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Unidad 3, Sucesos

Los primeros encuentros

Cuban Santeria: The Way of the Saints

Catholicism isn’t the only way that Cubans show their faith. Over half the population practices some form of Santeria, 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 or a bite to eat, or a quiet place to meet a friend.

(Hilda) Casi todo el mundo quería hacer el amor anoche (risas), un rato nada más, solo un momento (risas).

Hilda’s always working at least a dozen angles - like how to get running water for the new bathroom fixtures she just put in. If anyone can make it happen…

(Hilda) Sí, que lo traiga acá, por favor, María del Carmen, ya.

Hilda is a staunch Catholic and a high Santeria Priestess.

(Hilda) Y nosotros con esto limpiamos la casa para eliminar las impurezas 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 Santeria deities, she makes sure to take her Western medications. Tonight it is Christmas eve and she’s feeding over fifty guests. Her entire family pitches in to help. (Conversations in the back). 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 (cantos y música) 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. They still use the same ancient rhythm and African songs. If done correctly, a God descends to earth and possesses a Santeria priestess. In this case, it’s Kubayende (tambores y música de santería). 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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