

## Article

# Dissident Blood: Neo-Santeria in Barcelona and the Refusal of Sacrifices

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**Abstract:** This article explores the emergence and development of Neo-santeria in Barcelona, a contemporary trend of Afro-Cuban religious practices characterized by the rejection of animal sacrifice, a central ritual in traditional Santería. The study identifies and analyzes four key arguments employed by Neo-santeros to legitimize this rejection within the secular and modern European context: the scientific, de-traditionalist, individualistic, and ecologist arguments. Drawing on over a decade of ethnographic research, the article demonstrates how Neo-santeros navigate the tension between distancing themselves from certain traditional spiritual roots—particularly the practice of animal sacrifice—and the intertwining with European and contemporary cultural logics, particularly those related to secularism. The article situates Neo-santeria within the broader landscape of European holistic spiritualities, highlighting its strategic positioning as a religion that aligns with and challenges secularist expectations in modern Europe. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how Afro-Cuban religions, particularly Neo-Santería, can be defined by the ongoing creativity of their practitioners. This distinctive feature not only defines the fluid nature of these traditions but also contributes to the diversification and increased complexity of the spiritual landscape in European contexts, where Afro-Cuban practices are being intertwined in local cultural and religious frameworks.

**Keywords:** Neo-santeria; Afro-Cuban religions; sacrifice; secularism; holistic spirituality



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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Afro-Cuban religious practices in Spain have witnessed significant growth, driven by three primary factors. Firstly, an increase in public visibility has been encouraged by institutions like the Office of Religious Affairs of the Catalan government. Secondly, there has been a growing organization within these religious communities. Until recently, the Cuban migrant population in Spain, particularly in Barcelona, was neither settled nor organized as a cohesive community. In contrast, up until just five years ago, Cuban migrants arrived in Barcelona in a dispersed and decentralized manner. This situation has begun to shift, facilitating religious organization and the establishment of recognized houses of worship and *botánicas*—shops where the ritual objects of Afro-Cuban religions are sold. Lastly, a third factor has been the increasing participation of the local population, which has given rise to what I term “Neo-Santeria”, a religious phenomenon that intertwines with the broader context of holistic spirituality in Catalonia and Spain, reflecting trends seen across Europe (Cornejo Valle and Blázquez Rodríguez 2013).

Despite the growing visibility, organization, and local following of Afro-Cuban religions in Spain, there remains a scarcity of scholarly studies that account for their presence and provide an in-depth analysis of the religious dynamics at play. The literature on Afro-Cuban religious practices in Spain is limited, with a few notable exceptions: Sánchez Fuarrós (2008) and Pons-Raga (2020) for Barcelona, Pasqualino (2011) and Mena Cañadas (2018) for Madrid, and Pérez Amores (2017) for the Canary Islands.

This article seeks to contribute to this gap by examining a specific aspect of the local development of Afro-Cuban religions in Spain: the strategies employed by practitioners, particularly Neo-Santeros, to legitimize their religious practices in Spain’s secular context.

The central focus of this analysis is the rejection of sacrificial blood, a crucial element in traditional Santería rituals. I argue that this rejection serves as a key strategy for Neo-Santeros to validate and legitimize their practices in Spain, where animal sacrifice is prohibited outside of regulated slaughterhouses and where secularism and the *project of modernity*, as theorized by Asad (2003, 2018), predominates.

The rejection of sacrificial practices among Neo-Santeros is supported by the discourses of practitioners who self-identify with this movement. Based on my extensive research, spanning over a decade within various Afro-Cuban religious communities in Barcelona, I have identified four major discursive categories that explain the rejection of animal sacrifice: the scientific argument, the de-traditionalist argument, the individualistic argument, and the ecological argument. While these categories are heuristically useful, the discourses of many Neo-Santeros often overlap and cross boundaries, blending arguments from different categories. This variety in argumentation strengthens their stance against animal sacrifice and distinguishes Neo-Santeria from traditional Santería, which, despite its emphasis on sacrificial practices, is also becoming more established in the Catalan context.

The article is structured as follows. The first section presents an overview of Afro-Cuban religions in Barcelona and its surrounding areas, as well as the methodology used to identify the two major trends: traditional Santería and Neo-Santeria. This section also examines the tension between the two traditions, particularly when an *axis of conflict*, as the issue of sacrificial blood, arises. The second section presents the research findings by systematizing the discourses of Neo-Santeros regarding their rejection of sacrificial blood. The final section offers a theoretical and ethnographic discussion, relating the discourses of the social actors to secularist logics and demonstrating how Neo-Santeros legitimize their practices within the European context.

## 2. Approach to Afro-Cuban Religions: Methodological and Theoretical Considerations

Afro-Cuban religions represent a dynamic and continuously evolving field (Argyriadis and Capone 2011). These religious traditions are characterized by their structural flexibility, incorporating new elements into their ritual practices. The creativity of their practitioners and the transformative nature of both the liturgy and the cosmological framework render Afro-Cuban religions inherently heterogeneous and processual. In this light, each context shapes the religious dynamics and meanings, as every liturgical act generates new social and religious realities as well as possibilities. This has led scholars to define the Afro-Cuban religious field as a synergistic one (Palmié 2013; Pons-Raga 2020) or as a field “in motion” (Holbraad 2012), one that actively produces new realities. Within this framework, the inventiveness—rather than invention—as a constant and structural capacity for cosmological and ritual sense-making emerges as the cornerstone of religious activity (Espírito Santo and Panagiotopoulos 2015).

