Santería in Catemaco, Mexico

_Hybrid (Re)Configurations of Religious Meaning and Practice_

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Abstract

The Mexican city of Catemaco is famous for its diversity of African-American religious traditions. Although Santería was originally shaped in Cuba, the local Mexican versions show not only a variety of references regarding their origins and influences, ranging from West Africa and Cuba to local indigenous traditions, but also (re)interpretations of historically and geographically diverse contents. Based on interview data gathered during field research in 2017, this article outlines the different hybrid (re)configurations of African-Mexican Santería in Catemaco by tracing the changes made by the practitioners in order to adapt existing traditions. The corresponding adaptation processes include beliefs, practices, lore and material assets. Under a critical perspective, concepts of transnationalism, syncretism and glocalization are discussed, focusing on the dynamics between local and global aspects of Santería in Catemaco and shedding light on the processes of inclusion, exclusion and the shift of boundaries.

Keywords

Santería – Afro-American religion – Mexico – Hybridity – Glocalization

1 Introduction

African derived religions on the American continent have been researched thoroughly, yet few studies exist on Santería in Mexico. Indigenous religious influences, the adoration of popular saints like Santa Muerte and the boom
in spiritual healing practices in the wider context of esotericism provide a fertile ground for the establishment of Santería since many intersections and connecting points facilitate the adoption of elements from these traditions into Santería practice and vice versa. But how do Santería practitioners in the Mexican city of Catemaco configure their beliefs and practices, and which underlying processes influence these hybrid forms of Santería? This paper aims to explore Santería in Catemaco, focussing first on adaptation processes of originally African contents in the local context characterized by Mexican indigenous religious traditions and popular religion, later on the inclusion and exclusion of contents and the resulting boundary shift, and lastly on global networks and specifically local aspects. Based on the results of field research in 2017, the principal argument is that under the economically lucrative label of Santería, heterodox forms of the Afro-American religion have developed in Catemaco in two main currents: the Yorùbá-centred one which draws on originally African contents and the Cuba-centred one, following Cuban lineages of Santería and consequently including contents that were modified to match the Cuban milieu.

The first part of this paper explores the emergence and development of Santería in Catemaco – a city famous for witchcraft, shamanism and alternative healing in the Mexican state of Veracruz – shedding light on the scientific state of the art as well as sociocultural aspects that have influenced the development of Santería in this place. I will give details about the research project from which the data for later argumentations originates. The main part of this paper is centred around transnational, syncretistic and “glocal” factors that have led to different hybrid (re)configurations of Santería. I will discuss the corresponding theoretical concepts critically and will therefore establish hybridity as an overarching theoretical frame. In the part titled “Beyond Transnationalization”, I will take into account translocal displacements of persons and material/immaterial goods and the reconfiguration of boundaries within the field of Santería in Catemaco. In “Beyond Syncretism,” the findings made so far are taken up and I will address the reconfigured religious contents. Afterwards, I will consider local-global dynamics like hetero-/homogenization tendencies and digital influences.

2 Santería in Catemaco, Mexico

Beliefs, practices and rites labelled as Santería have originally emerged in Cuba, based on West African religious traditions (mainly Yorùbá), Catholicism and spiritism, but have spread across the entire American continent during the last
century. Anthropological studies\(^1\) on the topic have dealt with Santería in Peru, Chile, Bolivia, and USA among others. This article adds to this compendium of case studies, focussing on Mexico: both in the Mexican capital and in certain rural areas like Catemaco in Veracruz, local versions of Santería have developed. They draw on Cuban traditions as well as West-African Yorùbá religion itself which is understood by some practitioners as a more direct, hence accurate and less diluted origin. As there is a relatively scarce amount of scientific material about Santería in Mexico, with the case studies of Saldívar Arellano (2009, 2011 and 2012) and Juárez Huet (2009, 2013 and 2016) accounting for the most detailed and thus significant ones, the study on which the following observations are based counts as an explorative foray into the field of Mexican forms of Afro-American religions.

2.1 Methodology

Based on participatory observation and seven narrative interviews with Santeros,\(^2\) the field research of the study took place in July 2017 in and around Catemaco. Due to the individual character of their communitarization and the resulting low accessibility of the field,\(^3\) the interviewees were selected by a carefully implemented snowball system. I took into account the recommendations of Catemaco locals, Mexico City based Santeros and the interviewees themselves. The requirements for potential interviewees were for them to identify as Santero/a, to have several years of experience in their field of action and to earn their living by offering Santería-related services like spiritual and physical healings, limpias – spiritual cleansing or purification ceremonies –, rituals for the purpose of wealth, happiness, protection and other material and emotional benefits, divination and other consultations. Three of the interviewees were female, four were male; in terms of age, two belonged to the category

\(^1\) See for example the studies by Saldívar Arellano about Lima, Peru (2012 and 2013) and La Paz, Bolivia (2016), Castro Ramírez about Bogotá, Colombia (2011) and Pollak-Eltz about Venezuela (2004).

