1973.
- [3] Cabrera, L., *La Laguna Sagrada de San Joaquin*. A.I.P. Publications, Madrid, 1973.
- [4] Martinez, R., "Afro-Cuban Santeria Among the Cuban-Americans in Dade County, Florida: A Psycho-cultural Approach," Master's thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Florida, Gainesville, 1979.
- [5] Sandoval, M., "Santeria: Afro-Cuban Concepts of Disease and Its Treatment in Miami," *Journal of Operational Psychiatry*, Vol. 8, No. 2, April 1977, pp. 52-63.
- [6] Florida Statutes § 872 (1979).
- [7] Ortiz, F., *Los Negros Brujos*. New House Publishers, Miami, 1906.
- [8] Cannon, W. B., "'Voodoo' Death," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 44, No. 2, April-June 1942, pp. 169-181.
- [9] Pruitt, R. D., "Death as an Expression of Functional Disease," *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, Vol. 49, 1974, pp. 627-634.
- [10] Davis, J. H., "Can Sudden Cardiac Death Be Murder?" *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, Vol. 23, No. 2, April 1978, pp. 384-387.
- [11] Laws of the Cayman Islands § 113 (1963).
- [12] Florida Statutes § 828 (1979).

Address requests for reprints or additional information to
C. V. Wetli, M.D.
Medical Examiner's Office
1050 N.W. 19 St.
Miami, Fla. 33136