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Santeria and mental health : bridging the gap between the social work profession and Orisha

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**Santeria and Mental Health: Bridging the Gap between the Social Work profession
and Orisha**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2016

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Santeria and Mental health:
Bridging the Gap Between
the Social Work Profession
and Orisha

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was conducted with the purpose of exploring how Orisha priest and priestesses dealt with issues of mental health within their Iles and/or community. This study was made possible by the participation of seven priests and priestess, by conducting semi-open ended narrative interviews. The findings indicated that issues of mental health were present and dealt with in a number of ways by elders in the community. The results show that collaborative measure need to be supported between elders in the Santeria community and the social work profession, in order to establish culturally competent and therapeutic results to further clients in this marginalized community. Therefore, further research is needed, in order to increase the amount of limited information available to the social work profession.

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Maferefun, Olodumare! Maferefun my Orishas and my Egun.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how IyalOrishas (Elder Priestesses) and BabalOrishas Elder Priest) deal with matters of mental health within their Iles or spiritual houses. *Santeria* or the Way of the Saints has an over 500-year-old history within the Western Hemisphere. The *Santeria/Lucumi* practice is an African based spirituality from West Africa's Yoruba people in Nigeria. Today, one can find many books, lectures and other academic works about Santeria, its history, meaning and purpose. However, materials whether research or other written work about issues of mental health in this spiritual community has been very minimal and/or difficult to obtain. Long considered a closed community, Santeria has made its way to millions of people around the world who are of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Research in the area of Santeria (Traditional religions) is beginning to focus more on issues of mental health. Brazil, for example, focuses on Espiritismo and mental health - specifically on the types of treatment being used to further aid clients (Bragdon, 2013). Brazil currently has over a dozen Spiritist psychiatric hospitals, which were established in the early 20th Century. According to Bragdon and Azevedo (2013) these Spiritist hospitals were started by Spiritists and spiritist psychiatrists who have conducted extensive research. However there continues to be a barrier between merging the scientific with the "alternative" Spiritist work being done (Bragdon & Azevedo, 2013). Previous studies on the ways in which non-traditional religions deal with the mental health in their spiritual houses have not gained significant attention in the United States.

And, although these hospitals continue to operate in Brazil, their existence may be in jeopardy as a result of greater emphasis on more westernized mental health practices. However, there continues to be greater need for more research on the work that is being done with the spiritual and the psychiatric Brazil (Bragdon, 2011). There is greater number of non-traditional healing studies in Brazil that focuses on laying of the hands, complementing westernized medicine with spiritist psychiatry and the botanical uses of plants as a healing practice in addition to the faith-based aspects of nontraditional practices, such as Orisha practices (Bragdon & Azevedo, 2013).

The purpose of this current study is to gain a better understanding of how the United States Santeria communities deal with issues of mental health within the Santeria/ Way of the Saints Community. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews will be conducted with seven Elder Priests/ Babalocha and Priestesses/ Iyal/Ocha within the community to gather in-depth, narrative data about how mental health issues are taken care of within the Santeria Community and/or what mental health related issues can be referred to and/or collaborated with the social work community. The audience for this thesis will be comprised of social workers and other mental health professionals.

The findings of this study will hopefully inform the U.S. mental health community about the traditions and practices of Santeria. This information may enhance culturally competent services towards a spirituality that is not present in the mainstream of the mental health profession. There are many ways that the Santera/o community deals with issues of health concerns, mental health and other issues of everyday life. It may be very beneficial for the social work community to work with and have a better understanding of practices that are not currently viewed as solely scientific.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

This literature review begins with a brief history and a basic understanding of Santeria, its origins and its history in the western hemisphere going back to the transatlantic slave trade. The next major section focuses on the main deities in the Santeria religion and the importance of nature and plants. The chapter concludes with a review of the research that has been written about mental health and African based spiritual practices.

The following sections will focus specifically on the meaning and origins of Santeria, Orishas, plants, healing and nature and lastly mental health and healing in Afro-Descendant practices. There are some areas, such as syncretism and Espiritismo that will also be incorporated into the literature review, since these are very important components of Santeria or the ways in which the ancestors or Eggun continue to be a part of the spiritual ways of life of the community

Las Raices de La Regla de Ocha/ The Roots of the Way of the Saints

The *way of the saints or la regla de ocha* is originally an Afro-Cuban term of the Yoruba people that were enslaved mostly during the late 18th to the early 20th century from western Africa, specifically Nigeria. The *fundamentos* (foundation) or the rules of Yoruba spirituality were created and sustained by well-known IyaOrisha (priests) and BabaOrisha (priestesses), who made sure that the Yoruba based ways of life and spirituality continued to thrive so that the captured people had a way to cope during the horrors of enslavement.

During the trans-Atlantic enslavement trade, Yoruba people were one of the many ethnic groups scattered all over the Western Hemisphere. However, Orisha/Orixa or African based traditions thrived the most in Catholic based enslaved regions. Cuba and Brazil are two of the largest countries where Yoruba-based spiritual traditions continue to thrive.

Orisha

Overall, Yoruba based spirituality is a nature-based tradition that is based in one's environmental surroundings including individuals' and/or communities' daily way of life. *Santeria* or Yoruba based spirituality is a monotheistic spirituality, despite the inclusion and the importance of the Orisha. *Olodumare* is considered the one God of Yoruba based spirituality. *Orishas* are considered the spiritual emissaries of Oludumare on earth and each has a specific nature-based element. In Santeria, there are hundreds of Orishas in the Pantheon and each has a specific number, element, color(s), number, saint, and food. The following table includes specific Orishas (Vega 2001, Mason 1998, Murphy 1980)

Table 1 shows (Appendix E, page 57) a small number of the Orishas in the pantheon. These Orishas are very well known and the Iyalorishas and Babalorishas who survived the crossing of the Atlantic enslavement trade were able to pass on the knowledge of this Orishas to others. It is also important to include the ancestors, as being an important part of this African based spiritualites and the importance of also paying homage for their roles on a spiritual level for those who continue to be in the realm of the living.

Acts of Resistance

The traditions of Santeria/La Regla de Ocha was passed on by the BabalOrisha (Priest) and Iyal Orishas (Priestesses) who came over from western Africa, These elders were able to recreate los fundamentos (the foundation) of these African based traditions, by looking for similar elements from the land, such as plants for medicine and/or ceremonial rituals. For example, *Omierio* or *rogation* is a plant-based mixture that is put on the OriAde/Crown Head in order to cleanse the head of an individual (Brandon, 1991). Since, the koala nut was not indigenous to Cuba and Brazil, coconuts were used instead for the purposes of divination. Many traditions were lost due to enslavement. However, Babalorishas, Babalawos (divination priests) and IyalOrishas created new spiritual houses and/or spiritual families in the new country. Therefore, during a time of despair, displacement and human erasure, elders found ways to maintain their ways of life in a new place and a new part of the world. (Sandoval, 2007). One of these ways to sustain Santeria was syncretism.