\(^2\) Practitioners of Santería. In the Mexican understanding, “Santero” is not necessarily tied to the initiation in a related Afro-American religious tradition but rather to the offered services as explained later. The originally Spanish term is used gender-neutral, as are any other person-related terms hereafter.

\(^3\) The later mentioned studies and the here presented field research show that Mexican Santeros tend to offer their usually fee-based services to clients in their private consultorios and struggle to establish themselves as the best option among their fellow Santeros, hence there are economically driven rivalries for clients among Santeros in the same area. Furthermore, regarding the Catemaco-based interviewees, there are no notable organizations or institutions they affiliate to. The lack of formal social networks complicates field access.
from 40 to 50, three from 30 to 40 and one was between 20 and 30 years old. They were interviewed in their consultorios, the places where they receive clients and carry out their services, or in a public place chosen by them.4

2.2 Sociohistorical Context
The upsurge of Santería in Mexico dates back to the end of the 19th century and peaked in the period between 1920 and 19405 when Afro-Cuban religious contents were exoticized and estheticized in Mexican movies, specifically in Cuban dances and music which include images of òrìṣà.6 The public interest shifted towards the religion itself after the Cuban revolution in 1959 and the subsequent migratory movements from Cuba and the south of the USA, especially Miami, towards Mexico. Thus, a major part of Mexican Santería has Cuban heritage. During the 1980s, the prior exotism associated with Santería was superseded by negative connotations due to scandals that involved so-called narcosatánicos, organized crime groups in the northern part of Mexico whose violent actions caused Santería to be connected to bloody sacrificial practices, narcotraffic and Satanism in public discourse. Driven by tourism, the boom in esotericism and the growing influence of the Internet during the 1990s, the religion rose in popularity. Similar to the rise of other folk-religious tendencies like the adoration of Santa Muerte or other popular Mexican saints, Santeros consolidated their presence mostly in the Mexican capital but also in other regions7 with Catemaco in Veracruz among the most popular.8 The establishment of markets like Mercado Sonora in Mexico City and smaller, privately run botánicas, where ingredients for Santería religious practices can be acquired and services are provided by religious experts, shows the embeddedness of this kind of religions in the Mexican religious landscape.9

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4 The scope of the research project was determined by the master’s degree programme “Communication and Cultural Studies” at ICONOS, Instituto de Investigación en Comunicación y Cultura in Mexico City and the research interest was focussed on the Santeros’ usage of digital resources and the therefore applied theoretical categories syncretism, glocalization and transnationalization served as a conceptual framework.

5 Juárez Huet, Los procesos de relocalización de la santería en México, p. 169.

6 The term òrìṣà alludes to deities and is central in several Afro-American religions. It is written differently with varying accentuation, e.g., mainly orixa in Brazilian Umbanda, oricha in Cuban Santería, òrìṣà in Yoruba religion.

7 Juárez Huet points out that the federal states with the highest amounts of Santeros are Yucatán, Veracruz and Mexico State, apart from the Mexican capital. See Los procesos de relocalización de la santería en México, p. 172.

8 See Saldivar Arellano, Nuevas formas de adoración y culto, p. 152.

9 In their national statistical surveys, INEGI (National Institute of Statistics and Geography) includes Santería in “credos with Afro origin”. Neither are there explicit numbers nor more recent statistics about Mexican Santería available. See INEGI, Clasificación de Religiones 2010, p. 16.
Catemaco stands out among the places with a high density of Santería as it gained the reputation of being a centre for witchcraft, *curandería*\(^\text{10}\) and shamanism. Saldivar Arellano even goes so far as to ascribe a proper kind of Santería to Catemaco because of the unique local mix of witchcraft and Santería practices.\(^\text{11}\) Due to its location close to the Gulf of Mexico, Cuban immigrants arrived after the revolution in 1959 and settled there, establishing their religious traditions, especially Afro-American ones. Since the place had already become a famous tourist destination, particularly for clients of pre-Hispanic, indigenous witchcraft, Santería fitted into the by then existing religious market and attracted even more clients as well as Santeros.

However, African religious influence had arrived in the region around Catemaco already before the migratory wave from Cuba: during the Spanish colonialization of Mexican territory, slaves were brought from Africa and under the administration of the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortes, relocated in the region around “las Tuxtlas”, three cities in the vicinity of Catemaco, in order to work in the mines as well as tobacco and sugarcane plantations.\(^\text{12}\) Ever since, Yorùbá religion and Cuban Santería have mixed with Olmec and Totonac religion, both indigenous, pre-Hispanic cultures with their own polytheistic belief systems and herbalist traditions that offer junctions for syncretism with both Yorùbá religion and Santería. The latter are considered two distinct lineages of originally African religions, firstly because of their different geographical origins and secondly because the interviewed Santeros expressed their identification with either of them and distinguished themselves from the other. This argument will be discussed in detail in the main part of this paper. Furthermore, the configurations of local Santería will be analysed as phenomena influenced by West African religious traditions, both historic and contemporary, as well as Cuban- and US-American adaptations of those traditions, distinguishing those as different, heterogeneous traditions and their adaptations in local forms of Santería.