As a matter of fact, the incorporation of new elements into ritual and the flexibility of practitioners is not solely a current phenomenon associated with globalization or religious transnationalism. Rather, this flexibility has been a characteristic feature of these religious traditions since their African origins. However, in the present era, shaped by increased migratory flows of people, goods, capital, and ideas and further amplified by the digitalization of social life, Afro-Cuban religions have exhibited greater cosmological and liturgical flexibility. This flexibility enables practitioners to consciously and assertively navigate new political, economic, and legislative environments, responding to cultural and material challenges that are often adverse to their practices, especially in contexts outside of Cuba.

### 2.1. Afro-Cuban Religions in Catalonia

One of the regions in Spain with a significant concentration of Afro-Cuban religious practitioners is Catalonia, particularly its capital, Barcelona. The growth of these religious practices over the past two decades can be attributed to three main factors, as previously outlined.

The first factor is the increased visibility of Afro-Cuban religions due to public institutional support. Entities such as the Office of Religious Affairs of the Catalan government and the municipal government of Barcelona have actively worked to map existing religious houses and temples, engaging in dialog with practitioners about their rituals. For some practitioners, this initiative has facilitated closer relationships with public institutions, reducing their previous reluctance to engage with the state. As a result, some have used this platform to express dissatisfaction with the social stigmatization they perceive as practitioners of Santería by the non-practicing Catalan population.

The second factor driving the rise of Afro-Cuban religions in Spain is the growing social organization of the Cuban diaspora. During the initial waves of Cuban migration to Spain, particularly during the Special Period of the Cuban regime in the 1990s, the Cuban migrant population was scattered across Spanish and Catalan territories, integrating into the broader local population. As [Sánchez Fuarrós \(2008\)](#) notes, Cuban migrants did not form ethnic enclaves ([Margolis 1994](#)), such as those created by other migrant communities like Pakistanis or Chinese. This lack of collective organization made it difficult to establish consistent houses of worship. Religious practice was thus relegated to sporadic interactions, communicated through informal networks of devotees.

However, in recent years—exacerbated by the Cuban economic recession, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the escalating political crisis, driven by widespread public discontent with the Cuban government and its policies—the Cuban population in Catalonia and across other regions of Spain has become more visible and united, particularly in protests against the ruling authorities in Cuba. This increased public presence has translated into greater organization and the expansion of Afro-Cuban religious practices in Catalonia.

Despite this, unlike other Afro-American religions like Umbanda, Afro-Cuban religious practices have not achieved formal recognition at the institutional level in Spain. Practitioners still prefer to maintain anonymity and informality in their religious activities. As a consequence, there are no officially registered cultural associations or religious organizations dedicated to the practice of Santería. Furthermore, the Spanish Ministry of Justice's Registry of Religious Entities, the sole legal body responsible for the official recognition of religious associations, has not recognized any Santería-related entities to date. Nonetheless, informal and private associations where practitioners gather regularly to worship have grown in number.

The third factor contributing to the rise of Afro-Cuban religions is the increasing local following, whether among initiated practitioners or not. In Catalonia specifically, 2017 marked the emergence of Neo-Santeria, a religious trend within Santería whose adherents are predominantly Spanish and from other European nationalities ([Pons-Raga 2020](#)). The consolidation of Neo-Santeria in Barcelona can be understood as part of a broader “spiritual revolution” ([Heelas and Woodhead 2005](#)), which has paralleled the rise of holistic spiritualities or the spiritual descendants of the New Age Movement ([Hanegraaff 1998](#); [Heelas 1996](#); [Heelas and Woodhead 2005](#); [Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000](#); [Sointu and Woodhead 2010](#); [Arweck 2006](#)) worldwide. Thus, this is a phenomenon observed across various Latin American countries, including Cuba, Mexico, and Brazil ([Gobin 2022](#); [De La Torre 2018](#); [Juárez Huet 2022](#); [Karnoouh 2011](#)), as well as throughout Europe ([Hanegraaff 1998](#); [Heelas 1996](#); [Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000](#); [Bruce 2000](#); [Houtman and Aupers 2007](#); [Fedele and Knibbe 2013](#)), with notable occurrences in Spain as well ([Cornejo Valle and Blázquez Rodríguez 2013](#); [Prat Carós 2012](#)). As noted in the 2005 report “La situación de la religión en España a principios del siglo XXI” ([Pérez-Agote and Santiago García \(2005\)](#)), also discussed in [Cornejo Valle and Blázquez Rodríguez \(2013\)](#), this upward tendency is primarily driven by women, particularly those between the ages of 20 and 40, with a high level of education ([Prat Carós 2012](#), pp. 339–43), a demographic pattern also reflected in Neo-Santeria.

