

## **RELIGION AND IDENTITY**

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## **RELATION BETWEEN AFRO-MEXICAN IDENTITY AND AFRO-CUBAN SANTERÍA IN VERACRUZ, MEXICO**

In 2013, in an attempt to find out how local people perceive today the extension of the Caribbean world and its boundaries,, students from the Caribbean islands, Colombia and Guyana were asked to draw a map of what they considered to be the "Caribbean". (Cruse 2016).<sup>14</sup> Even when all respondents agreed that the "Caribbean" means primarily the Caribbean islands (more than 700 islands on the Caribbean Plate), the coast from Guyana, Colombia, and Venezuela, as well as Central America, through the Gulf of Mexico, till the southern coast of the United States was marked blurred, meaning that, in the boundaries of this zone, it became quite questionable whether the territories are part of the Caribbean zone, or not (fig. 1-2).<sup>15</sup> Can the Afro-Mexican culture in the state of Veracruz on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico be called "Caribbean"? Did the phenomenon result from the past, or is it just a created, forced, fictional "Caribbean"? In my study, I will explain how and why the Afro-Cuban religion, Santería, has become popular on the Gulf Coast, the reason for this, the extent to which the original Cuban traditions are followed, the extent to which the respect for the religion has changed in the long run, and whether the "Caribbean identity" of the locals can be considered authentic.

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<sup>14</sup> The Caribbean Atlas Project, led by geographer Romain Cruse, is the result of the collaboration with several Caribbean universities: University of the West Indies (Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago), Curaçao University, Anton de Kom University (Suriname), Haiti State University, és Havana University.

<sup>15</sup> Obviously, it would be worthwhile to involve a larger number of participants in the research in the future to draw more precise conclusions from it, in addition to the fact that everyone has a different opinion about the "Caribbean".

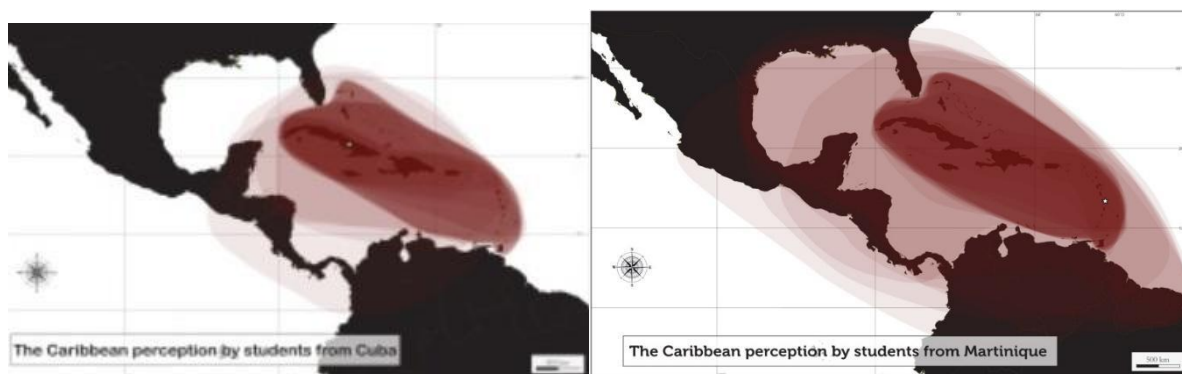


Fig. 1: The Caribbean perception by students from Cuba and Martinique (Cruse 2016)

Regarding the interpretation of Caribbean regional identity, the different perceptions of the border show the divergence within the region. This is partly attributable to the fact that the term "Caribbean", as an umbrella term, has only existed since the 20th century (Horváth 2014:23), partly because the citizens of the Caribbean states began to construct their collective consciousness after their independence. They started considering the region they lived in as their own, and have only been seeking to connect with each other in the last half century.<sup>16</sup>

The first subregional integration is the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), established in 1973 as the initiative of the English speaking islands. Its extended version is the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) from 1981 and the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) from 1994, where all independent and non-independent Caribbean states, Central American countries, including Mexico, can be members, as well as Venezuela and Colombia in South America (fig. 3). In summary, this is called the Caribbean Basin or the Greater Caribbean, which is a geopolitically cohesive area rather than a cultural entity (Girvan 2000:9). However, a region can only be successful in achieving common economic goals if it has strong regional cohesion and a regional identity (Lukovics 2004:214). This can be achieved through planned arrangements, creating common symbols with the distinction between the concepts of "we" and "them" with the establishment of the institutions, the implementation of the cultural programs.

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<sup>16</sup> Before the independence of the English-speaking Caribbean states, only Haiti (1804), the Dominican Republic (1844), and Cuba (1898) were independent. Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago in 1962, Barbados in 1966, the Bahamas in 1973, Grenada in 1974, the Dominican Community in 1978, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and Barbuda in 1979, Antigua and Barbuda in 1981 won their independence.