Syncretism. Enslaved peoples in Cuba continued their spiritual way of life by overlaying the Catholic saints as a means to continue their traditions. A fusion or a *syncretism* was created; in order to keep Orisha based traditions alive. Syncretism was the response to the *Las Leyes de Indias* or the *Laws of the Indies*, created by the Spanish rulers as a means of instituting the inhumane treatment of the Indians who were indigenous to the western hemisphere, such as the Arawak and the Tainos, initially (britanica.com). These slave laws were specific to the Spanish colonies that declared African-based drumming or dancing illegal, except on certain holidays and in specific areas. Therefore, enslaved peoples found a way to continue their way of life by utilizing

the Catholic religion to re-create and maintain their own African based tradition in a new country. For example, the base of a Catholic saint statue was where the fundamentos or the fundamentals of an Orisha were placed and hidden from the eyes of slave masters. An Orisha was associated with a specific Catholic saint. For example, in Cuba the patron saint is La Caridad Del Cobre (Our Lady of Charity), also known as Oshun in Santeria. It is important to note that they are not one and the same. They are different in that Our Lady of Charity is specifically derived from Catholicism and Oshun is an Orisha. This particular saint served as a hiding place for Oshun, in order to keep this Orisha from disappearing (Murphy 1980). Even though drumming and dancing were illegal, enslaved peoples in Cuba and other Catholic-based colonies were able to hold these ceremonies during certain Catholic holidays or, if they were able, various *sociedades* (associations) and/or *cabildos* (councils) were created for the purpose of supporting African based community and traditions (Murphy, 1980).

Thus if we can look at Santeria through a social justice lens, we may be able to have a better understanding of how individuals in these African based traditions strived to persevere and rise above enslavement. Through a social justice lens, Santeria can be also understood, as a movement of resistance and human dignity. When laws like the Leyes de Indios (Laws of the Indies) included ordinances that stated drumming was not allowed or non-Catholic observances were not allowed, elders (Priest, Priestesses and Babalawos) created calendars that coincided with the same Catholic holidays those enslavement/plantation owners and the local catholic churches observed (Murphy 1980, Clarke 2001). Therefore, a duality was created in order to preserve African based traditions. What is considered syncretism may have branched out in to other versions of

spiritual practices. However the root of syncretism was not to join or to fuse two spiritual paths. Syncretism was an act of resistance, in order to continue the Orisha based practices in the western hemisphere.

Animal Sacrifice. Acts of resistance were not only seen during the period of slavery. On June 12, 1993 the U.S Supreme Court ruled that the City of Hialeah in Florida violated the religious freedom of practicing Santeros/as when the city prohibited animal sacrifice in 1987 (Journal of Church and State, 1993). Animal sacrifice is an important part of Santeria ceremony it is a way to actually feed both the Orisha and the people of the community. Animal sacrifice continues to be misunderstood to this day in the mainstream population (Awo Fátégbè 2012). Nevertheless, it was a BabalOrisha, Ernesto Pichardo, founder of the Lucumi Church Babalu Aye, took the case all the way to the Supreme Court (New York Times June, 12,1993). This court case was an act of resistance, since prior to the ruling many ceremonies were raided and desecrated by “authorities” that continued to misunderstand and erase a tradition that is over 500 years old. As a result of this act of resistance by an elder, *iles* (spiritual houses) across the country have been able to continue their practices in peace. Animal sacrifice is a practice that continues to create, recreate and sustain communities, individuals and the sacred knowledge that could have been lost, as a result of enslavement (Vega, 1995).

Today, in the 21st century, Yoruba based tradition is practiced all over the world. The migration of many Cubans to the United States to places like Miami and New York resulted in a continuation and expansion of the traditions of African based spirituality that has successfully adapted to the environmental and social changes in a new country.

Mental Health and African Traditional Spiritualities

Mental health as it relates to African traditional spiritualities has not been extensively researched in the United States (Viladrich, 2006). Viladrich (2006) investigated the needs of individuals who sought assistance at local botanicas. *Botanicas* are spiritual/healing spaces where individuals can obtain spiritual consults and assistance with creating spiritual cleansing baths or finding plants to use for medicinal purposes, such as teas for nerves, digestion or other physical or mental ailments. Botanica, which originates from the word “botany”, is the epi-center of most Orisha needs. As Santeria is a nature based tradition, botanicas would be the most appropriate place where the Orisha community obtains many varieties of plants, candles and other items that can be used on their altars or for a specific ritual and spiritual consults. Botanicas are also spaces where individuals can obtain spiritual consultations around issues with love, health, and other concerns (Murphy, 2010).

Plants, Rituals, Medicine and Espiritismo

Plants have not been extensively researched, in terms of the use and purposes, in connection to healing and ritual matters in the Santeria tradition. Most of the plants connected to Santeria are plants that are indigenous to the western hemisphere and were extensively researched by enslaved people in Cuba and other countries where African based spiritualities were practiced. People would come to BabalOrisha or IyalOrishas in order to obtain healing services since there were no modern medical services (Sandoval, 1977). Thus, medicinal plants were used for a variety of reasons, such as reproductive medicines to ease childbirth, induce labor or to induce termination of a pregnancy. Plants for medicinal purposes were also used for digestive issues, nerves, arthritis and many

other physical ailments. For mental health issues, such as depression or other mental health related concerns, head rogation or cleaning of the head was a practice that continues to be used to clear the mind and to cool the head or refresh the head. Plants found in the wild or even in urban areas growing in between the cracks of the pavement are considered to have more powerful Ache (energy or strength), compared to the plants found in stores or grown in gardens or farms (Brandon, 1991).

In Brazil spiritist psychiatrists are merging western-based therapeutic practices with African-based and spiritist traditions. One noted European author is Allan Kardec, whose work was very well received from the 1840's in France and as far as Latin America. Allan Kardec's work in Brazil, Cuba and Puerto Rico's was more widely read by the upper and middle class of these various countries in Latin America. Allan Kardec, whose real name was Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, wrote a total of 5 books, which were known as the Spiritist codification (Allan Kardec.com). Kardec's first book was a compilation of questions and answers that he had obtained during the early 1850's in spiritist sessions. These spiritist sessions resulted in information from good and evil, God, the purpose of spirits and their connections with the living. Kardec's second book specifically related to mediumship and it was more of a guide in the development of a medium. A *medium* is the main communicator between the living and the dead (Allankardec.com). In Santeria/Orisha mediumship is a way to connect with the ancestors, as a way of finding out what may be needed, in order to better the life of the living or to aid a spirit. Studies have been conducted by spiritist psychiatrists in relation to disassociation and spiritist practices (Moreira- Almeida & Neto, 2005). These results have shown that mediums or spiritists do not have issues with disassociation given that

during the medium's work there is always an awareness that remains which is not the case with individuals actually diagnosed with disassociation (Moreira-Almeida, 2005). Despite the extensive work that is being conducted in Brazil and the few articles being published, westernized medicine continues to have a very strong presence, which silences and dismisses the work of the most renowned spiritist psychiatrists. However, these spiritist practitioners continue to use Santeria/oriisha interventions that are not considered scientifically sound, despite the number of individuals that visit many spiritist's hospitals and center in Brazil (Bragdon, 2010). Most of the work around mental health and African based spirituality /spiritism emerged from Puerto Rico. Espiritism in Puerto Rico has been very prominent since the work of Allec Kardec (year) around Spiritism/Espiritismo does have African based origins, as it relates to ancestor worship. Mental health professionals in Puerto Rico with westernized training are able to work with clients with mental health concerns who are also working with Espiritistas/Medium for additional assistance (Berthold, 1989).