## 2.2. Breaking with Traditional Santería: The Rise of Neo-Santeria

In June 2017, Teo, an Afro-Cuban priest residing in Barcelona, informed me that he was about to perform a *plante*—a ceremony in which the initiates receive a consecration linked to the land by sacrificial blood. He emphasized that this innovation marked a departure from traditional Santería practices. For Teo, the ritual corpus of Afro-Cuban practices without blood, of which the *plante* was merely a part, signified the consolidation of Neo-Santeria as both innovative and authentic. He described this development as a stripping away of “all the traditional folklore, which serves no purpose other than to keep a few people in power”. This moment confirmed the emergence of what I term Neo-Santeria, a conscious and deliberate break from traditional Santería.

Through my fieldwork among Afro-Cuban religious practitioners in Barcelona and its surrounding areas, I have identified two distinct religious tendencies: traditional Santería and Neo-Santeria. These tendencies define themselves through what [Espírito Santo \(2010\)](#) describes as boundary-work, where practitioners construct their religious identity in opposition to the identity of others. Each group rejects certain elements of the other to affirm its own authenticity.

Although the boundary between these two tendencies is permeable and subject to change, there are specific elements—what I have termed “axes of conflict”—that make this distinction rigid and engender polarized positions. Perhaps the most significant axis of conflict is the use and meaning of sacrificial blood within ritual.

For traditional Santeros, blood is a fundamental and indispensable element of the ritual, and its use has become an act of defiance in a secular context where they perceive social stigmatization and political invisibility. The more than fifty traditional Santeros who took part in my research, the majority of whom are members of the Ilé-Oriaté Cultural Association in El Prat de Llobregat, near Barcelona, reported experiencing a sense of marginalization within broader non-Santero society in Spain, as well as by modern practitioners who have chosen to forgo animal sacrifice. Leandro, the priest of the ilé where my research took place, stated:

“They [the Neo-Santeros] water down the ritual. Of course, we won’t kill dogs—they are man’s best friend, but that only applies to European man! All I ask is that they respect me and my religion”.

The dominant discourse among traditional Santeros revolves around preserving what they consider to be the “ancient” (*como los antiguos*) ways of practicing and living the religion. They are acutely aware of the existential threat posed by Neo-Santeria, which they characterize as modern and as responsible for what they see as a perversion of the original cult.

In contrast, Neo-Santeros argue that sacrificial blood holds no ritual significance and should be discarded for religious practice to function properly. As outlined earlier, Neo-Santeria aligns itself with other religious dynamics expanding across Europe, associated with holistic or contemporary spiritualities ([Besেকে 2001](#); [Noomen et al. 2012](#); [Frigeiro 2016](#); [Fedele and Knibbe 2013](#)). This engagement is particularly reflected in their more intimate approach to religious practice, placing greater importance on fulfilling the specific needs of the individual rather than the reinforcement of a collective religious identity (although always maintaining a delicate and complex balance between both). Thus, most Neo-Santeria rituals take place in the private homes of the devotees and are targeted at resolving the physical and emotional ailments of practitioners, with a particular emphasis on personal growth and well-being. While traditional Santería similarly aims to ensure that individual experiences are both functional and meaningful, the communal logic underlying the ritual practice is significantly different. Traditional Santería is organized around temple-houses, or Ilé, which function as religious families, comprising a highly stratified and stable community of both initiates and non-initiates (aleyo). These houses function as the central framework for the community’s ritual activities and, as such, must be carefully maintained, respected, and prioritized.

In alignment with this, Neo-Santería, much like other holistic spiritualities, embraces complementarity with the practice of other spiritualities and therapeutic knowledge, which Neo-Santeros actively incorporate, such as Temazcal ceremonies, Ayahuasca rituals, and family constellations. In a religion primarily centered on the individual's needs, irrespective of their affiliation with the religious community, it is inherently accepted that individuals choose the religious path they find most appropriate. As a result, this approach accommodates the integration of other spiritual practices commonly associated with the holistic sphere.

One of the central tenets of Neo-Santeria is the rejection of sacrificial blood in ritual practices. In traditional Santeria, sacrificial blood serves to activate the sacred space, enabling a connection between the *orishas* (Santeria deities) and devotees, facilitating co-presence on the same existential plane, where they are able to interact and relate to each other. The rejection of sacrificial blood by Neo-Santeros is therefore deeply intertwined with their rejection of traditional Santeria and their desire to establish a modern religion, which, even though rooted in ancestral origins, as they argue, is adapted to the contemporary European secular framework.

### 3. Neo-Santeria and the Rejection of Sacrifice

To analyze the rejection of sacrifice among Neo-Santeros, I propose a categorization of their arguments into four primary categories. This classification functions as a heuristic device to facilitate deeper analysis. However, it is important to emphasize that it should not be interpreted as rigid, as interlocutors frequently draw upon multiple categories in their discourses.