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\(^\text{10}\) *Curandería* encompasses arts and practices conducted by *curanderos*, healers who use natural (*herbolaria*) and magic means in order to cure spiritual as well as physical ailments.

\(^\text{11}\) Saldivar Arellano, *Nuevas formas de adoración y culto*, p. 160.

3 Hybrid (Re)Configurations

Transformation processes of religious beliefs and practices have been approached from various perspectives, hybridity accounting for only one of them. Putting aside the biological insinuations\textsuperscript{13} of the hybridity concept and the fact that the term has been adopted differently and controversially in various academic fields, Kraidy uses it in order to explain the cultural logic of globalization focussed on communication processes and international media, whereas García Canclini ties the term to the ideas of a mixed cultural reality and multitemporal heterogeneity. Both approaches are taken up here in order to outline hybridity as a useful conceptual framework for the study of transformations of Santería in the case of Catemaco in Mexico.

From his media- and communication-oriented point of view, Kraidy suggests hybridity – in comparison to similar concepts like mestizaje or creolization – in a broad sense, considering the “[…] fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct forms, styles, or identities”\textsuperscript{14} which leads to cross-cultural contact and movements that are key elements to his concept. He derives a critical transcultural perspective that frames cultures as inherently synthetic and mixed, and thus implies that every culture contains traces of other cultures. This is a necessary condition for intercultural relations and the introduction of transcultural contents in local communities on the assumption that the exchange causes the transformation of all entities involved.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, he underlines that hybridity is the conceptual core for the agency of individuals and communities in terms of social – and thus also religious – practices. Apart from the translocal perspective that assumes an involvement of local circumstances in supralocal relations,\textsuperscript{16} Kraidy’s conceptualization of hybridity offers two key points which constitute the here proposed conceptual framework: first, hybridity points at the agency of individuals or communities with regard to their adaptation to local conditions in complex transcultural networks, avoiding too simplistic observations like the mere fusion of two different contents without historical,
economic, political and other relations as these constitute factors that mutually influence and transform not only the involved entities but also their sociocultural context. Second, the transcultural aspect Kraidy rises may be taken as a cue towards trans- (instead of inter- or multi-) perspectives.\(^{17}\)

In turn, García Canclini approaches hybridity from a Latin-American view in which he questions cultural hybridization processes in the context of modernization and histories shaped by colonialization. In this regard, he locates hybridity in the dynamic links between different historical eras as well as contemporary cultural, political and economic manifestations.\(^{18}\) His notion of multitemporal heterogeneity alludes to cultural and geographical diversity – taking into account ethnic and local identities – that causes a state of cultural hybridity where the boundaries of dichotomies such as traditional and modern are dissolved. In the case of Santería, the given multitemporal heterogeneity is caused by practices and beliefs that have developed in different times and locations.

Taking up these aspects, hybridity, as a conceptual rather than operational framework, englobes translocal adaptation processes (see 3.1) in addition to the dynamics of in- and exclusion of religious contents like rites, myths, practices and the required knowledge that cause shifts of the boundaries within the field of Santería (see 3.2). Kraidy and García Canclini both opt for a translocal focus (which will be considered from a glocal perspective under 3.3) that becomes meaningful for the observations of Santería in Mexico as all given influences coalesce in the Santeros’ local living environment where they adopt new elements into their beliefs and practices in order to cope with their dynamic context and, consequently, their agency within translocal, post-colonial networks, eventually configuring and reconfiguring their religious identities.

### 3.1 Beyond Transnationalization: Translocal Adaptation Processes

All of the few earlier mentioned ethnographic studies on Santería in Mexico rely heavily on the concept of transnationalization.\(^{19}\) At first sight it may

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17 Following the argumentative line of Basarab Nicolescu’s transdisciplinarity into cultural matters as a general consideration that underlies the following argumentations, trans- is used to overcome dichotomies and linearity, underlining developments that happen between and across different cultures, and go beyond any individual culture instead, recognizing them as parts of complex systems. See Nicolescu, *Transdisciplinariedad*, p. 19.

18 See García Canclini, *Culturashíbridas*, p. 15.

19 Due to the fact that Saldivar Arellano remains a main point of reference, concepts with a similar perspective he considers, for example Fernando Ortiz’ “transculturation” (see Saldivar Arellano, *Transnacionalización de símbolos religiosos*, p. 240) are not taken into account here, although they might provide further relevant perspectives.
indeed seem useful to focus on transnational dynamics when tracing both continuities and discontinuities of Santería outside the assumed original contexts, namely Cuba and West Africa, mostly Ilê Yorùbá (Yorùbálánd). This is partly because the transnational focus reasonably sheds light on migratory movements and translocation processes of material and immaterial resources, but also partly due to the misplaced habit of linking cultural borders first and foremost to national states. While possible ideological, political and sociocultural factors tied to national matters must be taken into account, additions to the concept of transnationalization need to be made.