Summary

Overall, despite extensive research conducted by academics, anthropologists, IyalOrisha and BabalOrisha and Babalawos on the origins of Orisha spirituality and its growth in the western hemisphere, there continues to be a lack of information around the work that is being done by IyalOrisha and BabalOrisha around matters of mental health and other concerns of wellbeing within the Santeria/Orisha communities in the United States.. There also appears to be little to no work surrounding the connections that the clinical social work community are creating or have within the Santeria/Orisha

Community, in order to obtain a better understanding of the needs and wants of IyalOrishas and BabalOrishas and the spiritual work they are doing for their community.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the issues of mental health within the Santeria/ Way of the Saints is an African based spiritual practice that has lived on in the Western Hemisphere for over 500 years. Currently, many books, journal articles, documentaries and other research can be found on the history, the Orisha, the meaning and uses of herbs/plants, as it relates to this non-traditional spiritual practice within the western hemisphere and around the world. Nevertheless, there continues to be very little material around mental health issues and how the Santeria community deals with these matters. Therefore this study will focus on the following research question: how do Iyalorishas (priestesses) and Babalorishas (priests) deal with issues of mental health with in the Santeria community. In order to better understand and explore how elders with in the Santeria community deal with issues of mental health a qualitative, exploratory design was implemented by , conducting semi-structured interviews with seven Elder Priest and Priestesses. An interview guide comprised of pen-ended questions was best suited for the purposes of gathering in-depth, narrative responses. This type of study provided sufficient freedom and flexibility to fully observe and understand how elders with in the Santeria Community work around matters of mental health with in their communities and/or Iles (Rubin & Babbie 2013).

Sample

The sample was comprised of seven Elder Priest and Priestesses within the Santeria who ranged from 35-65 years of age and were initiated into the religion between 2- 30 years prior. Participants were recruited via a Facebook page called Orisha Space, utilizing a recruitment letter (Appendix A) that was also emailed to the participants. Participants also recommended other Elders from the Santeria community who would be suitable or interested in the study. Participants lived in Dallas, Fort Lauderdale, Chicago and New York City and all identified as Latino or People of Color. Out of the seven participants, six were male identified, and one was female identified. Four out of the seven participants were gay identified and the remaining three were straight identified. Two participants were also Babalawos and Espiritistas, in addition to being Orisha priests. Most of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes in length. One interview lasted for 2 hours rich history of the participant as a Babalorisha (Orisha Priest and Babalawo). The interviews took place via Skype or at various locations in New York City. Consent forms (Appendix B) were either emailed to the participants and returned via mail or signed at the time of the in-person interview.

Data Collection

Data collection officially began once the HSR Committee at Smith School approved this study for Social Work. Recruitment was initially conducted via Orisha Space a page on Facebook utilizing a recruitment letter and via contacts that were known to the writer, who were part of the Santeria Community. Semi-structured interviews, utilizing open-ended questions were conducted and recorded via digital recorder.

Interview guide. The interview guide consisted of 11 open-ended questions and some closed ended demographic questions (Appendix C). Prior to the interviews questions were selected with the assistance of members of this writer's Ile and there were also a number of consultations with professors at Smith. Several Orisha Elders were also consulted and were able to go over the interview questions with this writer. Suggestions were provided to this writer and Orisha Elders also shared the recruitment email to various practitioners in the Orisha community around the country. Some examples of the questions used were: What brought you to the way of the saints/Santeria? What kinds of mental health issues have you dealt with in the community?, and What are the meanings or values that a social worker wanting to respect the role of the Santeria need to keep in mind, in order to respect your work and your religious role? The questions were also provided to the participants prior to the interviews for their review, however they were also informed that some additional questions may be added or excluded depending on the information provided. However, other than the two BabalOrishas who are Espiritistas, the interview guide were the main questions used during the interviews. Lastly, the questions were actually pre-tested with other members in the Orisha community, who were able to provide more insight, encouragement and guidance to this writer

Confidentiality

The interaction will take the form of a semi-structured, open-ended interview either in-person or via Skype lasting for approximately 45-60 minutes after the participant signs the informed consent (Appendix C) and has had the opportunity to ask questions about their participation in the study. Participants were given a copy of the informed consent for their files and had until March 31, 2016 to withdraw from the

project. Participants were asked several open-ended interview questions, which can be found in Appendix C. The tapes and transcripts from the interviews will be kept strictly confidential. All information will be kept in a locked file and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password-protected file. I will be the only one with access to the audiotaped data. I will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify the participant. The data will be kept for at least three years according to Federal regulations. Data may be kept longer if still needed for research. After the three years, or whenever the data are no longer being used, all data will be destroyed.

Withdrawal Procedures

The decision to participate in this study was entirely up to the participant. They may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting their relationship with this writer or Smith College. Their decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which the participant is otherwise entitled. The participant has the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely at any point during the study. If the participant chooses to withdraw, the researcher will not use any of their information collected for this study. The participant will notify the researcher of their decision to withdraw by email or phone by 3/31/2016. After that date, their information will be part of the thesis.

Risks/Benefits

There are no reasonable, foreseeable (or expected) risks. Participants, who were concerned about being identified, as a priest in the religion due to their work in the church or other professional venue were provided with a copy of the consent form. All

participants were informed that they did not have to answer any questions or share any information they were uncomfortable with at any time before, during or after the interview was conducted, so long as it was before the deadline.

Ethics and Safeguards

Participants were digitally recorded during the interview process. This writer transcribes all digital recordings, since use of language may be in Spanish or in Yoruba and it would be easier for this writer to translate the information in to English.

Participants, who were concerned about being identified, as a priest in the religion due to their work in the church or other professional venue were provided with a copy of the consent form. All participants were informed that they did not have to answer any questions or share any information they were uncomfortable with at any time before, during or after the interview was conducted, so long as it was before he deadline.

“All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to Federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period.” In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. In addition, any data that identifies the participant will not be included in the final product or any drafts of the researcher’s thesis.

If it appears that the participants may need community resources to further aid in their health & wellness, this writer will provide resources that would be compatible with the participants needs.