#### 3.1. Scientific Argument

The first category I refer to as the scientific argument. A significant number of Neo-Santeros employ this line of reasoning to reject the ritual use of animal blood, arguing that it “makes no scientific sense” and therefore “serves no purpose”, particularly in terms of enhancing well-being or addressing ailments, which is one of the primary reasons Neo-Santeros seek out a priest. In fact, among the approximately forty Neo-Santeros involved in this research, the pursuit of well-being or the desire for an alternative healing method to biomedicine emerged as the main motivation for ritual work. The following quotes are illustrative:

“What’s the point of killing animals? I just don’t understand it. It serves no purpose other than for some of us to be amazed by the blood, but it has no therapeutic purpose, it has been not proved”. (Diana)

“Animal blood is not used to cure anything, except to bolster some people’s power. There is no scientific evidence that sacrifice heals, so it makes no sense to do it”. (Carla)

“We slaughter animals for food, which I have no issue with. But why kill an animal to cure a disease? That doesn’t hold any rational value; it’s simply barbaric”. (Jaime)

The emphasis on rationalizing religious practice, as suggested by Jaime, demonstrates how Neo-Santeros aim to find utility and efficacy in their rituals. This leads many to describe their religion as a scientific religion or even as Yoruba medicine. They argue that this framing makes their religious practices more applicable to the European context, capable of complementing or even challenging the dominant biomedical system, or what Menéndez defines as the Hegemonic Medical Model (Menéndez 1983, 2003). Their quest for empirical validation is central, with practitioners seeking to justify each ritual practice through scientific methodologies.



### 3.2. De-Traditionalist Argument

The second category is what I term the de-traditionalist argument, drawing on the work of [Beck and Beck-Gernsheim \(2003\)](#). Detraditionalization is understood as a process in which individuals and communities develop a distrust of previously dominant institutions—whether political, economic, social, medical, or religious. For Neo-Santeros, this manifests as a conscious effort to overcome traditional power structures, many of which revolve around sacrificial blood as the core of traditional Santería practice.

Some practitioners express this as follows:

“You have to move forward. We need to break with outdated traditions. Keeping up with the times is a gift and essential for survival”. (Daniel)

“Progress is key—not the harmful progress associated with neoliberalism, but progress that considers the advances we’ve made in alternative medicine, the women’s movement, and the internet. These are the kinds of progress that matter”. (Pablo)

It is crucial to note that the de-traditionalist argument does not conflict with the practitioners’ sense of historical or African origins. Neo-Santeros often position their practices as not only innovative but also as more authentic than Cuban Santería, aligning themselves with what they see as the “purest” form of the religion, located in Africa. This selective tradition ([Frigolé 2014](#)) aligns with what [Palmié \(2013\)](#) describes as ‘Africa as a chronotope’—a constructed space-time onto which notions of authenticity are projected and from which legitimacy is derived in the present. This phenomenon is not limited to Neo-Santeros but is observed among a broader spectrum of practitioners of Afro-American religions. As a result, scholars such as [Argyriadis and Capone \(2011\)](#) have discussed the emergence of a pan-Africanism that religious practitioners draw upon to assert the ancestral origins of their faiths and thereby legitimize themselves in contemporary contexts.

### 3.3. Individualistic Argument

The third category encompasses individualistic arguments. Some Neo-Santeros emphasize that rejecting sacrificial blood is a personal decision, informed by individual motivations and, most importantly, personal experience of what is functional and meaningful. For these practitioners, the traditional focus on animal sacrifice is not efficacious; they prefer alternative practices, such as the use of plants with phytochemical properties that promote well-being. Despite respecting the choice of others to engage in sacrificial practices, these practitioners assert their autonomy by opting out. The underlying logic is that “everyone should do what feels right for them”, with individual efficacy taking precedence.

Examples of these individualistic sentiments include:

“I don’t interfere with what others do. You have to respect everyone. What I feel when an animal is killed is pain, and that’s why I don’t do it”. (Adriana)

“I used to work in a butcher shop, so I don’t feel sorry for animals. But if I’m offering something, I think, why not flowers or fruit? Why should an animal die for me? I don’t like it, and I don’t think it’s fair”. (Raquel)

“Sacrificing doesn’t suit me. It feels violent, and I don’t want to be part of it. I see that others, like Teo, do it, but I choose to step aside during that part of the ritual”. (Ana)

### 3.4. Ecologist Argument

The fourth category is the ecological argument. Scholars such as [Giddens \(1991\)](#), [Frigeiro \(2016\)](#), and [Cornejo Valle \(2013\)](#) have noted that one of the defining concerns of late 20th and early 21st-century Euro-American culture is the environment. In recent decades, environmental and animal rights discourses have gained prominence in social movements, politics, advertising, and consumerism. Given this context, it is unsurprising that many Neo-Santeros, who are either Spanish nationals or have lived in Spain for many years and

therefore who are immersed in ecological frameworks that revolve around the climate emergency, the need for animal welfare, and the general protection of the environment, adopt these ecological discourses:

“We must respect natural life. It is the unnecessary killing of animals that has contributed to the environmental crisis we face today. Sacrificing animals is not the answer. We must learn to use nature’s gifts without expecting anything in return”. (Luismi)

“Life on Earth requires balance. I don’t understand why an animal has to die for me”. (Andrea)

These ecological and animalist arguments not only align Neo-Santeros with broader societal concerns but also position their rejection of sacrifice as part of a larger environmentalist ethic that opposes unnecessary harm to animals.

