

# Latin Religion Mixes African Cultures with Catholic Ritual

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Religious News  
Service Correspondent

Miami (RNS) — Few Americans are aware of the growing cultural influence in their cities by the Yoruba tribe of Africa.

But a University of Florida professor whose specialty is studying the Yoruba people is preparing an exhibit of that connection, and a missionary who has worked among the Yorubas in Nigeria explained the connection at a Southern Baptist seminar.

The Yoruba connection is Santeria, the mixture of Catholicism and the native Yoruba religion that is common among many Cubans and other Latins. Dr. Robin Poyner, an art history professor, is preparing a "Thunder over Miami" exhibition featuring Nigerian art objects used in Yoruba religious worship side by side with those used in Santeria worship. It will be on display next fall at the University of Florida gallery.

The missionary is Valda Long, a native of Florida who has been a nurse in Nigeria since 1956. She spoke at an African seminar for the Women's Missionary Union of the Miami Baptist Association.

The practice of Santeria can be found in many cities in America where the Hispanic population has grown, particularly in the Northeast and

Southeast, where many Cubans have settled. The Yoruba elements of Santeria can be traced back to the tribe in the southwestern portion of Nigeria some 800 years ago.

Dr. Poyner, whose work has been sponsored by the university's Center for African Studies, says that some of the Yorubas came to the New World as part of the slave trade to Brazil and the Caribbean. But the Africans maintained elements of their culture, language and religion in their new homes, he said.

Modern Westerners often have mistaken that Yoruban religion and the related Santeria with voodoo "and dismissed it as superstition and black magic," Dr. Poyner said. "But Santeria and voodoo (common in Haiti) are systems of religion that have developed from very old traditional African religions and Catholicism."

The Yoruban religion was flexible enough for its adherents to adapt it with each move they made west and yet maintained the integrity of its central beliefs, according to the professor. "The resulting religion of Santeria also is marked by its flexibility and openness to new interpretations and innovations," he said.

The original Yoruba religion focuses on one high god and many deities between him and mankind, analogous to the Catholic hierarchy of

many saints with one supreme being, Dr. Poyner observed.

In the process of change, the Yoruba deities, called orisha in the original but oricha in Santeria, were identified with Catholic saints based on similarities between the two spirit forces, he said.

The professor said there are about 20 oricha-saint pairings in Santeria and one of the most popular is the linking of Chango, the Yoruba god of thunder and fire, and St. Barbara, who usually is shown in red and white, the colors of Chango.

Dr. Poyner said that Santeria was popular mostly among people of low economic status — particularly blacks — in Cuba but that since its transfer to Miami beginning in 1960, and particularly with the boat lifts of the 1980s, greater numbers of the middle class have begun to participate in it.

He insists that Santeria has played a role in making it possible for the Cuban refugees to cope with their new situation in this country and that the religion is an important link to their roots in the Caribbean and beyond to Brazil and Africa.

However, those roots are weak in today's Africa, notes Ms. Long. Most of the people in that country are Moslems, she said, and a great many others are pagans by Western standards. Animism is their

form of religion and that element is evident in Yoruba.

Nonetheless, a strong minority of the Nigerian people are Christians, mostly Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist, Church of God, Church of Christ or Presbyterian, Ms. Long said.

Most of the Christian work in the country is directed by nationals. For Baptists, that includes a number of schools — particularly high schools for girls, nursing schools, medical schools, and three hospitals in addition to hundreds of churches, clinics and nutrition centers.

Nigeria is organized politically on the American pattern, she said, with 19 states having their own governors and legislatures under a federal legislature and president.

Modernization is taking place rapidly, she said, with nine new universities, up to date transportation, and better housing, sanitation, nutrition and children's diseases still are major problems in the country, which has become the world's seventh largest oil producer.

Ms. Long, who is living in Ona while undergoing treatment for cancer, shared her information at an African seminar in preparation for the study in Baptist churches of missions in French-speaking West Africa.

# St. Nick Wants To Wish Mankind A Merry Christmas

Where will Santa Claus be on Christmas Eve Day? At the Red Cross Blood Center, 50 Prince St., donating blood.

"I donate blood each year just before Christmas to emphasize the need for holiday blood donors," Santa said. He will be arriving at the Blood Center at 9 a.m., on Thursday, Dec. 24. His donation will be special.

According to Red Cross sources, instead of giving whole blood, as in a regular donation, Santa will be giving a unit of platelets through a pheresis donation. Pheresis donors give only one specific blood component, such as platelets, white blood cells, or plasma. That way, much more of the needed component can be collected. Most pheresis donations are transfused to cancer patients.

The Red Cross holds a holiday blood drive campaign each year to remind people about the opportunity to donate blood. The theme for

this year's campaign, which started on Dec. 14 and will run through to Jan. 8, is "Tis the season to be giving, give blood."

During Christmas week, blood donors can give at the Red Cross Blood Center 9 a.m. to 8 p.m., Monday through Wednesday, and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., on Thursday, or at one of the scheduled blood drives in the 15-county region served by Rochester Regional Blood Services.

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## At Your Parish...

### St. John of Rochester

Mitzi Collins, Rochester folk singer and radio personality, performed at St. John of Rochester School recently for the children in grades five through eight. Her program included ballads, Erie Canal songs, play-party games, love songs, spirituals

and children's songs, and was designed to elicit student participation.

The entertainer's appearance was sponsored by St. John of Rochester Cultural Arts Committee of the Home School Association.

### St. Thomas More

Children in the second grade at St. Thomas More School recently experienced a hands-on demonstration of the use of the spinning wheel. Mrs. Pat Bishop led the class through the demonstration. The exercise was designed to

help the children become more aware of the effort involved in making clothing in a typical community during the early days of our country's growth, Sister Judith Whalen, principal, said.

### St. Anne's, Palmyra

Palmyra — A New Year's Eve dance has been advertised in the bulletin of St. Anne's Church here. The party opens at 9 p.m. in the Zion Parish

Center. Music will be provided by Bob Scott of WHAM. Tickets at \$15 per couple are available by calling 597-9236 or 597-2124.

### Cenacle 'Call'

Father David Mura, director of Teen Seminar and retreat programs, will join the Sisters of the Cenacle in leading a retreat for women parish workers Jan. 22-24. The program, called "The Call," was described by Carolyn Schulte, Cenacle

spokesperson, as an occasion to "ponder Who is calling, all through each one's life... To find in this renewed peace, renewed joy, renewed love." Reservations and further information are obtained by calling the Cenacle Ministry Office, (716) 271-8755.

### Rosary on the Air

The Family Rosary Network may be heard at 6:30 nightly over the following stations:  
WWG, Rochester (1500AM); WXXY,

Watkins Glen (104FM); WSFW, Seneca Falls (99FM and 1110AM); WOIV, Syracuse (105FM); WYRD, Syracuse (1540 AM), and WXRL, Buffalo (1300AM).

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