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Santeria slowly sheds secretive shroud of yore

By Maya Kandel

Santeria, a mix of ancient African religion and Roman Catholicism with influences from the Caribbean and South America, is slowly coming into the open, after decades of forced secret practice.

It was long considered a cult and stigmatized as a black magic ritual involving spells and sticking pins into stuffed dolls.

"Santeros, people who practice Santeria, would never talk about it before," said Paul Bispo, a Santero who used to live in the South Bronx and works at the Caribbean Cultural Center in Manhattan. "In the Bronx, where Santeria is widespread, ceremonies were held secretly, because everyone feared being arrested."

Santeria derives from the Yoruba people's religion, which has millions of followers in Africa and the Americas. It arrived with slaves from what is now Nigeria.

Slaves in Brazil and the Caribbean were forced to become Catholics. Instead of abandoning their traditions, the slaves disguised their saints, called orishas, modeling them in the image of Catholic saints.

They would pretend to honor St. Barbara, while actually worshipping Chango, the orisha of thunder. Today, Catholic imagery prevails in Santeria and in the other forms of Yoruba religion, called Espiritismo in Puerto Rico, Vodoun in Haiti and Candomble in Brazil.

Santeros worship using large colorful candles, images and a huge variety of medicinal herbs with purifying as well as heal-

ing purposes. They are sold in botanicas, which began to multiply on the streets of the South Bronx and Spanish Harlem in the 1950s. There are now more than 30 of them in the South Bronx.

Today, the religion is said to have hundreds of thousands of followers from all backgrounds and includes a growing number of intellectuals. Most Santeros reside in New York, Miami and Los Angeles.

"In Africa, people just went outside for the ceremonies. Here in the Western world, we rent basements, or celebrate in private apartments," explained a babalawo, or Yoruba high priest, who spoke on condition his name would not be used.

Loose organization has always been one way for Santeros to resist persecution, from the times of slavery.

In 1993, the U.S. Supreme Court said animal sacrifices were protected by the Constitution's guarantee of religious freedom. Before that, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty To Animals—protesting sacrifices, usually of chickens—would have people arrested during Santeria ceremonies that marked special occasions such as marriage.

"The Catholics also stigmatized the religion, because they considered it rather as a witchcraft," said Bispo.

"But the major part of the religion is not the sacrifices, it's in the purifying and healing power of the herbs," he explained. "It makes it more than a religion, because people come for medicine, and priests are also doctors."