#### 4. Discussion: Modernity, Secularism, and Neo-Santeria

Talal Asad (2003) suggests that one of the fundamental pillars of modernity in the 21st century is secularism. He argues that the project of modernity—comprising a set of cultural projects—emerged within the European nation-state and sought expansion and dominance across the globe. Secularism, in this context, became a tool through which modernity legitimized its hegemony.

It is crucial to understand that secularism does not entail the elimination of religion from the public sphere nor its exclusion from the political or economic realms. Rather, it institutionalizes a division between what is considered “good religion” and “bad religion” (Mahmood 2009). Thus, secularism does not, in any case, signify the cessation of the proliferation of religious movements or spiritual practices. In this regard, scholars such as Giera and Urgell (2002), Cornejo Valle and Blázquez Rodríguez (2013), and Prat Carós (2012) have noted a substantial rise in so-called reflexive spiritualities—which refer to holistic spiritualities—in Spain over the last few decades. These practices have become increasingly institutionalized, receiving positive public attention and attracting a growing number of followers, especially women.

The critical question then arises: What distinguishes “good religion” from “bad religion”?

“Good religion” aligns itself with secularist logic, a theme explored by authors like Turner (2011) and Taylor (2007), who describe the rise of “low-intensity” or “minimal” religions. These forms of religion follow a logic of ‘belief without practice’ and, according to my proposal, adhere to four main principles: rationalization, the logic of progress, the criterion of individual choice, and reflexivity. This allows religious actors to incorporate and appropriate dominant cultural discourses, enabling them to construct their own narratives and legitimize their religious practices within the context of modern secularism.

##### 4.1. Scientific Epistemology

One of the primary principles emerging in Neo-Santeria is the rationalizing principle, particularly in relation to the rejection of sacrificial blood. Max Weber (2002) was one of the first social scientists to analyze rationalization, tracing its roots to the Protestant Reformation (Weber 2009). Rationalization involves the gradual replacement of feelings and traditions with explicit, intellectually calculable rules and procedures (Morris 2009). Weber predicted that this process would eventually lead to widespread secularization, contributing to the “disenchantment” of the world—a concept denoting the elimination of magical means of salvation in favor of instrumental reasoning (Casanova 2008; Hanegraaff 1998).

Secularism, then, can be understood as closely linked to the disenchantment that emerged during the Enlightenment, creating a reasoned and disenchanted worldview that has shaped European spiritualities ever since.

Despite predictions of secularization, however, the boundaries between religion and science began to blur as early as the 18th and 19th centuries. The European context witnessed the rise of religious traditions that sought to reconcile faith and reason. Occultists, for

example, advocated a religious sensibility in which faith and reason were no longer viewed as mutually exclusive, and they aimed to create a scientific or rationalized spirituality.

Hanegraaff (1998) coined the term “secularized esotericism” to describe this phenomenon, in which religious engagement with the sacred increasingly relied on empirical, instrumental demonstrations of spiritual events—often grounded in scientific epistemology.

In contemporary secular contexts, especially in Europe, only those religions that align themselves with scientific or rational principles possess greater social and political legitimacy. Neo-Santeria adopts this logic by rejecting animal sacrifice, arguing that there is no scientific evidence to support its efficacy. The lack of scientific justification renders the act irrational, meaningless, and therefore incompatible with what Neo-Santeros perceive religion should be—Yoruba medicine.

However, the science referenced by Neo-Santeros is not the dominant Western biomedical science but rather a more holistic understanding of what most practitioners call *natural energies*. This perspective is based on a holistic conception of the body, which contrasts with the compartmentalized approach characteristic of allopathic medicine and modern science. The distinction here is between science as a universal body of knowledge (episteme) and science as the product of Enlightenment thinking, which fosters dichotomies between mind and body, nature and the supernatural, and spirit and matter.

In Neo-Santeria, the search for a scientific religion reflects a reliance on trial and error and the inductive-deductive method to validate ritual practices. Even when these practices diverge from biomedical explanations, they remain grounded in forms of experimentation. Thus, each ritual action must demonstrate its effectiveness for the devotee. Furthermore, all rituals must be broken down into their constituent parts, each of which must be explained and justified through logical and deductive reasoning.

This dynamic is illustrated in the case of Diana, a Belgian Neo-Santera living in Barcelona, who recounted the following:

“I was bleeding constantly. Teo came and immediately diagnosed the issue. I had been dating a vampire—he was even hitting me. He was draining all my energy, and Teo told me that I was losing that energy through blood, that my circulation was poor, with clots bursting and causing the bleeding. Teo performed an intense ritual, and after a huge thunderclap, I was healed. I had been to a doctor, but modern science doesn’t explain everything. In fact, I believe more and more that it explains nothing at all”

While Diana expresses skepticism about modern science, her explanation still relies on a certain kind of scientific rationalization, informed by a biological understanding of blood circulation and clots.

In this way, Neo-Santeria’s scientific epistemology integrates one of the foundational principles of European secularism: the development of a “good”, rational religion that, although outside conventional and hegemonic science, still aligns with scientific reasoning and incorporates physiological knowledge about the human body without the necessity of invoking the will of the *orishas* to treat specific ailments or conditions, which represents a significant innovation over traditional Santeria. This leads to the consideration that in Neo-Santería, there are some rituals in which the Orisha is not consulted to determine the course of action. An ointment made from plants or herbal medication is prepared solely based on the knowledge of the priest. It is clear, however, that this priest possesses all this knowledge because they have been initiated into Osain—the Orisha of plants and the vegetal world. Therefore, the need for the Orisha on some occasions is more indirect in a ritual realm, though still present in the overall cosmology.