Data Analysis

A content and theme analysis was conducted after all the data was collected and were later coded in to categories of themes and patterns that were compared to the interview questions to the participants. In addition, notes were taking during the interviews and during the coding process. Participant's responses were also gathered and categorized under each question asked and certain parts of the recorded interviews were also heard, in order to assist in the open coding. Similar responses or quotes from the participants were highlighted and included with the findings chapter.

Chapter IV

Findings

This chapter focuses on some of the most salient findings obtained from interviews conducted with all 7 participants. The interview questions were all answered and additional questions were also asked to cover other relevant aspects that the participants included in the answers. For example, some of the questions that will be covered in this chapter answer the questions: How the participants became involved with the way of the saints/Santeria? How is health connected with Santeria and How does community play a role in Santeria?. . The major sections will be broken down in the following manner: Family/Journey to Orisha, Well-being/magical thinking, Community, Social Work and the Orisha Community and Espiritismo.

Family/ Journey to Orisha

This section focuses on how family influenced the path to Orisha for all the participants, whether it was through music or rituals or symbols they saw growing up. The journey to Orisha focuses on how the participants finally decided to initiate in to this indigenous religion.

Family.All the participants shared how their families and the area where they grew up was a strong influence in their path to Orisha. For most of the participants, there were several generations of practitioners and Espiritistas in their family. However some participants shared that their gran parents would not share their practices. Some would

practice behind closed doors and others would be open about their practices, however it was not discussed with the participants.

One participant said:

More specifically, I grew up obsessed with Salsa music from New York and Caribbean from the 1960s and 70s, and since many of these artists were Orisha worshippers it is common to find references and entire Salsa songs dedicated to the Orishas (Celia Cruz, Tito Puente, Hector Lavoe, etc). When I was 16 I began to take interest in those references and where they came from, and that's how I first knew of Orisha's existence.

Another participant shared his grandmother's denial about Santeria:

There is definitely some denial in my Mom's side of the family. However there is definitely some involvement. My grandmother, she was married to my mother's stepfather, who was a southern Baptist preacher, so that may have played a part in to it. However she had this room in the basement that I was never allowed to go into. She also I remember growing up she had her boveda (altar for the ancestors) inside the house and once I asked her when I was little- Grandma, why do you have all those cups. She said "Oh porque por la noche tengo mucha sed) well, at night I get very thirst and) y it's easier to get up and grab the glass of water. She said that when I was a child. As I grew and then I started reading about this stuff again. I asked her again" Grandma, why do you have these glasses of water. She said " Ay mi'jo eso e' costumbre de tu abuelo (oh son, those were customs of your grandfather), because he was a preacher and that was one of the spiritual

things that he did and I continued it.” Yet, she told me when I was young it was a because she was thirsty. she forgot that she told me that when I was little.

Another participant shared some of his experiences growing up in Puerto Rico:

I think it’s a cultural thing, I grow up in Puerto Rico and I came to New York when I was older. I was already in my late 20’s when I came to New York. I think it’s a cultural thing; I grow up seeing all this kind of things. I don’t believe in my family there are too many people in the Orisha community, but my father was a spiritualist so I grow up seeing him, you know, like helping people, talking to people even though he married a woman that is very, very catholic. And she still is. I think growing up seeing him you know, talking about the spirits, talking about the spiritual...talking about that there is something else but what we see and what we can feel , it’s something like that...I think also brought me to the Santeria community. My neighbors were also like growing up...he was crowned Shango I believe so every year when he has his santo birthday. There were a lot of people at his house and music, and, you know, a lot of talking about the Santos of course we were never allowed to go, my mother didn’t want us to go. But I think I grow up seeing what Santeria was, what the santos means and what the Orishas are, and what the Orishas can do for you spiritually and it wasn’t until I came to New York when I started like talking to more people aware in this religion and were initiated in the religion and until I finally got crowned.

Role as an Elder (Priest/Babalawo/Priestess/Espiritista)

This section focuses on the specific roles participants believe they have with in the Santeria/Orisha Community. All participants shared where they are within their role as an Elder.

One participant answered:

You know, since I haven't being that long, I'm gonna be turned 4 year in Santo, in June. For me it's still a learning process, even though I have been in the religion for 8 years. It's like I got my collares like 5-6 years before I got crowned. I think it's still a learning process, because there is so a lot of things to learn, a lot of things to be aware of the rituals and the ceremonies, that has to be done in certain way. Yes, there are differences between houses but I think the basics are the basics and to me right now its just looking and learning how to do a ceremony. Right now something that I am doing is to try to learn how to read the shells, you know, the Willoku, which is very important. And it's fun because when I was Iyawo I bumped in to a person that it's crowned Shango for many years, and one of the things he told me was the only thing I can tell you is: "learn the shells, because the shells don't lie, people do". So I am learning all the different combinations, like the Oduns, which it's the combination of the numbers with the shells with the math. And it's very interesting. That was one of the things that brought me to the religion because my first children (shells) were incredibly accurate, it was like. It was like the shells knew me because it was talking about things that nobody knows about me. In my experience every time I do a child reading or go to a child reading or attend somebody else's child reading, it's

amazing how accurate the shells are, it's eerie. So that's my role right now mostly, and you know, like little by little I have to do that right now and I want to teach what I know already. And I gonna do what is called Auyubon, which is the second parent , the second part of the Auyubon, and I am learning all the process of what a Ayubon are supposed to do, that is my role right now

Another participant shared another aspect of their role:

Although I am both an Orisha priest and babalawo, I only perform work that is specific to babalawos. This is because in the Lucumí system, we believe that each category of priesthood and the ritual training that goes with each is so large, profound, and complicated that it is necessary to dedicate oneself to one of the two. Thus, any Lucumí Orisha priest that later becomes a babalawo focuses primarily on studying the Ifá divination system and the rituals and initiations specific to it. In the day to day of either a working olorisha or babalawo, this essentially means performing divination consultations and the offerings, cleansings, and/or spiritual-medicinal work that may be prescribed during a consultation. Whenever anyone comes to get a consultation our main goal is to find the root problem in that person's life at that very moment. So while some people might come in asking about a work issue, the person's ori will communicate that root of the person's problems is a family issue that is spilling over into work. Or someone may come with a health issue such as sudden insomnia, and it is our goal to find the root cause of that symptom, whether it is emotional, mental, or physiological. As people come to get repeated readings, it may come to light that the person needs to receive either introductory or advanced

levels of initiation, based on their individual circumstances. At that point it is our responsibility as elders to prepare and educate the initiate as to the specific responsibilities that come with a given level of initiation, and we are in charge of any post-initiation training that may be required. To priestly initiates, it is our role to oversee their proper training so that they are not conducting ceremonies that they have not been sufficiently prepared to carry out.

