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Unidad 3, Almanaque

Las religiones afrocaribeñas y el sincretismo

Cuban Santería: The Way of the Saints

Catholicism isn’t the only way that Cubans show their faith. Over half the population practices some form of Santería, an African religion brought to Cuba with the slave trade. Though since then it’s taken on a distinctly Cuban flavor. Hilda is the matriarch of Ravela town. She’s the unofficial problem solver. The one you go to if you need a change of luck… “Porque eso representa maleficio para la casa.” Or a bite to eat. Or a quiet place to meet a friend. “¡Casi todo el mundo quería hacer el amor anoche! ¡Un rato nada más, solo un momento!”

Hilda’s always working at least a dozen angles… “…Y aquí está algo para la cocina” - like how to get running water for the new bathroom fixtures she just put in… “Sí, que lo traiga acá.” If anyone can make it happen… “Por favor madre del Carmen. Ya.”

Hilda is a staunch Catholic and a high Santeria Priestess. “Y nosotros con esto limpiamos la casa para sacar la impureza de la casa. Todo lo malo. Con agua de tortuga. Te lo aconsejo.” She even has a secret room where sacrifices are prepared. She also uses it to hang laundry during the rainy season. And though Hilda believes in the healing powers of the Santería deities, she makes sure to take her Western medications.

Tonight, is Christmas Eve and she’s feeding over fifty guests. Her entire family pitches in to help [background chatter in Spanish]. But once they’re finally gone… Another group arrives for a completely different kind of celebration.

Until the early 90s, Cuba was officially atheist. Lately the government has loosened up and let Cubans worship more openly [music begins to play] with dancing and the occasional possession. Back in the 1600s, a million Africans were brought to Cuba to work the sugar plantations. Desperate to hang onto their religion, they disguised their gods as Catholic saints [music continues playing]. They still use the same ancient rhythm and African songs [singing and dancing continues]. If done correctly, a God descends to earth and possesses a Santería priestess. In this case, it’s Kubayende (music and singing grows louder).

Santeria isn’t just a religion; it’s a reflection of the Cuban personality. Born out of resistance and survival – and now a celebration.

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