Saldívar Arellano frames transnationalization by the dynamics of deterriorialization versus territorialization, that is, “[...] the crossing of culture between imagined borders, displacements of people to various spaces around the globe, reconfiguring local traditions and inserting them into intensified global frameworks”\(^\text{20}\) and therefore deals with the displacement not only of the involved persons and their identities in relation to both (or even more) involved localities but also of material objects and immaterial goods like myths, culture-specific values, rites, customs and beliefs in general. Transnationalization implies, in the sense of the above-mentioned hybridity, multidirectional flows of information via translocal social networks that are facilitated by digital communication media. And while the aspect of crossed imaginary boundaries hints at the transformation of ethnical and possibly local identities, it does not, in fact, account for the reconfiguration and implementation of new boundaries. Those will be addressed later. Two issues have been addressed during field research in terms of translocal dynamics: on the one hand the Santeros’ relations with the assumed place of origin of their practices and beliefs, including persons related to those places,\(^\text{21}\) and on the other hand the displacement of goods, beliefs, traditions and symbols.

It should be clarified that none of the interviewees did migrate from Cuba or Africa to Catemaco;\(^\text{22}\) nevertheless, they identified themselves as part of one of


\(^{21}\) Six of the seven interviewees did not have migratory backgrounds, but some of their families and teachers did come from Cuba or Africa and most of the earlier generations of their social circles have ties to Yorùbálánd or Cuba and other Latin American countries like Brazil, or state to have direct contact with U.S.-based Santeros.

\(^{22}\) Regarding migration, one interviewee stated to have lived some time in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, where she was taught Umbanda lore and ritual from a Pai de Santo. Back in Catemaco, she was initiated into Yorùbá religion by “an African”, but she underlines that her understanding of and work with the ọrịsàs is still influenced by her experiences with Umbanda.
two major traditions. Three interviewees outlined a Cuban heritage, whereas
the other three claimed an African lineage. Especially the African-centred
Santeros delimited themselves against Cuban Santería, arguing that their reli-
gion is the original – and therefore more authentic – one, entailing that their
practices are more effective than the rituals that are “[…] washed-out and
blurred almost to unrecognizability due to the detour they took in Cuba” and
bringing up the frequently touched upon issue of charlatanism. In contrast,
the interviewees who identified as Santeros with Cuban traditional lineage
did include the partially African origin of their beliefs and practices in their
narratives and held up their arguments about charlatans paired with accusa-
tions of bad or wrong practice based on the wrong execution of the practices
themselves rather than an ascribed dilution by influence of Catholicism and
spiritism in Cuba. The overall tendency of those two different traditions in
Catemaco, derived from originally West African religious practices and beliefs
that were (re)configured along two historically, geographically and thus cultur-
ally different ways, become visible not only by the active distinctions made by
the interviewees, but also by the language they use: African-centred practitio-
ners use for example mainly the term “òrìṣà”, while Cuban-centred practitio-
ners prefer to call the same entities “santos”. In the same way, the vocabulary
used by the former is characterized by Yorùbá terminology, while the latter
tend to name Santería-specific content in Spanish. As an example, amarres,
a kind of love-spell that is commonly linked to folk-religious practices (not only
to Santería), are offered by Santeros who claim a Cuban tradition but are dis-
missed as rip-off charlatanism by African-centred practitioners although they,
too, cast what they describe as love-spells. They label those actions differently

23 In comparison, Juárez Huet identifies three main tendencies regarding the practice
of Santería in Mexico: the “creole” version with adherence to Cuban tradition, the “re-
Africanised” version and the “Mexicanized” one. (Juárez Huet, Religiones afroamericanas
en México, p. 234) The first two concur with the tendencies outlined here, while the impli-
cations tied to the “Mexicanization” coincide with the below-mentioned adjustments
made by Santeros in Catemaco to their respective practices.
24 Lineage refers to a religious rather than strictly genealogical notion. Interestingly enough,
one Santero explained that he assumes the term “Santero” mostly for lucrative purpose,
claiming that he was initiated into the religion by a Cuban Santero, but that his strong
suit were Olmec herbalist healing rituals which he learned and adopted from his great-
grandfather and grandfather. Although he technically fits into the Cuban category, he
practically links his religious identity to local indigenous Olmec tradition instead of
Cuban Santería.
26 All four interviewees who place themselves in Cuban tradition offer amarres and two of
them remark that this kind of ritual is one of the most common requested and therefore
offered services in their loosely tied communities.
and usually do not offer them as a standalone service, but rather include them in more holistically presented consultas during which the religious expert tries to figure out the sources of physical, spiritual or mental distress, illness or imbalance and consequently attempts to eradicate or cure them comprehensively.\textsuperscript{27} Furthermore, although all of the interviewees are publicly referred to as “Santeros” (male) or “Santeras” (female), only the Cuban-centred practitioners embrace the label and use it themselves, while the others prefer to use expressions like “Babalawo” and “Iyalawo” as well as “Babalocha” and “Iyalocha”.\textsuperscript{28} The linguistic demarcations are an expression not only of the different reconfigurations of Santería but also hint at the Santeros’ broader, more individualistic self-conceptions in Catemaco’s economically driven religious milieu where they make their livings and are sometimes even the breadwinners of their families by means of their religious expertise. Thus, the public images they create for themselves include buzzwords like “Santero/a” or labels that hint at Yorùbá tradition\textsuperscript{29} as well as commonly requested services like amarres or limpias,\textsuperscript{30} even if they privately label details of their beliefs and practices differently. Also, in terms of visibility and accessibility, two different approaches stand out: services of Cuban Santería are predominantly presented by flyers and visual content in digital spaces (mostly in Facebook), print media and in situ. In contrast, the Africa-centred interviewees (and peers they mention) are primarily found via word-of-mouth recommendation or in closed, private groups on digital communication platforms like WhatsApp. The fact that all of them equally charge for their services\textsuperscript{31} shall be pointed out.