One of the only olorishas (Priestess) shared her experience:

I am an olorisha, Orisha priest, of Elegba in Regla de Ocha/Lucumí Orisha. I am also an apetebí, priestess/wife of Orula in Lucumí Ifá. In these roles, I am elder to aleyos, non-initiated practitioners, and other apetebí's and olorishas initiated since my initiations took place. At my point in spiritual training, I am still an early novice and my ritual capabilities include praying and singing ritual songs to the Orisha, caring for sacred and ritual materials and instruments, preparing ritual meals and food offering, and being present/assisting in a range of ritual initiations and ceremonies. I have not yet initiated anyone into the religion, thus I do not give consultations, divination, or ritual to other people. I still have a lot of work to do...

Community

This section covers the importance of community with in Santeria/Orisha practice. Having aids in the testimony and witnessing of other practitioners in terms of rituals and ceremonies. However, participants shared the pros and cons of community, during the time of the interview and responses were similar.

One participant shared:

Community is one of the main things that practitioners are missing when they search for Orisha spirituality. Many people come from family homes where they are not allowed to express their individuality or otherwise not emotionally supportive environments. In my case, I was separated from my extended family because I was an undocumented immigrant and could not leave the country. Today I have a large Orisha family that includes my wife, my godparents and godsiblings, as well as my Ifá godchildren, and that has given me the alternative kinship and support networks that many geographically displaced people lose upon leaving their places of origin.

Another participant who is also an Espiritista shared his experience around community, while in Cuba;

I talked about the 21 diviciones experiences, as far as community. But I did not touch upon the Lucumi aspect and how that plays a part in peoples lives. I was initiated in Cuba en La Havana. I made a trip from Chicago. Those two different experiences from the Lucumi community in La Havana versus the Lucumi community in Chicago. You had mentioned cabildos and asociaciones. All the big groups and stuff. In Cuba you still see all that like the cabildos and asociaciones. You see how the Lucumi community is so tight and so close knit People work the Ocha ceremonies for almost nothing. They all walk away on having sacrificed, prayed together, spent time together and they al walk away with a little bit of meat from all of those animals that were sacrificed through their hard

work. I think that is important, its kind of sad, cause I have worked Ocha in Chicago. Where a lot of the Santeros take out the Achés from the animals they need, however a lot of the other animals don't necessarily get sectioned. So, you know that meat goes to waste because it is a freaking shame. I don't see people interested in the commercializing happening and there is a lot of gossiping happening in Chicago. Not to say that gossip does not happen in Cuba either. But a lot gossip in Chicago and a lot of Iles tend not to work together. They tend to kind of do their own little things in there own little clues, unless it was an emergency situation. I experienced the county in Cuba and I love it I love throwing ceremonies out there and their faith is so strong

Health

This section focus on health and the importance of self care with in Santeria and how it's interwoven in al of the rituals and ceremonies and also connected with the Orishas. Participants shared their person experiences in the area of health and community experiences.

One participant shared:

Health is one of the primary goals toward which the religion is practiced. Ifa-Orisha conceptualizes health holistically in the sense that ritual practice and divination address a range of health-related complaints, from personal relationships to specific medical decisions, because health connects through mind, body, and spirit. The Orisha work, literally and figuratively, at each of the corners

of health. In my initiation to Eleggua, the first and most important thing prayed for in ceremonies was related to health. Each of the elder olorishas who witnessed my ceremony personally wished me health through my spiritual and ritual practice with the Orisha. Another example is Babalú Ayé, who is the orisha of illness and bodily suffering. Babalu Aye, referred to also as San Lazaro, was a large part of my initiation ceremony, and much of the advice and divination that was performed for me spoke about the many health trials and vulnerabilities that lay ahead of me, many of them genetic, or “de la sangre,” that San Lazaro and the other orisha would be able to help me with over time. I reference my personal ceremony because I have learned that each individual’s own ritual ceremonies serve as that person’s knowledge of the religion and its health applications. It is important to read and study, but participating in, doing, and experiencing ritual, divination and ceremony are the most accurate and appropriate ways to gain knowledge of the health...

Another participant shared:

The most obvious connection between African Diaspora and Afroamerindian religions and health practices is that fact that these systems have been used as viable and effective holistic and naturopathic healing methods for centuries all throughout the Americas, including the U.S.

Mental Health

Mental health was another salient theme in the interviews and the main thesis question. Participants were in agreeance that individuals come in to Santeria/Orisha, in order to heal and may also come to the practice, as a result of anxiety or other trauma they experienced.

One participant shared:

I didn't know how to deal with my Godfather pass away because again I felt alone, even today some days I feel alone, you know, It's like in a way... its like when a biological parent dies, we deal with the feeling of emptiness, and it's how I felt when my Godfather passed away and I know for a fact speaking with other priest and priestesses they also go through depression or if they are diagnosed or undiagnosed on other mental health conditions they don't get treatment for it again, because they feel that the Orisha will take care of everything, you know, and you have to take care of yourself and not put too much dependence on this but I wish there was that. I wish there were more, more community...

Another participant shares his experience with community obtaining a spiritual consultation:

Definitely, there are some people that come to us with health issues and, I am not talking about simple stuff, I mean, really serious stuff, and we have to tell them, you know we are not doctors. I cannot tell them "you gonna be fine or you gonna be cured, or this is what you should do to in order to get better". We tend to the

emotional and spiritual side; I have to tell people like these are things you have to go to the doctor to check. Like for example, people start talking like ohh I am feeling this way and I am having this health problem or this health issue. The first thing I tell them is have you been to the doctor, because you need to know. Because I cannot tell to people like this is what you have, or your symptoms are, or you have this kind of illness, I cannot do that because I am not a doctor. So if they said they haven't go to the doctor, I say you should go to the doctor right away because you have to check this with somebody who knows what are they talking about. If they had said, they have been to the doctor and they can't find anything, then I start looking to maybe there is something that is triggering this or maybe is like something in the brain, like, that is not a real thing.

The Olorisha shared:

Our community is like any other and we deal with the range of people's experiences, capacities, and illnesses. Spiritual practice is often where people unite in times of need and in times of crisis. Most often, we discuss issues of depression, anxiety, stress, etc. but sometimes our elders have dealt with a range of more serious mental illnesses, like autism, schizophrenia, and PTSD. The Orisha speak to mental health issues in many ways, through divination and Odu (Lucumi and Yorùbá knowledge corpus), patakis (Orisha story/oral history), and through the major and minor initiations. They warn us of possible mental health susceptibilities, the way that in my initiation one of the health warnings I received was of Nervios (nerves) and locura (craziness). I can't let my life get too stressful

and I can't put myself in relationships that hurt me because my mental health will suffer in these ways. It is validating to have heard this in my initiation because I knew that I had struggled with nervios and even locura, even though I had never been diagnosed with anything like that through my western mental health care. I have advised friends seeking healing for issues like grief, insomnia, depression, and interpersonal concerns about the possibilities for healing offered by the Orisha and the ancestors.

Referring to Practitioners Outside of the Community

This section focuses on the ways elders refer clients or practitioners for further assistance outside of the community. All participants shared that certain issues are not covered well by service providers, however in most cases individuals need to see someone outside of an elder's expertise. One of the participants mentioned social workers doing outreach at the local botanicas and aiding people with food stamp, and providing resources for more holistic eating and wellbeing. While another discussed social workers incorporating some of the Ita(life goals) a practitioners may need to meet, as apart of the treatment plan for better therapeutic results.

