

Business booming at Santeria botanica

Sacrificial goats, ritual herbs on sale

ASSOCIATED PRESS

The sign inside Gerardo Lastra's botanica advertizes discounted prices on live ducks and female goats for sacrifices to Yemaya, the Santeria god of the seas.

Shoppers short on cash can use American Express, Visa or MasterCard to charge their animals or purchases of good-luck sprays, colognes that chase away evil spirits, or herbs for Santeria rituals. Mr. Lastra's store, which sells ducks for \$10 each and goats for \$70 each, even delivers.

"Business is good," says Mr. Lastra, standing amid a crowd of statues representing various deities. Behind his dusty store in Miami's run-down Allapattah neighborhood, Lexus luxury sedans are as common in the parking lot as broken-down Buicks.

"We have lawyers, doctors, policemen coming in here," he says. "You'd be surprised at the people who practice this religion. They see the proof of what it can do."

Two years after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down laws banning religious animal sacrifices, the centuries-old Afro-Caribbean religion of Santeria is coming out of the shadows.

"There's a collective feeling that the Supreme Court ruling did cause a psychological change in the way people think," says Ernesto Pichardo, the man who took the fight for Santeria to the Supreme Court. "People are more open."

Santeros now number an estimated 100,000 in South Florida and 1 million nationwide, says anthropologist Rafael Martinez, who has worked with the Dade County (Miami) Medical Examiner's Office investigating crime scenes linked to Afro-Caribbean religions.

Born of a marriage of Roman Catholicism and religions practiced by West African slaves brought to the Caribbean, Santeria has evolved into a distinct faith.

Slaves prayed to their gods from the Yoruba culture, in what is now Nigeria, but adopted Roman Catholic saints as equivalents to appease their masters bent on converting them to Christianity. St. Barbara became Chango, the warrior god of thunder and lightning. And St. Lazarus became Babalu-Aye, patron of the sick.

The saint worship that developed in Santeria centers on seven deities with responsibility for various forces in nature.

From your health to your love life, there is a remedy prescribed

by the orishas, as the saints are called.

Jackie Rodriguez, a Santero, says the church may not like it, but the two religions are intertwined. Before a person becomes initiated in Santeria, he or she must be baptized in the Catholic Church. On the last day of Santeria's seven-day initiation period, the first place a newly initiated person goes is to a Roman Catholic Mass.

The Rev. Michael Curtin, director of the Catholic Information Center in Washington, says: "The only connection between Catholicism and Santeria is in the mind of those who practice Santeria. Anything that is superstition is contrary to Catholic doctrine; everything that is like pulling a lever to get a result is superstition."

Mr. Pichardo says his Church of the Lukumi has grown enormously since his Supreme Court victory. Membership has reached 6,000 and includes practitioners from Miami's large Cuban exile community, suburban New Jersey, Chicago, Venezuela and Panama.

The Church of the Lukumi has begun certifying priests, and Mr. Pichardo's board of babalawos, or high priests, have given themselves the authority to expel any priest not following rules of certification. Certification costs \$250.

Mr. Pichardo's certification rules have angered many other practitioners.

"I think all Santeros have to be grateful for what he did," says Mr. Rodriguez. "But I don't know why he would be the only person who decides who's a priest."

One Santero expelled by Mr. Pichardo's church contends Mr. Pichardo is trying to profit from Santeria by controlling the religion.

"He wants to make a monopoly of this religion. Who gave him the right? Santeria doesn't have temples. Santeria works in each person's home," says Rigoberto Zamora, who was expelled by Mr. Pichardo after he sacrificed animals for live television cameras in celebration of the Supreme Court victory.

Scholars who have studied Santeria are split over whether the religion can truly be brought out of the shadows into mainstream American life.

"Santeria is not ready to be institutionalized," says Mercedes Sandoval, a professor at Miami-Dade Community College who has written extensively on it. "Do it in the open, and it loses a lot of its mystery."