For the interviewed Santeros, the temporal and cultural translocation of practices and beliefs involves dealing with the configuration of their individual

\textsuperscript{27} This is the lowest common denominator the three African-centred interviewees described when asked about their practices with clients.

\textsuperscript{28} The terms Babalawo/Iyalawo (including their different spellings) usually refer to initiates in the Ifá divinatory system and Babalocha/Iyalocha to practitioners of Regla de Ocha who are not necessarily initiated in the Ifá tradition. However, the interviewees often use the terms Santero/Santera interchangeably with both pairs of aforementioned terms, leaving aside their usual implications regarding initiation, formalities and other details.

\textsuperscript{29} As Juárez Huet points out, the commercialization of “Yoruba heritage” related to the recognition of the Ifá divination system as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the UNESCO has led to the rise of references to Yorùbá origin during the last decades. (Juárez Huet, Religiones afroamericanas en México, p. 234).

\textsuperscript{30} Purification rituals that aim to cleanse the client of negative energies or malevolent spells.

\textsuperscript{31} Payment may vary, though. Four interviewees state that they have fixed prices for most of their services, two charge differently according to the required services and used materials that are figured out during the consulta and depending on the financial standing of the client. The latter two belong to the African-centred category.
form of Santería, since all of them place themselves in a lineage of orally transmitted religious tradition(s) that are passed on from master(s) to student and originate, according to their framings of this issue, either in Cuba, Africa or at least partially in the local surroundings, culturally imprinted by Olmec and Totonac culture. This becomes apparent for instance in an overall orthopraxical approach regarding religious practices with and without clients.\textsuperscript{32} Additionally, there is no consensus among the interviewed Santeros about eclecticism and changes of contents that they mark as “established” or “traditional”, because on the one hand, most of their knowledge has been taught by one (or more) teacher(s) who have passed on their subjectively tinted interpretations of myths, practices and other religious contents, and on the other hand, core elements of ritual practice like fresh herbs have to be acquired locally and not all species from Cuba or Africa grow there, so the Santero has to decide individually how to handle the matter. The same applies for materials used in Yorùbá religion or in Cuba that are not endemic to Catemaco: local Santeros craft some of their own tools for oracle practices out of materials they gather in the local rainforest although they differ from the materials used traditionally in Yorúbaland and Cuba.\textsuperscript{33} These dynamics of configuration and reconfiguration of African and Cuban lineages cause Santería in the previously sketched context to be highly individual and orthopraxical.\textsuperscript{34} Constitutive elements of Santería that concern religious contents like myths and oracles, which have been omitted so far, are considered next under the vantage points of exclusion, inclusion and shifting boundaries among the heterodox field that has been outlined.

3.2 Beyond Syncretism: Inclusion, Exclusion and Shifting Boundaries

Although controversially discussed,\textsuperscript{35} syncretism, at least in the field of Religious Studies, has widely been discarded as an obsolete concept that has acquired a pejorative subtone and omits the fact that the configuration of every

\textsuperscript{32} All interviewees emphasise the correct execution of ritual actions. Yet, the details of what is actually correct, including which parts or ingredients of rituals can be changed, varies substantially among them. This is for one part due to the different lineages of knowledge they take up from their teachers and for the other part due to their own considerations.

\textsuperscript{33} Interviewee two used for example the dried shells of a local tree to craft her opele, a chain with eight of those shells used for Ifá divination.

\textsuperscript{34} However, not all changes made to practices that are considered “traditional” can be interpreted as results of individualism or orthopraxis as it is common for religious experts in Santería to determine whether or not a certain non-traditional practice or object in question is permitted by consulting an oracle.

