

Benedikta Tölke, *Gracias a Misericordia* – Religious Syncretism in the Dominican Republic

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ABSTRACT

The object of this paper is the religious syncretism that is wide-spread in the Dominican Republic in addition to Catholicism. It has hardly been examined before. Similar to Haitian Voodoo, Brazilian Candomblé or Cuban Santería, this belief system is an Afro-American religion. Believers do use periphrases rather than any specific name to describe their belief.

This form of religion originated in 300 years of colonial rule and slavery on the island of Hispaniola. In addition to demographic, social and economic structures, religiousness on the island was strongly characterised by the forceful settlement of African slaves. This brought religious knowledge made up of different autochthonic African religions to the colony. The colonisers, in contrast, introduced both orthodox Christian teachings and many folk-religious and folk-magical practices into the country, while the indigenous Taino mainly continued to practice their own beliefs.

These different religious ideas merged over time to form a new belief that plays an important role in the lives of people in the Dominican Republic to this day.

The religious practice of Dominican syncretism is particularly characterised by interaction with many anthropomorphic deities. They are associated with certain catholic deities or their chromolithographies and have many human characteristics. They have their own significant appearances, relationships and individual preferences.

The deities frequently reveal themselves to humans in dreams or manifest in the bodies of believers whose physical shells serve as a speaking tube to them in trance states. Each deity represents specific tasks and can do good or, if not honoured sufficiently, harm to people.

The pantheon comprises the so-called 21 divisions, each consisting of deities with similar characteristics. Believers assume that a remote creator god, a 'deus otiosus', placed control of daily human matters in the hands of the deities. He represents the last instance of all things and is associated with the Catholic God in the Dominican Republic.

In particular specially trained priests know a large number of practices to affect individual deities in a way that will cause them to employ their powers to the benefit of people. These priests are visited to perform protective spells, spiritual cleansings or magical rituals to fulfil specific desires. In addition to financial improvement or amorous success, destructive damage spells are also a frequent focus of the magical practices.

The data for the present paper is based on 16 months of field research the author conducted on site.