**Comparison of New Religious Movements: Rastafarianism & Santeria**

SOC151: Religion and Ideology / Prof. Lutz Kaelber

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April 2012

**Introduction**

Today in the media, the news, and even in educational settings, the word “cult” has been seen as something negative, scary, and foreign. In Lorne L. Dawson’s book *Comprehending Cults* he says “it is necessary to correct the image of exotic and dangerous ‘otherness’ that pervades the public perceptions of these new religions” (Dawson 2008: 5). He promotes the idea of calling them new religious movements, or NRMs, and acknowledges that they have legitimate religious history, core beliefs, practices, symbols, and organizational features. There are many NRMs practicing today, which tell us important things about religion, ideology, and society. In this paper I will explore the New Religious Movements of Rastafarianism and Santeria.

**Rastafarianism**

Rastafarianism has traditionally has involved mostly men, lower classes, blacks, and ex-Christians (“Rastafarianism” 2006). It is an acephalous movement, meaning it does not have a clearly defined leader and a loose structure. Meetings usually begin as informal gatherings and turn into religious services (“Rastafarianism” 2006). It began with inspiration from Marcus Garvey, who believed that since slavery, Europeans had spread Africans around the world making them unable to organize and keeping them oppressed. Garvey prophesized “Look to Africa, when a Black King shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is near” (Nicholas 1979: 14). In 1930, Prince Ras Tafari Makonnen was crowned as the Emperor of Ethiopia and the people of Jamaica took this as the fulfillment of Garvey’s prophecy, beginning to worship Haile Selassie as a god (“Rastafarianism” 2006). A charismatic leader is one who can use their power to “mobilize followers and to create within them a sense of mission” (Roberts 2012: 152). Marcus Garvey began as a charismatic leader and exemplary prophet, while the original focus of the movement was on him and Haile Selassie, however there are aspects of ethical prophecy because of the actual religious doctrines that have lasted.

When the movement first started in the 1930s, there were some differences between groups, however there were important similarities. The Rastafarian movement resisted colonial rule because “By the 1920s, Jamaica was a British colony with an entrenched color-caste system that dominated the social, economic, and political fabric of society” (White 2007: 682). The composition of the original groups included people of the lower class, politically passive and nonviolent, who were focused on meditation and prayer. Despite this, they faced violence from the police in Jamaica (“Rastafarianism” 2006). In 1966, Haile Selassie visited Jamaica and met with some of the early Rastafarian leaders. In 1968, Jamaican University lecturer Walter Rodney started a Black Power Movement, which influenced Rastafarianism and in which the Rastafarians played a large role politically (“Rastafarianism” 2006). Haile Selassie died in 1975, which caused a crisis in the movement. Throughout the 1970s, the Rastafarian image turned positive, showing them as an important cultural influence, especially in art and music (“Rastafarianism” 2006). Bob Marley became a worldwide symbol of their values and beliefs, while there was also a general migration of Jamaicans to the United States. Since the 1980s, Rastafarianism has become increasingly secular, women have taken on a larger role in the religion (moving away from the male-dominated patriarchal traditions) and there has continued to be popular Rastafarian music (“Rastafarianism” 2006).

Rastafarianism does use parts of the Holy Bible, however they believe some parts were changed by “Babylon,” or the white power structure in society (“Rastafarianism” 2006). Members also believe that the Jesus in the bible is referring to Haile Selassie “but the white slave masters and the missionaries present him as European in order to hide from their Black slaves their true dignity” (Barrett 1988: 106). Some of the religion’s core beliefs include the fact that Haile Selassie is the living god, that the black person is “the reincarnation of ancient Israel, who, at the hand of the white person, has been in exile in Jamaica,” that the white person is inferior to the black person, that repatriation to Africa is necessary, and that in the near future blacks will rule the world (Barrett 1988: 104). An important objective of the religion is to “revitalize African and natural styles and forms of life among black Jamaicans” (Nicholas 1979: 28). A large part of their beliefs is also the rejection of the systems of power in society that keep them in poverty and in unequal positions. Charles Reavis Price, in his article about black identity, considers Rastafarians to be “Antisystemic” because they reject economic, political, and social institutions they see as unjust and have developed their own identification and empowerment (2003: 9-10).