#### 4.2. The Logic of Progress

Beyond the pursuit of scientific justification, Neo-Santeria aligns with another key principle of secularist spirituality: the logic of progress. For Neo-Santeros, progress involves challenging and overcoming traditional power structures, particularly those that they perceive as authoritarian or stagnant. In rejecting sacrificial blood, Neo-Santeros position



themselves as advocates of a flexible, democratized religious knowledge system, as opposed to the secretive and hierarchical structures found in traditional Afro-Cuban religions.

Traditional Santería maintains a rigid, hierarchical socio-religious structure based on houses of worship (*ilé*) led by a priest (*oriaté*). These house-temples, though often operating informally in Barcelona, follow a clear chain of command. The process of initiation into Santería is long, ritualized, and dependent on the guidance of one's godfather and the approval of the *orishas* through various ceremonies. As one Catalan priest explained, "If you want to know this religion, you must go through all the necessary rituals and ranks. There's no way around it".

In contrast, Neo-Santería's hierarchical structure is fluid. The primary priest I worked with during my research, Teo, self-initiated as a Santería priest in early 2017, a decision that contrasts sharply with the traditional route to priesthood. He explained his position as follows:

"These rituals and hierarchies that the old Santeros follow don't make any sense to me. I respect that they do what they want, but I'm not getting involved. I am an *obá* [a Santería priest] because I believe I am capable of being one. I've studied for many years, and I know the plants, the snails, the chants, and the prayers. Why should the rest matter? The rest is just folklore and tradition".

This statement reveals three important points. First, there is a clear rejection of the authority of religious tradition. Second, Teo's self-designation as an *obá* is grounded in his personal conviction and self-acquired knowledge. Third, Teo's view of priesthood focuses on personal expertise in plants, divination techniques, and ritual procedure, all of which he regards as more essential than the traditional hierarchy.

The hierarchical flexibility found in Neo-Santería extends beyond the priesthood. Teo emphasizes democratizing religious knowledge, ensuring that participants can learn and witness what is happening in ceremonies. He aims to eliminate the secrecy that characterizes traditional Santería and advocates for a religion with knowledge that is accessible to everyone. As a result, in recent years, he has initiated the 'Yoruba Therapies' project, which consists of workshops where anyone interested in the healing knowledge of this religion can participate (see more in [Pons-Raga 2020](#)).

Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that the aim is not to eliminate all power structures—ceremonies still generate hierarchies based on knowledge and trust. This is a crucial issue that warrants attention even beyond the context of Neo-Santería. Notably, we observe more flexible, fluid, and context-dependent forms of hierarchization across a wide range of practices associated with holistic spiritualities, as highlighted by [Fedele and Knibbe \(2013\)](#), [Frigeiro \(2016\)](#), and [Cornejo Valle \(2013\)](#). Neo-Santería thus represents a "relaxation" of authority rather than its dissolution.

Access to rituals in Neo-Santería depends largely on the personal interests and learning capacity of the participants, a departure from traditional practices where religious paths are determined by the *orishas*, one's own *ashé*—the vital force of existence—and the religious community, as noted by Belén, who stated the following:

"The truth is, I love Teo because he's more progressive; he eliminates the nonsense of power and authority of other more traditional priests. He makes you follow the padrino and adhere to a religious family blindly"

It is important to underscore that the question of flexibility, along with the creativity and improvisation it entails, should not be conflated with the (un)flexibility inherent in the traditional socioreligious structure of a religious family referred to by Belén. Indeed, if we shift our focus to ritual and cosmological flexibility—rather than the power structure—Afro-Cuban religions exhibit remarkable and structural adaptability, and considerable degrees of improvisation and creativity by devotees across their practices ([Espírito Santo and Panagiotopoulos 2015](#)).

At this point, nonetheless, we turn our attention to the concept of flexibility in relation to power within the socioreligious structure. In this regard, a critical distinction emerges

between traditional Santería and Neo-Santería. As previously discussed, the openness of Neo-Santería enables greater individual autonomy and reflects a broader trend toward the democratization of religious practice and knowledge, with the cornerstone being the individual's will and motivation.

#### 4.3. The Criterion of Choice and the Holistic Individual

The de-traditionalist argument that emphasizes the relaxation and democratization of worship is closely tied to the rise of religious individualism. As Hervieu-Léger (2005) observes, contemporary European religiosity has undergone a transformation in response to the increasing importance of personal experience and experimentation (Cornejo Valle 2013; Aupers 2012).

In modern Europe, religious institutions are giving way to a diffuse network of associations, esoteric practices, and unconventional spiritual services, such as *botánicas*, as previously mentioned. Within this religious fragmentation, a new type of religious individual emerges, defined by personal autonomy and a focus on transdisciplinary concerns such as environmentalism, access to information, and gender equality.

