

THE SAINTS AND EL LÍDER

THE RELATIONSHIP OF CASTRO AND HIS REGIME WITH 'THE RELIGION,' AS SANTERIA IS OFTEN CALLED IN CUBA, IS COMPLEX — AND MYSTERIOUS.

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In any conversation among Cubans, sooner or later a trinity of questions will come up. When will Fidel Castro fall? What will happen afterward? Is he protected?

"Protected" in this context doesn't refer to a palace guard. Cubans are asking whether despite years of soaking the island in Marxist-Leninist jargon, *El Líder* is in fact an initiate of one of the magical Afro-Cuban faiths. As they say, "that Fidel is pretty lucky, no?" He is by now modern history's longest-standing strongman.

To what extent he may be a "believer" is open to speculation. What is clear is that in a culture where these traditions have a special hold on the imagination — Newsweek has estimated that 70 percent of all Cubans on the island practice some form of the old slave religions — the association of Castro with Afro-Cuban faith contributes to his power.

Over the years, a number of events have been read as marking Castro as one "anointed" by the gods. Castro has used this to show his solidarity both with African nations and with his own country's black underclass. Still the relationship of Castro's regime with "the religion," as Cubans call Santería, is complex: Castro has used this one to respond to emerging and even urgent conditions.

Although Santería in Cuba has always been shrouded in secrecy, many Cubans and even serious scholars believe there is a long tradition of highly placed politicians, including presidents, turning to "the religion" for that little added edge. Still, nobody had seen anything like *El Comandante*. His revolution managed to "triumph" on arguably the most sacred day in Santería's calendar — Jan. 1, the day given over to prophecy and belonging to Elegua, keeper of the crossroads, he who is responsible for "opening the way." Castro's cavalcade wound through Cuba draped in the flags of a movement whose colors of red and black happened to be Elegua's as well.



WINGED SYMBOL: A dove perched on Castro's shoulder, top, while he addressed a rally on Jan. 8, 1959 — and again on Jan. 8, 1989. To many, the bird's presence symbolized Obatalá, the Santería prince of peace, above, whose color is white.

About a week later in 1959, as the 32-year-old Castro addressed his people at a huge rally in Havana, a dove alighted on his shoulder. Wayne S. Smith, former chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, describes "a palpable shiver that went through the crowd." Here was the living synthesis of symbols from two religions: the Holy Ghost, represented in Catholicism as a dove,

and Obatalá, the Santería prince of peace, whose color is white. (Of course, there are skeptics who believe the dove was trained, particularly because it happened again 30 years later.)

There were other signs of Castro's connection to Afro-Cuban traditions. The Abakuá, a secret-society/male-brotherhood, was among the most respected and feared of any Cuban institution. According to Dr. Ivor Miller, a scholar-in-residence at the Shomberg Center for Research in Black Culture and Visiting Professor of African and Black Diaspora Studies at DePaul University, "in 1959 the brotherhood made Fidel an honorary member because, as one of them put it, 'Fidel had come to defend the blacks who had always been discriminated against.' Castro's body was ritually cleansed with medicinal plants and a rooster. The ceremony was shown on Cuban national TV."

After Castro's ascent to power and under his direction, museums featuring Santería's ritual objects were popping up all over the island. In 1965, the first company devoted to the sacred dance of the Afro-Cuban faiths was born. Rogelio Martínez-Furú, who founded the company, talked of the troupe's trip to West Africa. "We were greeted at the airport by hundreds dancing the same dances that we would dance for them. The old world was meeting the new. Everyone was in tears."

"It appeared to be a time when black culture/Santería could finally come out of Cuba's closet," says Damián Fernández, who heads Florida International University's Cuban Research Center. "Castro was setting the stage for Cuba to appear as paradise for the black, the disenfranchised. But... once a culture is enshrined in a museum, it can no longer threaten another orthodoxy."

Shrewd calculation? Look at those around Fidel, and the pic-

ture becomes muddy.

No one was closer to Fidel than his secretary and lover Celia Sánchez. There are indications that Celia was a Santería priestess. A respected plastic surgeon who worked with her, and chooses to remain anonymous, claims having seen Castro in robes with Celia at a ceremony. "Perhaps Castro was there to please Celia," says Carlos Alberto Montaner, a political writer and exile leader who knew her. "Celia was always doing everything to protect him."

SPIRITIST

It wasn't just Celia. Castro's personal physician, *Comandante* René Vallejo, was a well-known spiritist who reputedly was informed by the "invisibles" that the U.S. invasion of 1961 would occur at The Bay of Pigs.

By 1980, the regime was losing its grip at home, as evidenced by the storming of the Peruvian Embassy and the Mariel exodus that followed.

"After Mariel, Fidel's power was so eroded that without serious overtures to the black community, he would have been overthrown," says an anthropologist working at Cuba's Academy of Science. (Like many other sources from the island, this one prefers to remain anonymous for fear of retribution.)

Suddenly, state *permisos* to celebrate Afro-Cuban liturgy were readily available. José Carniedad, who headed the Politburo's Office on Religion and Atheism, made overtures to various religious leaders, asking them to include in their praise song descriptions of the various deities as "great revolutionaries." King Sijuwade Olubuse II, head of the Yoruba faith in Nigeria, was invited to the island and was received with a pomp and ceremony heretofore unknown in revolutionary Cuba.

By the decade's end, as the Soviet Union collapsed, Castro made a very public rapprochement with the Catholic Church. When the church tried to push *El Comandante* further in the area of religious rights, so many articles sympathetic to Santería appeared in Cuba's state-run press that Jaime Cardinal Ortega accused the regime of trying to place "an artificial wedge" between Santería and the church.

Economic and political crises continued. Cubans were desperate enough to take to the sea in rafts made of old doors. Annual Santería divinations reflected

this. By the 1990s, the regime offered its favors to many of the island's priests in exchange for their help in an official Yoruba Cultural Association that guaranteed happier predications for Cuba. The association's work didn't stop there. Some of these priests were sent into Latin America and Europe to bring back the curious and the converted to be initiated in Cuba. Approximately \$8,000 per head would make its way into state coffers. And in the annual May Day Parade, Santería devotees appeared just after the missiles and tanks chanting, "Elegua will resolve everything."

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Elegua, a child with the head of an old man, known as the Ancient of Days, can be interpreted as the aging revolutionary renewed by a sacred child. Thus the significance of Elián González, the child "rescued" back to Castro's Cuba.

FIDEL A BELIEVER?

But does Fidel actually believe? Could he be an initiate?

The answer continues to be . . . maybe.

"He believes only in power," says Montaner. But Santería is about power, or more precisely what Yale Africanist Robert Farris Thompson calls that "flash of spirit" that can make things happen.

"Fidel is a master of the dialectical," adds Miami Santería priest Jorge Torres. "That is an attitude that might well be sympathetic to 'the religion.'"

Another Miami priest, Ernesto Pichardo, explains, "If Fidel were initiated, we would have more information about who within Santería's community performed the ceremony."

Still, the stories go on.

Miller, the scholar, found an old woman in Havana who knew Félix "El Negro" — the priest who reportedly performed the initiation in the early 1950s, long before Castro became *El Comandante*. Miller tried to corroborate the story — but Félix "El Negro" was dead.