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Santeros

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Santeros is the main output of the postdoctoral fellowship that I held in 2014 at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy. The objective of my project was to continue the research started during my Ph.D. in “History and Analysis of Musical Cultures” at the University of Rome ‘La Sapienza’ on the music of the sacred batá drums in the Afro-Cuban religion known as Santería or Regla de Ocha (Lutzu 2013). In this sense, *Santeros* is a film based on my three years of fieldwork in Havana, Cuba, focusing on the batá drums and the social role of music in Santería.

According to Mary Ann Clark, “Santaría and its sister religions are religions of practice rather than belief” (Clark 2007, 97). The richness of religious practices deeply experienced through the body by the practitioners, as well as that of rituals whose celebration calls for a great variety of objects (fetishes, colored fabrics, herbs, flowers, cakes, etc.) inspired me to privilege the audiovisual medium to present the visual richness of this research.

Instrumental music is a prominent presence in Santería rituals. It is no coincidence that some of the most important rituals take their name from the musical instrument played in them such as *tambor*, *violin*, *guiro*, or *cajon*. Practitioners attribute a different value to these instruments and greater prestige to the batá drums. The batá are considered sacred drums inside which the deity Aña lives. Several taboos are related to their use, only permitted to consecrated musicians known as *Omo Aña*, sons of Aña. During the different phases of the ritual known as *tambor* or *toque de santo*, the batá drums may play alone or accompany responsorial songs in which a solo voice (*awpon*) alternates with the choir made up of the people participating in the ritual. In the central phase of the ritual, most of them dance and clap their hands while singing. Drumming, singing, and dancing are activities that deeply involve the body in the Santería ritual: a collective effort required to evoke the descent of a deity (*oricha*) to the earth, represented by the achievement of a modified state of consciousness by one of the practitioners.

The documentary was shot during the months of April and October 2014. The first month I filmed alone, handling both the camera and the audio recorder, while in the second month I worked with a small crew consisting of two video operators, who helped me in the making of the more complex scenes (such as the public rituals).

Two firm beliefs guided my work as a filmmaker. The first is the awareness of the close connection between audiovisual media and sensory perception (MacDougall 2006). Persuaded by the idea that image and sound provide an alternative knowledge of reality different from that conveyed by a written text, I tried to capture images that transmit the deep sensory involvement experienced while participating in a Santería ritual. The second is that the camera captures not only the verbal content of the interviews but also the emotions of the interlocutors, especially if, as in this case, we

shared a high level of rapport with one another built up over a number of years.

From a methodological point of view, my choice to produce a documentary rather than a research article allowed me to practice a form of collaborative ethnography (Lassiter 2005) involving the protagonists in different phases of film production. The protagonists of the documentary, two of my main interlocutors during my fieldwork in Cuba, not only had the chance to view a pre-edited version of the documentary to discuss it and suggest possible changes, but they were also actively involved in the pre-production process, based on numerous meetings in which we identified the aspects of their musical life within Santería that deserved to be considered in the film.

The film has two main protagonists. The first is Yuliet, a spiritist and medium who has practiced Santería since she was a child, and who had set her two sons on the path of this religion. The second one is Alain, a talented musician who devoted his life to the *oricha* Aña, a necessary condition for playing the sacred batá drums during religious ceremonies. *Santeros* focuses on their lives, showing how they are involved in daily religious rituals and music, both of which are essential in facing the difficult conditions of their existence in a country full of contradictions.

The documentary begins with the protagonists engaged in two different rituals (0:06). In the second sequence, Alain and Yuliet briefly trace the history of their involvement in religion (3:23) and describe the pantheon of Santería and their relationship with the different orichas (5:46). This is followed by a sequence in which Alain recalls his training as a musician and outlines the figure of the *tamborero*. His memories alternate with scenes of rituals and a lesson to a young apprentice (12:36). In the following sequence (21:36), Yuliet presents her family (blood relatives and in-laws) and the history of their involvement with Santería, while her husband Lazaro recalls the beginning of their love story.

Although religious music is part of their daily lives, Yuliet and Alain also love other musical genres such as salsa and the so-called *musica romantica*, as the following sequence shows (27:13). In the next sequence (30:14), the most intimate of the film, the focus shifts again to Alain, who shows his deep faith in the power of the orichas by describing his path to becoming a *babalawo*, or son of Orula. After a brief sequence in which Yuliet consults a *babalawo* for divination, a phone call between the two protagonists starts the preparation of a toque de santo to be held at Yuliet's house (34:41). Alain tunes the drums (38:18), while Yuliet goes to the market and a shop selling religious articles to buy all that is needed (40:25). Alain and another *tamborero* carry out the required rituals to prepare the drums (43:33), while Yuliet has a conversation with an Obatala priest about how one feels on reaching the trance state (47:49). The final sequences show Yuliet preparing the altar at her home (51:41), the arrival of the musicians (54:56), and the beginning of the *toque de santo* (56:16).

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He is the scientific director of the *Encyclopedia of Sardinian Music* (L'Unione Sarda 2012) and co-editor of the book *Investigating Musical Performance: Theoretical Models and Intersections* (Routledge 2020). Since 2018 he is also scientific supervisor, together with Giovanni Giuriati and Simone Tarsitani, of "Eyes on Music: Projects on Visual Ethnomusicology," promoted by the Intercultural Institute of Comparative Music Studies (IISMC) of the Cini Foundation (Venice).

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