The Rastafarian religion has developed very unique practices, such as smoking ganja (or marijuana), eating a very specific diet, and wearing their hair in dreadlocks. They hold rituals such as Binghi, which is a dance held on special occasions throughout the year, bringing Rastafarians together from all over to camp in tents, dance at night, and “rest and reason” during the day. The use of marijuana is probably the most controversial aspect of Rastafarianism because it is illegal. Within the religion it is seen in a different way than most of society sees it, and “any political or financial reference to herb, they feel, is a perversion of its real role and use value” (Nicholas 1979: 51). The proper diet for Rastafarians is called “I-tal” food. This is food that never touches chemicals, is completely natural, and is served in the rawest form possible without the use of salts, preservatives, or condiments (“Rastafarianism” 2006). Growing the hair in dreadlocks is another important practice for Rastafarians. It is a symbol, which contrasts the straight blonde hair of white men. This goes along with the natural Rasta lifestyle and diet, and as form of police persecution, they would sometimes cut off the Rastafarians’ dreadlocks when they brought them in for questioning.

Important symbols in Rastafarianism include the idea of Babylon, “I and I,” Jah, the colors red, gold, and green, and the lion. Babylon is a symbol of white power that holds the black race down. They believe that in the past this power held them down through slavery and in the present through poverty, illiteracy, inequality, etc. (“Rastafarianism” 2006). The phrase “I and I” is often used in normal conversations and is “an expression to totalize the concept of oneness, the oneness of two persons. So God is within all of us and we’re one people in fact” (“Rastafarianism” 2006). Jah is the Rastafarian name for god, who is Haile Selassie I. Ethiopia where Selassie ruled, and Africa in general, are seen as heaven on Earth, while no afterlife or hell exists like in Christianity (“Rastafarianism” 2006). The religion’s colors, red, gold, and green, were taken from the Garvey movement. Red symbolizes the blood shed by martyrs in the movement, yellow symbolizes the wealth of the homeland, green stands for the vegetation and beauty in Ethiopia, and black is sometimes used to represent the color of Africans (“Rastafarianism 2006). Lastly, the lion is a symbol of Haile Selassie I, sometimes referred to as “the conquering Lion of Judah” (“Rastafarianism” 2006).

**Santeria**

Santeria originated in Cuba as a combination of the African Yoruba Religion and Catholicism when Africans slaves were imported to the Caribbean islands (“Santeria” 2006). Slaves were forced to follow the Catholic Church when they arrived in Cuba, which went against the beliefs of their native religions. They began to see parallels between their religion and Catholicism, and fused their orishas with corresponding saints (Lefever 1996: 319). They had to do this in secret because “under slavery in colonial Cuba, the practice of the religion was technically illegal, and accusations of ‘witchcraft’ could mean imprisonment or death” (Mason 2002: 9). Later there were additions from Spanish culture and Kardecian Spiritist traditions in France. Santeria arrived in the United States with Cuban immigrants starting in the 1940s (Mason 2002: 8).

There are no written doctrines or formal texts in Santeria, everything is passed on orally to initiates and “Santeria is an essentially secret society, where most knowledge is guarded by those who have it” (Mason 2002: 9). They believe in one supreme god named Olodumare or Olorun. Olodumare interacts with the world through emissaries called “orisha.” The orishas rule over every aspect of nature and human life and in traditional Yoruba religion the estimates of the number of orishas range from 400 to 1700. In Santeria, there is a cosmology of five different levels of power: Olodumare (the highest), then the orisha, human beings, human ancestors, and the lowest group including plants, animals, objects, etc. (“Santeria” 2006). There is a magical aspect of Santeria, but it is a natural magic rather than supernatural. It is said, “the most basic spell in Santeria will always require a plant, an herb, a stone, a flower, a fruit, or an animal” (“Santeria” 2006).

Santeria is still largely practiced in secret because of its history. Important practices of Santeria include sacrifices/offerings, initiations, divination, and “bembe.” The practice of sacrifice has been controversial in society, however animal sacrifice is usually only used in important situations such as death, sickness, or misfortune (“Santeria” 2006). In the United States in 1980, there was a raid of an apartment in the Bronx where there had already been several chickens and hamsters and a goat sacrificed and the ASPCA confiscated 18 chickens, 3 goats, and several hamsters still alive (González-Wippler 1994: 152). This caused much controversy and bad publicity for the religion, referring to “satanic cults” and “bizarre ritualistic activities” without a full understanding of the practice (González-Wippler 1994: 152).