One participant shared:

Many health issues get referred out of the community as well as many spiritual issues. Health issues are often referred to western doctors/clinicians, though the orisha give advice as to medical decision-making, procedures, dates, doctors, etc. Spiritual issues may get referred to another type of divination, like tarot or

astrology, a practitioner may be referred to Palo, Spiritismo, or other traditions.

Spiritual issues that get referred out often have to do with ancestors

One of the Babalawos explained:

Referring people to medical doctors and even therapists is something that we do quite often. The divination corpus of Ifá has many signs that talk about very specific medical health issues and we always refer people to the specific kind of doctor necessary when something like for example blood health, bone health, or reproductive health comes up in a reading. Yet our referral to a medical doctor does not mean that we stop working with the person, and we can continue provide additional support in the other health areas not covered by Western health professionals. Another example is the case where a person may be told in a reading that they need to work through a profound trauma that requires the intervention of a clinically-trained mental health professional—in addition to continued spiritual/emotional/ancestral work. In that case, the person could come back with information on therapists X, Y, and Z in order to ask their own ori (with the help of the diviner) as to which therapist will provide the best long term results. So again, while we often refer people to mental and biomedical health specialists, we continue to support the patient in other ways and do not simply hand off cases completely.

A Message to Social Workers

In this section elders send out a clear and specific message to social work about Santeria/Orisha and how to appropriately provide services and connect with the community.

One participant expressed:

Santeria is a coherent, holistic, and comprehensive knowledge system and health technology. It is an important avenue for empowering and healing all people, but especially people of color. Santeria offers mental health care in many ways, for example through divination, ritual, personal/spiritual relationships, and community. These practices do not entail superstition, stupidity, or evil. The practices of Santeria require knowledge, discipline, and community from its adherents and both the system and its practitioners deserve respect and equity in the context of mainstream health care.

A Babalawo in the study stated:

I would like for social work professionals to know that if they fail to fully respect a person due to their involvement in Orisha religion, that also constitutes a form of racism (specifically anti-Black and Afro-Latino racism), even if they are not themselves aware of it. Because of the histories of racism and slavery within which African Diaspora religions developed, these systems were purposely made to represent the epitome of pathology, irrationality, and insanity. The notion that a complex system of religio-spiritual health and healing practices could never

possibly be created by individuals who were seen to be less than human has had a long life. Just as slaveholders discredited the ability for slaves to possess complex religion in the past, popular culture and sensationalist journalism reifies these stereotypes to this day. Social workers and medical professionals are not immune to these negative images of “Santería” and “Voodoo” that they are exposed to in popular culture throughout their lives, and come to either consciously or unconsciously look down upon African Diaspora and Afroamerindian spiritual health practices as “superstition” at best and pathology at worst. Uncritically accepting these popular stereotypes toward these religions and treating the people who practice them with less respect (regardless of their race or the race of the social worker) is in itself a form of racism.

Another BabalOrisha replied:

I think definitely there should be more education in the social work field, because these are individuals...I think people now that when people go to medical facilities there are social workers and a lot of times ,doctors, now they are very quick with their appointments. You are probably in like ten minutes, they just ask you a couple of questions about your health, they are not really looking at you; they type your information. There is not even time to discuss any type of social issue, or a better way to taking care of yourself, if the issue is about the medication probably, so having a social worker that is educated specifically in Santeria religion it's the key because there is a reason why someone isn't doing some therapy that the doctor gave them. Because, Obatala, for example, said I

can't do it, and having a social worker that is knowledgeable would probably really be a huge help for this individual to continue taking care of himself . So I think it's great specifically you as individual that becoming a social worker in the Orisha community to be able to assist people on the community. Especially with the mental health issues that are out there. That's all

Summary

The findings in this study reflect the personal and communal way that elders continue the practice of Santeria/Orisha with in the United States. There findings were very rich and covered many areas around health, mental health, family and the need for the social work profession to fully recognize, respect and value the many practioners who may be in need or seeking assisting through a westernized practice. Most of the practitioners, if not a huge number of practitioners are of color and therefore, systemic issues, such as poverty, lack of medical care or poor medical are some of the issues that most people of color face and are therefore further marginalized by mainstream providers. Therefore, the importance of Santeria communities going to botanicas or to their elders for support that is not only so ritual, however medical and mental matters, as well. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that social work professional have a better understanding of Santeria and the specific needs of the community with out stereotyping dismantling or not recognizing the strong spiritual connections practitioners have with in Santeria/Orisha practices.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory study is to further discuss how Elders within the Orisha community deal with issues of mental health within their Iles and community. The Elders who participated in this study were able to share their specific experiences with members of their Iles and Orisha practitioners in their community, who came for spiritual consultation, healing and assistance in different areas of their lives. In addition, elders were provided an opportunity to further discuss their roles, the meaning of Orisha and the importance of health and community in Orisha practice. Equally as important, the Elders in this study were able to share their concerns with the social work profession when connecting other practitioners or members of the Orisha community. However the literature was very limited, in terms of written materials around issues of Santeria/Orisha traditions and collaborations with the social work profession. As a result, the following section will take a different turn from the traditional aspect of comparing and contrasting the findings with the literature review.

Mental Health and the Orisha/Santeria community

Complementary and alternative medicine or traditional (indigenous) medicine has been an effective resource utilized within the Orisha community and other traditional/indigenous cultures for hundreds of years. (who.int) Elders within the Orisha Community, who have experience in a number of areas, such as holistic medicine (specifically for bablawos), divination, espiritismo and spiritual counseling have been assisting in the healing of many practitioners and members of the Orisha community. Herbs, baths, rituals and/or social gatherings can be a part of the supportive and healing

steps individuals take, in order to have a healthy mind, body, and spiritual balance. (Gomez-Beloz, 2007) However, there is a large disconnect between the social work profession and the Orisha community, in terms of culturally appropriate mental health practices that also complement the work Elders are doing with members of the Orisha community.

During the interview process, Elders were asked how they make referrals to social work professionals when a practitioner or member needs specific mental health services outside of the community. All 7 expressed their concerns about how social work and/or mental health professionals have attempted to steer clients away from practicing Orisha traditions. For example, an Elder stated that one of his God Children was having trouble adjusting to having all her hair cut off, as a process of becoming an Iyawo (a newly initiated priestess), as part of their rebirth. During the interview the Elder stated that the clinician in this particular incident suggested the practitioner set aside her spiritual practice and focus on other matters, such as her education. The Elder particularly noted how the clinician did not attempt to gather information about how the Orishas praised and encouraged the Iyawo by providing positive affirmations or how her spiritual practice was also part of her support system.

