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Santeria Healing: A Journey into the Afro-Cuban World of Divinities, Spirits, and Sorcery (review)

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United States. Surprisingly absent is the work of U.S. anthropologist Quetzil Castaneda, whose book, articles, and film about Pisté give insight into the mix of traditional and modern there. In contrast, Kunow makes extensive reference to a book on Chicano folk medicine in Los Angeles. This is especially puzzling, given that so few people from the Yucatan migrate to the U.S., and when they do, it is seldom to California. Moreover, the two areas have few plants in common.

The book gives only superficial treatment to the ideology of healers, plants, and the distribution of knowledge in Maya villages. For example, the author mentions that Maya people, like many people in Latin America, divide sicknesses into “hot” and “cold.” Surprisingly, she failed to learn that the plants are also divided between hot and cold and that curing involves matching the hot or cold characteristics of a given illness with those of the plants. Other couplets and complimentary relationships in Maya curing are subtler. For example, most curing plants have elder or younger sibling or complimentary plants. Because of this most cures include at least two and sometimes up to ten or fifteen plants used together. The “community of plants,” reflecting the community of people in a Maya village are used in daily baths as well as in curing. In this way Maya medicinal plants are preventative as well as curative and are used to build up immunities, health, and well-being in people whether sick or not.

Maya Medicine is a book that illustrates that Maya villagers have extensive knowledge of plants and their use in the dry forest of the Yucatán. The book is disappointing, though, for its superficial exploration of the ideology of health, illness, and curing in Yucatec Maya culture. It succeeds in providing extensive lists, cross references, and drawings of plants used by people in Pisté, Yucatán.

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Santería Healing: A Journey into the Afro-Cuban World of Divinities, Spirits, and Sorcery. By Johan Wedel. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. Pp. xiv, 209. Illustrations. Appendices. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. \$55.00 cloth.

Taking a fresh approach to its subject, Swedish anthropologist Johan Wedel contributes to the field of ethnomedicine in *Santería Healing*, giving a human face to Afro-Cuban religion by presenting a series of case studies of santería's real practitioners. The author announces his aim early on: “to develop an understanding of how santería healing works, how it is carried out, and how it is experienced” (p. 4). In developing his thesis, Wedel applies the qualitative methodology of the participant-observer, drawing on numerous interviews he carried out primarily in Havana and Matanzas during fifteen months' fieldwork from 1996 to 2001.

Wedel interweaves informants' stories with his own observations of initiations, divinations, and *curaciones*. His phenomenological approach succeeds in relating santería with the way people face the challenges of everyday life, particularly during

the post-Soviet “special period” in Cuba. Wedel amply demonstrates how, in this time of scarcity, santería has offered a cultural support system that also works as an alternative economy. With regard to the cures and therapies of santería, Wedel’s “sociality” thesis argues that healing taking place in the *ebbó* (spells with sacrifices) prescribed by *santeros/as* and *babalawos* (priests and diviners, respectively) is holistic—involving the mind and body in co-equal interaction—and it is social: that it involves the individual’s interaction with an entire faith community, a virtual family. The Preface announces this aspect of the study: “In santería, illness is often understood as originating in disturbed social relations and sorcery” (p. xiii). The process of making adjustments in the patient’s relations to others forms an integral part of the healing process, which is determined by the *ebbó* of sacrifice and other ritual acts, since the underlying causes for illness are identified, by the santero/a or babalawo, in the entire network of the patient’s familial and communal interrelations.

Chapter 1 presents cases of two santería devotees and their responses to healing processes. The historical background of santería and its role in Cuban society is given in Chapter 2, and a survey of Afro-Cuban myths, beliefs, arts and pharmacopeia is provided in Chapter 3. More extended treatment of myth is given in Chapter 4’s presentation of the Lucumí pantheon of orisha/saints and ceremonies, foregrounding especially the rituals of divination and initiation. Chapter 5, which takes a more comparatist view than the preceding chapters, explains what could be called the worldview of santería, encompassing the religion’s ontology, psychology and sociology, developing the implications of this worldview with regard to nature and the concepts of “reshaping the world” and “transforming the self.” Chapter 6 presents additional narrative accounts of santería curing; Chapter 7 addresses the negative criticisms that have been aimed at santería; Chapters 8 and a concluding chapter offer a summing-up of the book’s argument and implications.

The book adds its weight to a proliferation of works in English dedicated to the examination of Afro-Cuban religions. These contributions include George Brandon’s *Santería from Africa to the New World* (1993), Joseph Murphy’s *Working the Spirit* (1994), and my own *Afro-Cuban Religious Experience* (1996), not to mention the influential studies by Robert Farris Thompson, Mercedes Sandoval, Margarite Fernández-Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gébert. With its abundance of detail, Wedel’s book would best serve the interests of those already versed in the basics of the Lucumí religion: a non-practitioner of santería or non-specialist on the subject could find the coverage of particulars tedious. It is difficult moreover to judge the veracity of the accounts based on personal testimony. These reservations notwithstanding, the book does an admirable job of showing how santería constitutes not only a *system of belief*, but a *practice*, one whose efficacy poses a challenge to dominant paradigms of medical treatment and healthcare. In doing so, it also succeeds in fleshing out the abstract schema that have been used in previous attempts to characterize the Afro-Cuban religious experience.

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