\textsuperscript{35} See for example Leopold/Jensen, Syncretism in Religion.
religious phenomenon implies syncretistic elements. Yet Latin-American scholars (which include Santería-focussed studies by Juárez Huet and Sandívar Arellano) seem to have gravitated towards per se syncretistic framings, not only of Santería but also Afro-American religions, esotericism, spirituality, New Age and other, especially non-Christian religious phenomena. The general conceptual usage of syncretism regarding Santería hints at the mix of different religions that form the bases of contemporary Santería. To this effect, Sandívar Arellano sets up Santería in Catemaco as what he calls a “minor syncretism”, underlining that not just deities but also symbols and elements that recontextualize the reality in a certain region are blended together and that this kind of religion is the result of transnational ideologies that are set out in reduced spaces. As far as Berner argues, syncretism remains a useful approach towards religious actors (rather than the mere intermingling of ideas) who ensure the survival of a (religious) group when faced with an unfamiliar situation like displacement and reinsertion into a different culture in times of colonialization; then, the mix of heterogeneous religious elements might be the only option that enables the survival of the group. Cuban Santería seems a fitting example since the African slaves who had been brought to Cuba by Spanish colonialists had to adapt their original religious practices and beliefs to the compulsory Catholicism as the practice of their own rites was prohibited by the colonial rulers. Thus, African órìṣàs were “syncretized” with Catholic saints and e.g. the work with ancestral spirits was practiced under the cover of Kardecism, a form of spiritism that had grown popular among Cuban upper class at that time. Though it appears viable to focus on the fusion processes that lead to the configuration of Santeria in Cuba and later in other places like

36 See Sered, Taxonomies of Ritual Mixing, p. 222.
37 The usage of syncretism as a base approach to Santería is similar to the apparently ever-present transnational approach presented above. This is the main reason these concepts are critically taken into consideration here.
38 See D’Andrea, From Gregarious Syncretism to Reflexive Individualism.
39 Saldívar Arellano, Nuevas formas de adoración y culto, p. 154.
40 Berner, Synkretismus, p. 37.
41 This notion of syncretism derives from the origin story of the Greek word συγκέρανωμι by antique Greek Plutarch who describes the struggle of the people of the island of Crete who overcome their inner conflicts in order to fight against extern enemies. See Plutarch, De Fraterno amore, p. 420b.
42 The “syncretisation” of órìṣàs and saints remains a contested topic, not only because there is no content-related congruence between them, but also because the connections among them can be described as iconographic transfers. See for example Brown, Santería Enthroned and earlier Brandon, Santería from Africa to the new world.
43 See De la Torre, Santería, Chapter 1.
the USA and Mexico, syncretism as a concept falls short on the issue of boundaries: according to Berner, the notion of syncretism as a mixture of religions implies the eradication of the boundaries of originally distinct religions within a proper, new religion, but this absence of boundaries does not cause a loss of religious identity and religious relativism. I argue that the boundary shift that causes reconfigurations of religious content does not necessarily include the abolishment of former boundaries (like those between Catholicism and Yorùbá religion or Cuban Santería and local curandería) as the practitioners draw on different traditions which they actively distinguish. Nor is Santería assumed to be a now-static mixture of a fixed set of base-religions but rather an individualistic set of practices and beliefs configured by Santeros themselves in an eclectic manner, yet still under the wider term of Santería that allows the embedding of offered services in a regionally specific, profit-oriented religious market. This does not mean, however, that financial profit is the only impetus behind (re)configurations of Santería in Catemaco, which shall be explored next through the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of religious contents of various origins.

As stated earlier, there are two main bases of Santería in Catemaco: Yorùbá religion from Africa and Santería from Cuba, also called Regla de Osha, Regla Ifa, Regla Ocha-Ifa or Lucumí among others. Cuban Santería already arrived with elements of Kardecism, Yorùbá religion and Catholicism, whereas the Yorùbá religion that had been established in Catemaco and the surrounding areas by then was influenced mainly by local Olmec and Totonac tradition. Furthermore, the Mexican cultural undercurrents, often labelled as popular religiosity, should not be underestimated: tethered to Catholicism, folk-religious practices that include limpias, rituals and festivities like Día de Muertos related to the spirits of the deceased, the cult to local and popular saints like Santa Muerte, Jesús Malverde or Virgen de Guadalupe and the overall tendency towards semi-secret practices with tinges of witchcraft, shamanism, New Age and esoterism all constitute elements of a fertile soil for heterodox forms of Santería.

In line with the emphasis on individual agency that Kraidy points out as a core factor of hybridity, the interviewed Santeros can be characterized as eclectic, individualistic and non-institutionalized. However, within their configured systems of practice, rite and belief, they very well set themselves apart from other practitioners and thus create boundaries within the field of Santería to