Therefore, a connection between the clinicians and the elders should be established, in order to better assist the client/practitioner. During the course of the interviews there were additional concerns raised around Elders also being depressed themselves. However most depended upon their Orisha to make things better or would not disclose their spiritual affiliation. This admission about Elders, who do healing work and were experiencing depression, burn out, and/or (secondary) trauma either by working

with their clients or with their own personal matters was of particular concern . As such, this writer questioned how the social work profession can further assist elders, who are also healers?

Overall, lack of knowledge about the Orisha Community within the social work profession serves to further marginalize a community that is already very far from the mainstream. Therefore, the importance of building a bridge between Elders and the Social work profession is paramount, in order to appropriately assist clients' to live a healthier and balanced life. Complementary and alternative medicine have been quite effective with the Orisha Community, specifically when access to westernized medicine is not accessible to many people or when botanicas have been a source of affordable healing and supportive community for many practitioners and Aleyos (non-initiates). (Funlayo, et.al, 2012)

Implications for Social Work Practice

Elders. Elders who are healers, scholars, activist, and leaders in the Iles and community are the perfect advocates to aid in bridging the gap between Orisha/ Santeria and the social work profession. Elders come with an extensive knowledge about Orisa and may have a better understanding of the spiritually and culturally specific concerns that practitioners and Alyeos (non-initiate) in the community who seek their various services may need beyond the spiritual. Many Elders are also renowned musicians and dancers with in the Santeria/community, who called to perform a numerous ceremonies, can be of further assistance in providing music and/or dance to further assist in the therapeutic needs of an aleyo and/or practitioner. Elders are a necessary and

complementary addition in creating culturally and spiritually understanding on better serving the Orisha/Santeria community.

Social Work Practitioners who are also practitioners and/or aleyos in the Orisha/Santeria community. It is critical to strike the perfect balance in our westernized teachings and meeting the specific requirements of the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics. In this writer's experience, this has not been an easy balance since there aren't many written guides that would aid us in meeting the needs of a community that is not part of the mainstream. However, this situation also speaks to the reality of institutional oppression and possibly the internalized oppression that many social work practitioners, who also practice Orisha/Santeria traditions, deal with on a daily basis. Nevertheless, like the very Elders in our Orisha/Santeria community, we are in a perfect position to advocate for those changes that must be made in order for the Orisha/Santeria community to move toward an improved body, mind, spirit. Elders shared their experiences in observing and knowing practitioners and aleyos, who are dealing with issues of depression, trauma and other mind and body concerns that also have physical consequences. For example, Elders have recognized that practitioners and aleyos will come to them first with ailments that would need the attention of doctor and/or a social worker, in addition to providing the assistance Elders are able to provide with in their area of expertise. As a result, Santeria social work practitioners are better able to further assist practitioners and aleyos to be able to receive therapeutic assistance with out harming the client by dismissing their spiritual practice and possibly further connecting with their Elder on ways to build a better treatment plan. Cultural and

spiritually competent trainings for the social work professionals and further research is greatly needed and highly encouraged.

Social Work Practitioners who are not familiar with the Orisha/Santeria community. The Code of Ethics 1.05 on Cultural Competence states:

(c) Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability (NASW, p.9).

Therefore, non-Santeria social workers may benefit by reading this study on the basics of Santeria/Orisha spirituality as it would greatly aid in assisting and encouraging practitioners and aleyos to bring their full spiritual selves with their therapeutic sessions. There is plenty of information, such as articles, books and documentaries about Santeria/Orisha spirituality. By initially asking a client about their spirituality would also greatly aid in providing clients with the culturally competent and appropriate assistance they may need. For example, an Elder and Espiritista recalled, “An Iyawo receives an Ita (book of life goals they must complete) when they are first initiated. Usually most Iyawos may not think it should be shared, however with their Godparent’s counsel, their may be certain things that can be shared during a therapy session. This information may further aid the Iyawo and/or elder seeking assistance to focus on meeting some of those goals with in their Ita and it may aid them in possibly understanding some issues that may affect their own lives. For example, an Iyawo or Elder may have been told within their initial initiation to be mindful of nervios (nerves/anxiety). Therefore by aiding them with

their Ita during a therapy session they may be able to assist them on how to better manage their own nervios or that it may run in the family. This is but a small example of ways that the social work professions can aid the Orisha/Santeria community. In addition, to creating ways for practitioners to feel welcomed to obtain mental health services, it would be essential to also assist in creating culturally competent training on further assisting communities who practice indigenous spiritualities.

Limitations, Strengths and Bias

Limitations. One of the main limitations was the difficulty in obtaining a larger sample of elders to participate in the study. This was due to a number of reasons that included: 1) This writer over estimated the community's willingness to participate in the study. Mental health is not an easy matter to discuss or disclose and the Orisha community continues to be a very closed community, even to those who are practitioners and scholars within the community 2) Despite scholars like Mercedes C. Sandoval, who has written about mental health within the Santeria community as far back as the late 1970's and most recently published a book on Orishas as a worldview, more research needs to be conducted, in addition to the work Sandoval has presented to the academic community. 3) Santeria/the way of the saints is very recognized, as connected to the Lucumi (Afro-Cuban) tradition, however, this writer has learned that Orisha spirituality or traditions is the preferred term to be used, instead of Santeria. As a result, this writer utilized both terms, throughout this thesis.

Strengths. There are a number of strengths in this study. The first has to do with the Elders who participated in the study. All the participants were very open and encouraging about this study and recognized its importance to both the Santeria and

social work communities. Since the time that this writer has worked on this study, additional attention and research has emerged. Practitioner/scholars have been meeting at Harvard and other venues to present similar work around healing and discussing the importance of connecting Orisha spirituality with art, health and other important issues. This is highly encouraging and it appears that more work will be created due to the collaboration that are occurring with Elders, who are also scholars and are healers and advocates with in the Orisha/Santeria community.

Bias. Initially, there were some concerns as to where this writer would seek advice and /or suggestions on how to best proceed with this study. Growing up, I understood that there were matters that were only for the home and matters that were for the public. For example, my aunt was an espiritista in the 21 divisiones. My aunt would mount Anaisa (Lua/deity) and would provide spiritual consultation. As a child, I would accompany my mother to the local botanica to find the necessary ingredients for a spiritual bath or watch while a bowl of fruit and fresh flowers was prepared for those who have passed away. These were rituals that were never discussed outside of the home. As a small child, I knew that in the outside world these practices would not be understood or received very well by the mainstream public. As a result, I am aware that internalized oppressions were at work due to the history of systemic racism/oppressions against indigenous spiritualities and against people of color.

Nevertheless, as a social worker I consistently worked on ways to provide much needed information to the social work profession, which would hopefully aid Orisha/Santeria communities in many ways while at the same time, respecting and valuing the spiritual practices that have only been preserved through silence. Thus this

conflict was one where I worked with Elders in the community as an advisor, in order to ensure a level of balance that is usually hard to achieve under the circumstances.

However, as one elder shared with me, “Follow your heart and know you will write, only what is needed to be written. Connect with your Orishas; Egun (ancestors) and your elders and things will go, as they should.”