Religious individualism, as approached by Cornejo Valle (2013), Carrozzi (1999), or Taylor (2007, 2008), among others, refers to personal spiritual pursuits that are deliberately practiced outside institutional religious frameworks such as churches. In this context, religion becomes elective, with individuals seeking out practices that they feel will alleviate physical, emotional, or spiritual discomfort.

The emergence of the religious individual is tied to what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim term as *institutionalized individualism* (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2003). In late modernity, the dominant logic is not grounded in static structures but in fluid, dynamic social flows (Bauman 2002; Lash 2003). In this regard, the individual is tasked with constructing their own biography. This is not a case of an anomic individual, devoid of norms, but rather one who autonomously manages their own set of rules, including those related to the spiritual and religious realm. Such an individual does not operate outside of social norms but understands them as fluid and evolving. The dynamics of authority observed in Neo-Santería and outlined in the previous section can be extended to a broader context. In contemporary Euro-American societies, individualism emerges not as a dissolution of the social but as a synergistic relationship between society and the individual. Through their decisions and actions, individuals navigate and shape the fluid normative frameworks available to them, with society being an outcome and a driving force of these processes. This aligns with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2003) theory of institutionalized individualism, wherein the individual/society relationship is not viewed as two ontologically or epistemologically distinct entities but as a cohesive, interdependent construct.

The modern individual seeks personalized, subject-centered solutions to social and systemic challenges, driven by the primacy of personal choice: 'Nowadays, even God has to be chosen' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2003, p. 71). Greenfield (1979) similarly described this phenomenon in the late 20th century as a 'spiritual supermarket', where individuals simply need to 'say yes' (p. 183) to access and believe whatever aligns with their desires. This elective capacity extends to the consumption of symbolic goods within a marketplace—if not a hypermarket—that permeates contemporary European society.

In this framework, it is unsurprising that some practitioners, informed by their personal experiences, experimentation, background, and ideological perspectives, choose to reject animal sacrifices. Neo-Santeros, as European practitioners embedded in a cultural context that prioritizes individual choice, deliberately opt to reject these practices as part of a broader strategy to align with dominant cultural norms in Spain. This shift contributes to the delegitimization of animal sacrifices within the religious sphere.

Consider the example of Dayana:

"I think it's fine for everyone to do what they need to do. I needed to find myself, learn about myself, grow, and I achieved that with Teo. I tried many things, believe me; I've done, and still do, other things—temazcales, constellations—but

what I do here is what suits me best, what has made me feel more fulfilled, more whole. This is where I've grown the most"

However, this elective individual, exemplified by Dayana's pursuit of personal growth, should not be viewed as narcissistic or solely focused on self-fulfillment. As [Griera and Clot-Garrell \(2019\)](#) argue, individuals participating in holistic practices are actively engaged in the contemporary public sphere and concerned with the societal challenges of our time. This prompts the consideration of the emergence of what I propose to define as a "holistic individual", who aspires to contribute to social transformation and the betterment of humanity. This both underscores the need to break from the individual/society dichotomy, as discussed earlier, and highlights the importance of recognizing these individuals as highly reflective and critical actors.

#### 4.4. The Age of Reflexivity

In addition to individualization, modernity is marked by a reflexive turn, as theorized by various scholars, including [Lash \(2003\)](#), [Besecke \(2001\)](#), [Urban \(2001\)](#), and [Frigeiro \(2016\)](#), during the first and second decades of the 21st century. These scholars argue that a defining feature of contemporary modernity is the reflexive—or metacultural ([Urban 2001](#))—nature of individuals who exhibit an acute awareness of the cultural frameworks in which they are embedded. This reflexivity has become a crucial point of analysis in anthropology, especially in the context of posthumanist discourse, where social actors actively rework and negotiate dominant cultural logics to shape their identities and cultural expressions.

[Lash \(2003\)](#) contrasts early modernity's reflective individual—someone who remains outside the structures they study but reflects upon them—with the agent of second modernity. The latter does not simply mirror societal structures but actively engages in producing and reproducing the flows and logics of social life. This shift calls into question the objectivity that was central to early modern and positivist thought. As noted by [Holbraad \(2011\)](#), in postmodern philosophy and science, the nature of objectivity and absolute truth has come under significant scrutiny. In the age of reflexivity, knowledge is no longer defined in positivist terms but understood in terms of probability or possibility (see [Willerslev 2007](#); [Holbraad 2007](#); [Viveiros de Castro 2010](#)).

In this context, subjectivities play a fundamental role in constructing discourses on what constitutes "truth", no longer viewed as an external reality but as something continuously produced and reproduced by social actors. The meta-cultural nature of Neo-Santeros aligns them with the logics of European late modernity, wherein individuals constantly elaborate and revise discourses about the society in which they live, the problems they face, and the collective goals they strive for.

To examine the reflexive character of Neo-Santeria, one can look at the ecologist and pro-animal arguments surrounding the rejection of animal sacrifice. These arguments highlight one of the most pervasive concerns of our time: the climate emergency and the growing awareness of the need to preserve and protect the environment, a concern [Giddens \(1991\)](#) referred to as the "politics of life". Environmental and sustainability goals, such as those outlined in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, are also increasingly central in social networks, political parties, and educational systems.