44 Berner, Synkretismus, p. 41.
45 In Cuba, other African influences interacted with Santería, e.g. Bantu-based Palo Monte.
46 See for example Juárez Huet, ¿Heterodoxía por defecto?, p. 117.
which they adhere to especially in public, conveyed by word-of-mouth recommendation as well as digital and printed advertisements of their services. When asked about their opinion on modifications of what they consider the roots of their religion, three interviewees pledged themselves to an eclectic point of view, stereotypically described as “[...] whatever heals and helps my clients best, but always according to what my spirit guides and, of course, my òrìṣàs consider best” by a Santero who locates himself mostly in Olmec herbal healing and magic tradition apart from being initiated into Cuban Santería for over twenty years. The other four interviewees stress that their religion comprises sets of strict rules to which they adhere to at face value. Interestingly enough, these rules apply to orthopraxical ritual standards transmitted by their teachers, but not to external elements they include “additionally” – and mark as such – to their more standardized core practices, like the use of “Tarot de los Òrìṣàs” for divinatory purposes, Yoga as a mental and bodily preparation for consultas or healing practices based on Olmec herbal medicine. Likewise, other religious African-American traditions – in the studied cases specifically Umbanda and Palo Mayombe – are openly mentioned either as influences or literal sources of knowledge and ritual practice. This shows that boundaries are drawn not only between an individually configured version of Santería to which clear orthopraxical rules are attributed, but also, on the other hand, between additional practices that are included in daily religious practice and “core Santería”. As mentioned above, boundaries are also drawn within the field by orthopraxical standards, Santeros thus distinguishing “right” (therefore “expert”) from “wrong” (consequently “charlatan”) practice, for example regarding the use of medicinal herbs, according to individual considerations that often replicate the value systems and in-depth knowledge transmitted by their teachers.

Transcendent beings are another crossroads for inclusion and exclusion: all questioned Santeros state that they work with òrìṣàs and ancestral spirits, three of them even count especially the òrìṣàs among their main sources of knowledge. These entities are framed as ontologically real beings; hence the interviewees talk about their individual spiritual peers which in some cases

48 These examples were mentioned by three different interviewees.
49 Two given reasons for the inclusion of non-Santería labelled practices stand out: firstly, practices offered as services and used on clients are included in daily work routines in order to serve a wider clientele who seeks services they expect (erroneously) from a Santero, like Tarot readings. Secondly, some Santeros state to engage in religiously connoted practices like Yoga or meditation in order to achieve bodily and mental wellbeing which they consider a precondition for their work.
include local *Nahuales* and elemental beings who reside in the surrounding rainforest as well as African or Cuban ancestral spirits. Like the *órìṣàs*, these beings are included in the Santeros’ individual everyday life and religious practice, but unlike the fact that *órìṣàs* are one of the lowest common denominators of Santería, these beings are framed as specific “acquaintances” to the individual person. Regarding the *órìṣàs*, some *pataki* “[…] have their origin in Africa; others come from the Cuban slave community; still others are synthesized stories from both hemispheres” and some are evidently adapted to the local context by the interviewed Santeros, connecting them to earlier described Mexican folk-religious contents. One such example is the *órìṣà* *Oyá*; interviewee six, apart from calling this *órìṣà* also by her Brasilians name “Iyansa” with regard to her mixed Umbanda/Santería context, claims to work with this deity particularly on tasks related to *Día de Muertos*, the Mexican celebration centred around the honour of the dead, due to their semantic connection to death and rebirth. Boundaries are shifted, then, on the one hand in terms of adaptation to local cultural and economic circumstances and the integration of heterodox elements that are assimilated into individual versions of Santería according to self-imposed, individual orthopraxical standards that correspond to a traditional lineage taught by their mentors. On the other hand, they are shifted in terms of active separation from charlatanism, folk-religious practices, or (elsewhere actually adopted) reinterpretations of either specifically Yorùbá-derived or Cuban-derived versions of lore and ritual practice, again marking clearly the two above identified tendencies. Since the mentioned local components as well as transnational networks play a major role for the (re)configuration of Santería in Catemaco, special attention is paid to glocal dynamics in the following part of this paper.

### 3.3 Glocalization: Global Networks and Local Influences

Ever since Roland Robertson, one of the sociologists who had coined the term “globalization” in the early 1990s, reworked the idea of globalization a few years later into *glocalization*, the local aspects of global dynamics seem to have gained analytical importance. In order to identify features of Santería that

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50 From Nahuatl *nahuālli*, the term *Nahual* refers to entities, usually spirits, with the ability to shapeshift. The concept is known among various Mesoamerican cultures.

51 *Pataki* are legends about the *órìṣàs* and their relations to humans and other *órìṣàs*.

52 De la Torre, *Santería*, p. 57.

53 The majority of the interviewees defines charlatanism by unethical behaviour regarding first and foremost the payment of services and execution of religious practices that aim to cure the client.

54 See Robertson, *Globalization*.
have been reconfigured specifically due to local-global dynamics, keywords of glocalization will be used as theoretical spotlights to highlight results of glocal dynamics in the case of Catemaco. Hence, only a few core thoughts out of the huge amount of literature on globalization should suffice here.