Recommendations for Future Research

It is this writer’s hope that more work around Orisha/Santeria and well-being with in the social work profession can continue to grow and provide further insight and assistance to the Orisha/Santeria community. The long-term goal for this writer is to provide [w] holistic therapy for individuals in the Orisha/Santeria and other communities who practice indigenous spiritualities, as well. This would also include providing cultural and social diversity around Orisha/Santeria spirituality. In addition to obtaining ample grants and other academic support, it is the dream of this writer to obtain her PhD and seek opportunities to do further research that would include Elder’s within the Orisha community in and outside of the U.S. Further work in this area will provide the social work profession and other social services communities to better serve those in the margins and allow these communities to seek treatment with out being dismissed or having to erase their spiritual practice in the process of seeking care.

Summary

This exploratory study provided a platform, where elders expressed interest around building a culturally appropriate bridge between the Orisha community and the social work profession. Responses to the questions on referring clients and recognizing the importance of respecting Elders and Orisha/Santeria spirituality were answered with

very specific requests and recommendation of the need for social work professionals to be open-minded to Orisha/Santeria spirituality, in order to reduce further harm to the community. Despite the thesis question, How do BabalOrishas and Iyal Orishas deal with issues of mental health with in their iles and communities? being answered, there are still more questions to be asked, such as how can Orisha Elders and Social Workers make a collaborative effort to provide culturally appropriate mental health services to the Orisha Community? Further research needs to be conducted, in order to have a better understanding of the most pressing issues that elders in the study reported.

Overall, continuing the work on bridge building between the Orisha community and the social work profession would greatly aid in creating culturally appropriate client centered services, specifically geared towards the Orisha/Santeria community. Thus building a stronger connection with this marginalized community opens the door to learning more and adding to the growing research in the area of Orisha/Santeria spirituality and mental health. This is a community with a long history of trauma and stigma and much work is needed to be done and welcomed with a strong consideration to cultural appropriateness and understanding of difference, yet beauty in a spiritual tradition that has stood against the many attempts of erasure, yet continues to persevere and stand strong, despite 500 years of marginalization.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form



School for social work

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Smith College SSW • Northampton, MA**

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**Title of Study: Mental Health and the Santeria Community
Investigator(s): Penelope Williams [REDACTED]**

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Introduction

You are being asked to be in a research study, the purpose of which is to have a better understanding of mental health within the Santeria/ Way of the Saints Community. I am reaching out to Elder Priests and Priestesses within the community for the purpose of exploring how mental health issues are handled within the Santeria Community and/or what mental health related issues are referred to and complement with the social work community. You are specifically invited to participate in the study because of your expertise as a Priest or Priestess with the Santeria/Way of the Saints Community and for having you own Ile.

I ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study is to have a better understanding of the issues of mental health and how the priests and priestesses within the Santeria/ Way of the Saints Community handle these. I am reaching out to Elder Priests and Priestesses within the community for the purpose of sharing how mental health issues are taken care of within the Santeria Community and/or what mental health related issues can be referred to and complement with the social work community. The research question for this study is: How do Priest and/or Priestesses deal with issues of Mental within the Santeria community].

This study is being conducted as a thesis requirement for my master's in social work (MSW) degree. Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

Description of the Study Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: Share your experience and knowledge as an elder within the Santeria community about matters relating to mental health and how they are handled or possible referred outside the community. The interview will be an hour in length and will be conducted either in person or via Skype and audio recorded.

Risks/Discomforts of being in this Study

There are no reasonable, foreseeable (or expected) risks.

Benefits of Being in the Study

The benefits of participation are the opportunity for you to share your knowledge and insights about the Santeria Community, as it relates to mental health.

Confidentiality

The tapes and transcripts from the interviews will be kept strictly confidential. All information will be kept in a locked file and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password-protected file. I will be the only one with access to the audio-taped data. I will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you. The data will be kept for at least three years according to Federal regulations. Data may be kept longer if still needed for research. After the three years, or whenever the data are no longer being used, all data will be destroyed.

Payments

You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting your relationship with me or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely at any point during the study. If you choose to withdraw, the researcher will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify the researcher of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by 3/31/2016. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, *Penelope Williams*, at [REDACTED] or by telephone at [REDACTED]. If you like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you. If you have any other concerns about your rights

as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at [REDACTED]

Consent

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study researcher.

.....
Name of Participant (print):

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____
Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

.....
[If using audio or video recording, use next section for signatures:]

1. I agree to be audio taped for this interview:

Name of Participant (print):

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____
Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:

Name of Participant (print):

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____
Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

Appendix B

Interview Guide (or Instrument)

1. What brought you to the way of the Saints/Santeria?
2. Please describe your role, as a Priest or Priestess?
3. What is the purpose of Santeria in relations to health?
4. What is the purpose of Santeria in relations to Spirituality?
5. What is the purpose of Santeria in relations to self?
6. What is the purpose of Santeria in relations to community?
7. What kinds of mental health issues have you dealt with in the community?
8. What kinds of issues have you had to refer out of the community?
9. What are the meanings or values that a social worker wanting to respect the role of Santeria need to keep in mind, in order to respect your work, and you religious role?
10. What specific message would you give the social work profession about Santeria?

Appendix C

HSR Approval Letter



School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-
7994

October 9, 2013

Penelope Williams

Dear Penelope,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished).

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Jean LaTerz, Research Advisor

Appendix D

Recruitment Email

Dear Orisha Family,

My name is Penelope Williams and I am a MSW student at the Smith School for Social Work. I am working on an explorative thesis, in order to complete my graduate studies.

The purpose of this study is to further explore, how Priest and Priestesses in the Santeria/Orisha community work on issues of mental health. Mental health within the Santeria/Orisha community has not been extensively explored and such a study would be helpful to recognize how the Santeria/Orisha priest and priestesses handle these matters exclusively and/or complement their religious role with social workers in the field. As a result, the completion of this thesis will be read by a faculty second reader and will also be presented to the Santeria/Orisha and social work community in 2016-2017.

I am seeking to interview Santeria/Orisha Priests and Priestesses who are over 35 years old, have their own Iles and may continue to be guided and collaborate with their Godparent(s). Participants will be asked to share their experiences and expertise with the Santeria/Orisha Community, as it relates to matters of mental health and wellbeing. The interview will be Confidential, approximately an hour in length and cash nor in kind payment will not be concluded. Participants will be asked to sign a consent form and will have until March 31, 2016 to be excluded from the study. Participants can withdraw from the interview process before, during or by March 30, 2016.

All interviews will be audio recorded and will be transcribed by a professional transcriber, who will also sign a Transcribers confidentiality form. All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to Federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please feel free to contact me at pwilliam@smith.edu. In addition, if you know anyone within the community who would be interested in participating in the study, please forward. However, this will be a small study of no more than 7 people.

Alafia,

Penelope Williams, MSW Candidate A'16

pwilliam@smith.edu