The Santeria religion is based on an initiation system. Knowledge can be directly shared with initiates by their teachers, but usually “the initiate is encouraged to learn through careful observation of the leaders’ actions and through direct participation in the ceremonies and rites” (González-Wippler 1994: 164). When you are initiated, you receive religious symbols, such as necklaces, that will help you communicate with the orishas. Divination is also used to communicate with the gods. Divination can include manipulation of palm nuts, cowrie shells, coconuts, and other things. Another way to communicate with the orishas is “bembe,” or drum and dance festivals. Bembe honors the orishas by “playing specific drum rhythms, performing specific dance postures, and acting out in pantomime the behavior of the orishas” (Lefever 1996: 321).

The orishas, and the objects used to communicate with them, are important symbols of the Santeria religion. When initiated, there is a ceremony for receiving the five necklaces. The initiate must abstain from sexual activity for at least 24 hours prior to the ceremony and they bring with them a complete change of new white clothes. They take a cleansing bath and the necklaces are made from the appropriate colors for each orisha, then “baptized” with blood from sacrificed animals. This is known as “feeding the necklaces” (González-Wippler 1994: 165). Santeros, who are the priests of Santeria, say, “The necklaces are the banners of the saints, with which they protect their followers. Each necklace confers upon its wearers the blessing of the orisha it represents and helps him in those areas controlled by the orisha” (González-Wippler 1994: 165). After receiving the necklaces, you also “receive the warriors” which means sacred objects used to create a shrine for the four protective deities (Mason 2002: 6). In Michael Atwood Mason’s book *Living Santeria,* he discusses how he underwent a ritual initiation to become a Santeria priest himself (2002: 1). He says that the initiation is not an everyday occurrence but it creates a lasting relationship between person and orisha and it leads to a much greater commitment and interaction with the orishas (2002: 6).

In Santeria, the priests are “Santeros” and the high priest is the “Babalowo” (Lefever 1996: 321). The Santeros, and female Santeras, “are seen only as the mouthpieces of the orishas, or saints, and as the instructors in the mysteries of Santeria (González-Wippler 1994: 12). This means that the orishas are the intermediaries between people and god, and the Santeros are the intermediaries between people and the orishas. The Babalowo are all men; no women are allowed to be high priests, although this is changing today. The structure of Santeria is paradoxically “strongly hierarchical at the local level, yet largely acephalous at levels more inclusive than the local” (Brandon 2002: 152). The smaller unit in Cuban Santeria structure is the house, “casa,” or “ile.” There is “la casa pequeña” and “la casa grande” or the small house and big house (Brandon 2002: 152). Members are assigned “godparents” who are in charge of the small house, and devotees go to their godparents for the religious services they need. Then the big house includes the house of the priest and all the small houses that have descended from it (Brandon 2002: 152).

**Comparison**

Both Rastafarianism and Santeria are African-related Caribbean new religious movements. Both arose out of colonization and oppression, in Jamaica and Cuba, and have ties to slavery. Neither religion has one clearly defined, central leader but there are positions of power within smaller religious communities, especially in Santeria. Both religions have gender stratification, especially Rastafarianism, and women have historically been prohibited from certain roles. Both have caused controversies, although not as extreme as other violent religious movements such as Heavens Gate. The widespread use of marijuana in Rastafarianism is controversial, as well as some of their more radical beliefs, and the animal sacrifice in Santeria has caused negative reactions from outsiders. However, an important event to note is the Supreme Court’s decision to rule in favor of a Santeria church that was performing sacrifices as a protection of their religious beliefs. The god figures in each religion are different, with a real historical figure treated as god in Rastafarianism, and an all-powerful spiritual being in Santeria. Rastafarianism has also been involved more politically and publicly, while Santeria has been more private and secretive.

On the Internet and in the media, there is representation of Rastafarianism and some young people try to emulate their culture without adhering to all of their beliefs and practices. Many use the appearance of Rastafarians, wearing dreadlocks, their colors, smoking ganja, etc., but are not involved in the religion. Reggae music has become more popular also, representing Rastafarian symbols and beliefs. They believe that this has given them a bad name and worry that the actions of these people will be associated with them. There is information about their beliefs on the Internet but they do not actively recruit through their websites. It seems that they have more informal recruiting through current members and in other ways that reflect Dawson’s model of joining NRMs. There is now some information about Santeria in the media and on the Internet but most portray it as tribal or barbaric. People join Santeria in a similar way, through current members, because they are so secretive and not very well known. Both NRMs are closely connected to a certain culture, ancestry, background, and race/ethnicity. Rastafarianism and Santeria both have been seen negatively as cults from outsiders but both have unique histories, beliefs, practices, symbols, and organization that have attracted many followers.

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