As one of their core elements, Robertson emphasises that glocal dynamics are shaped simultaneously by homogenization and heterogenization tendencies because both are mutually implicative. Santeros in Catemaco claim the overarching label of “Santería” on the one hand, unifying heterodox traditions in the light of a flourishing religious market, while on the other hand they stress the uniqueness of the elements they dare to transform or reinterpret. An example of that is the Ifá oracle. Originally, only heterosexual male Babaláwos were allowed to perform Ifá-divination; nevertheless, two female interviewees narrated about this specific practice being one of their most commonly performed services. Both mention that the necessary knowledge was passed on to them by their male mentors who had decided to deviate from the rules regarded as “traditional”. Similar adjustments or reinterpretations of rules are made especially concerning material elements for ritual practice, for example the use of medical plants from the surrounding rainforest or own garden, and locally produced artisanal materials like wax for candles, essential oils for potions and (mineral) powders for talismans. Most interviewees also stated to work with locally bound spirits and energies that are unique to the region of Catemaco, making them an uninterchangeable local element of their religion. Additionally, all interviewees underline the importance of the locality of the ritually consecrated spaces dedicated to their religious work that are “[...] infused with the local energy of the volcano, the magic rainforest and the ley lines that run strongly here.”

Global networks are required nonetheless: exchange of information and acquisition of certain ingredients take place on a transnational level. All interviewed Santeros communicate with clients, mentors and peers all over the globe and do so via digital communication media, above all Facebook and WhatsApp. General tendencies of globalization such as the rising importance of digital interactive platforms independent of national borders do not seem to leave religious phenomena like Santería unaffected either, even though the

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55 Robertson, *Glocalization*, p. 27.
56 The explanation for this specification is based on the *pataki* of the *óríṣàs* Yemanja and Orúnla. See De la Torre, *Santería*, pp. 150.
58 Most frequently mentioned are contact persons in the USA, European and South American countries.
59 See for example Ohmae, *El próximo escenario global*. 
research data from Catemaco displays that the Santeros differentiate strongly between their religious practice which does not include any electronic technology at all and, on the contrary, their daily communicative practice which takes place mostly in digital spaces. Interviewee six summarises: “Sometimes I think that if we get so lost in the Internet or technology, our religion loses its magic, that is, what connects us to the earth and the energies; and we use precisely this connection to cure persons.”60 Digital assets apart from communication platforms are nevertheless used in a supplementary manner, for example for divination, as the use of the “Tratado de Ifá”-App61 illustrates. The user can replicate the outcome of any above-mentioned Ifá divination in the app and will get exhaustive information about the specific divination outcome, including related pataki, interpretations and verses.

Considering the mentioned research material, Santería in Catemaco represents on a small scale some of the most influential tendencies of glocalization: information as a tradable good, decentralization, non-institutionalization, blurred or fluid boundaries in the face of homogenisation/heterogenization and digital communication, among others. Individual adaptation to these contemporary conditions has led to the previously outlined heterodox forms of Santería in the considered case of Catemaco.

4 Conclusions

In order to summarize the findings made so far, I will outline major tendencies regarding the shift of boundaries within the field of Santería in Catemaco. Local Santeros create public images of themselves as experts in the local religious market, on the one hand combining a wide range of offered services under the label “Santería” driven by lucrative reasons, but on the other hand drawing on different local, African and Cuban traditions. Boundaries are drawn based on orthopraxical criteria, orally transmitted traditions and, above all, individual eclectic considerations within an again individually defined set of rules that tends to be understood as either Yorùbá-derived or Cuba-derived, implying two different ways to (re)interpret lore, myths, practices, gender-specific rules and their encompassing boundaries. The same elements that are used to create religious meaning and identity are actively delimited against other configurations of Santería, causing the field to be marked by accusations.

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60 Interview 6, 27.07.2017, translated by the author.
61 See Herrera Arias, Tratado de Ifá demo. According to Google Play (where the app can be acquired) it was downloaded over 50,000 times.
of charlatanism that are mostly also based on orthopraxical criteria and subordinated to the Cuban- or African-attributed origin. Digital assets play an important role for transcultural communication with mentors, peers and clients all around the globe but are completely dismissed for religious practice. Nonetheless, there are indeed applications like “Tratado de Ifa” that facilitate common ritualized practices.

Although I consider transnationalization a useful concept for the study of personal and material displacements based on transnational movements, it lacks the focus on the observed non-national boundaries. Syncretism, apart from the advantageous but too general focus on fusion processes, remains a mostly negative-connotated concept; still, it helped to make the different origins and influences in contemporary Santería visible. The few selected conceptual aspects of glocalization contributed further foci on specifically local elements of Santería and global social networks, yet I chose those foci to highlight the mentioned points; thus, the power-political, socioeconomic and communication-oriented potential of the concept remains unused. Since these three concepts address aspects that conceptually fit into hybridity that is oriented especially towards involved actors and their agency, I framed the topic of shifting boundaries within the “hybrid” context in order to emphasize (re)configuration dynamics.

Even though some approaches to the hybrid reconfigurations regarding Santería have been made, much remains to be explored since this summary of the underlying case study only shows a very small part of the whole picture. The theoretical scope and deductive methodology fall short of more detailed analysis and more specific and thus more conclusive categories that are derived from observations in the field rather than preliminary considerations.

Due to the complex (re)configuration processes that keep shaping contemporary Santería as one of the main Afro-American religions, further research on the topic is bound to turn up new aspects of this religious phenomenon. This article provides some groundwork for further studies, specifically for Santería in Catemaco.

Bio

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