The incorporation of ecological discourses by Neo-Santeros reflects a notable transformation in ritual practice. For example, while a dog was sacrificed to the orisha *Oggún* in 2015, by 2018, a cleansing ritual was instead performed on a practitioner's pet dog. This shift demonstrates how the *orishas* have come to be associated with environmental advocacy and ethical considerations in relation to animals. In a *rayamiento* initiation ritual in May 2019, a dead spirit was invoked, who addressed the ritual participants with the words, "Don't kill so many animals. You must respect natural life".

Through such examples, it becomes evident that devotees and *orishas* within Neo-Santeria have embraced ecological and animalist logics, embedding one of the most prominent concerns of modernity—environmentalism—into their religious framework. The

reflexive incorporation of ecological concerns thus positions Neo-Santeria firmly within the broader logics of European modernity.

However, the ecologist argument in Neo-Santeria is not solely a product of reflexivity. It also draws from scientific epistemology. Despite the presence of alternative and often dissenting forms of rationality within non-Western worldviews—such as those of indigenous communities, who have long voiced concerns about the climate crisis and are now doing so more effusively—the dominant framework for affirming the reality of the climate and environmental crisis on a global scale continues to be grounded in European hegemonic science. In this way, the ecological argument within Neo-Santeria synthesizes two core principles of European modernity: the reflexive adoption of dominant contemporary discourses and the reliance on hegemonic scientific reasoning to validate them.

## 5. Conclusions

This article has explored how Neo-Santeria has emerged as an Afro-Cuban religious practice in Barcelona, where its practitioners and followers have devised strategies to legitimize themselves within a secular and modern context. Afro-Cuban religions have been steadily gaining followers in Spain, particularly in Catalonia, over the last few decades. This growth can be attributed to several factors, with the rise in local followers being especially noteworthy. This phenomenon mirrors the broader expansion of contemporary or reflexive spiritualities, descendants of the New Age movement, across Europe and beyond, often led by the *holistic individual*, who is both a driving force and a product of these new cultural imaginaries (Prat Carós 2012).

These spiritualities have redefined how religious experience is understood in the European context, positioning themselves as alternative pathways to well-being and health, inspired by sacred knowledge outside the Western hegemonic culture. Understanding the nature of contemporary European sacredness increasingly requires engaging with these forms of spirituality, which emphasize concepts like holism, functionality, and personal growth. At the same time, these spiritualities are shaped by cultural logics that diverge from the dominant Euro-American perspectives on the sacred and health.

It is therefore unsurprising that certain Afro-Cuban practitioners in Barcelona have established a religion infused with reflexive spirituality, integrating the holistic health framework. At this point, it is essential to recall, as outlined in the first section of this article, that Afro-Cuban religions are defined by their highly fluid, dynamic, and mobile nature, with followers constantly reimagining their practices to construct new identities in changing contexts. This structural malleability is key to their skill to devise strategies for legitimization in modern societies, where they navigate challenges such as secularism and ethical shifts while still seeking a meaningful spiritual framework. Furthermore, this structural malleability is essential to comprehending their growth in followers in Spain.

Despite this growth, Afro-Cuban religions—particularly in their more traditional forms—remain largely invisible in Spain's public and institutional spheres. This invisibility is compounded by a lack of academic research and public recognition, which in some situations practitioners seem content to accept without showing any particular urgency to challenge it.

One key factor behind this detachment from public institutions is the issue of animal sacrifice and ritual blood use. In Spain, the illegality of animal slaughter outside regulated slaughterhouses compels practitioners to conceal their practices, keeping them at a distance from public authorities. Nonetheless, some practitioners have chosen to distance themselves from traditional practices and sacrificial rituals altogether, constructing an alternative discourse that emphasizes four main aspects: a scientific epistemology of rituals, adherence to a progressive logic, the prioritization of individual choice, and the adoption of contemporary ecological discourses. These are the same discourses that dominate much of the European cultural landscape today.

In essence, Neo-Santeros have crafted a distinct strategy to legitimize their practices in modern, secular Europe. By distancing themselves from traditional sacrificial practices,

they align more closely with holistic spirituality, rebranding themselves as practitioners of *Yoruba medicine*. This spirituality embraces health in holistic terms, where the *ashé* may provide emotional and spiritual well-being that resonates more with modern European sensibilities than with traditional medicine.

At this juncture, if Neo-Santería is defined as a religion aligned with some of the more dominant European logics and, ultimately, as a component of the broader European spiritual landscape, we must pose one final question: To what extent has European anthropology contributed to the consolidation of Neo-Santeria? We must acknowledge that the anthropologist involved with the Neo-Santeros (myself) is European and has engaged in in-depth conversations with interlocutors on how religion, secularism, and contemporary spiritualities are perceived in Spain. Palmié's concept of the *ethnographic interface* (Palmié 2013) is relevant here, as it shows that much of what we consider Afro-Cuban religious practices and knowledge are the result of historical processes shaped by an exchange of academic discourses and their recursive use by practitioners. The boundary between Afro-Cuban religions and academic knowledge about these religions remains fluid, characterized by mutual negotiation and ongoing co-construction. Thus, the consolidation of Neo-Santeria in Spain may well be influenced by this process—a subject that invites further exploration.

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