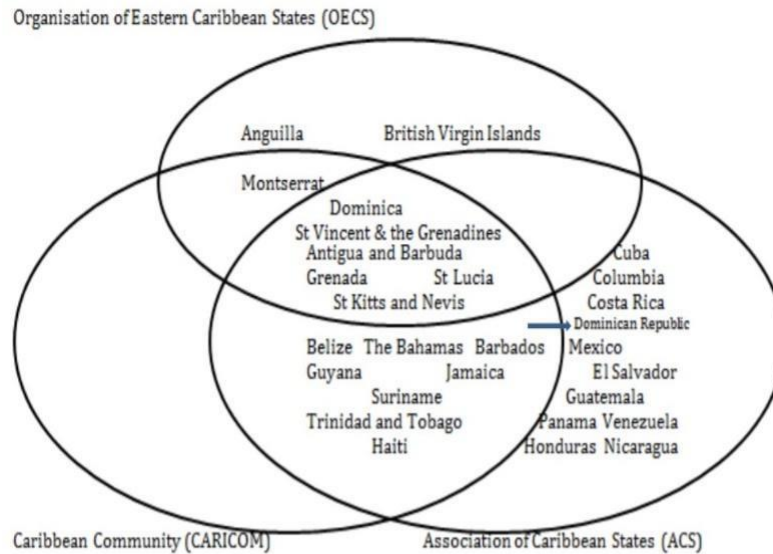


Fig. 3: Member States of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) and the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) (Girvan 2000)

For the interpretation of the Caribbean area, after World War II, cultural anthropologists used the comparative study method. A student of Franz Boas, Charles Wagley, pioneer of Brazilian anthropology, in the division of the New World, (Euro-America, Indo-America, Plantation America) used the term Plantation America to denominate “Caribbean”, in 1956 at one of the first social science meetings in Seattle. He published his theory one year later as “Plantation America: The Culture Sphere” (Wagley 1957). Wagley argued that Plantation America extends from the coast of Brazil (in the Northeast, the region of Bahia and some smaller states, and in the Southeast Minas Gerais and Espirito Santo states) to the Guianas, further along the coast of Venezuela and Colombia to Central America, across the Gulf of Mexico coast towards the United States, encircling the Caribbean islands. According to Wagley, the basic features of the Plantation America cultural sphere are: 1. the plantation system and monocrop cultivation; 2. rigid class lines; 3. multi-racial societies; 4. weak community structure; 5. Afro-American peasantry; 6. prevalence of the matrifocal family. The author identified many secondary characteristics which derive often from similarities in the environment, the common historical background, and the presence of a large population of African origin. Wagley as well, sees similarities in African-origin folklore and African-American religious cults, which have been fused with Christianity. For example, the Candomblé in Brazil, the Vodou in Haiti, the Xango in Trinidad, or the Santería in Cuba.

Sidney Mintz, an American anthropologist, known for his studies on the Caribbean, creolization and the anthropology of food, has also carried out cultural comparisons within the Caribbean. In his essay of 1966, “The “Caribbean” as a Socio-cultural Area“ (Mintz 1966) he delimited the region as follows: mainly the Caribbean islands, but also the Yucatan Peninsula, the Gulf of Mexico, Central America, and the northern coast of South America.<sup>17</sup> Common characteristics within the region include the rapid extermination of indigenous peoples during colonisation, their replacement by the introduction of African slaves, and the introduction of the plantation economy, with sugar cane plantations, coffee and tobacco farms.

The two studies highlight that the presence of the African-origin population, culture and tradition In Mexico, this essential element is mentioned as the “third root” (La tercera raíz) near the indigenous and Spanish origins (Beltrán 1946), which was appreciated in recent decades and has played a prominent role in the search of the Afro-Mexican identity (Argyriadis 2013:12).<sup>18</sup> Unlike other regions of the country, the state of Veracruz plays a very important role, as their attachment to the Caribbean area can be clearly demonstrated. Regarding the population of Mexico, it can be seen that most African descendants live in Veracruz after the State of Mexico (Internet Archive 2017:14), that is, according to the data of 2015, 3.5% of the population in the state of Veracruz: 266,000 persons from 8.1 million inhabitants (fig. 4).<sup>19</sup> Within Veracruz, there are parts where the black population reaches 37% of the population (for example Xoxocotla). Their ancestors were largely introduced during the colonial period through the Atlantic slave trade. According to historical statistics, the slave trade in the territory of Mexico was significant mainly in the first period, between 1575 and 1650, when about 200,000 people arrived in New Spain through the port of Veracruz (Hoffmann 2017:130), who were

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17 He mentions examples from Guyana, but he no longer takes Brazil as a basis for comparison, as Charley Wagley did, mainly because the three Guianas are separated from Brazil by the vast forest, so the Caribbean definition does not concern Brazil anymore because of the physical separation from the other Caribbean countries and Caribbean Sea.

18 The “third root” is an academic movement following the pioneering work of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, a Mexican anthropologist in 1946, that encourages Mexican researchers and artists to study the African elements of Mexican cultural identity. This movement is part of the network of a wide range of the transnational intellectual groups that have joined UNESCO’s The Slave Route program, among others. (see on the UNESCO website).

19 Today, there are 1.4 million African descendants in Mexico (by category: “negrasos”, “morenasos”, “costeños”).

distributed to work in the mines and sugar cane plantations. By 1681, half of the thousand inhabitants of the port were already black (Rinaudo 2014:6).

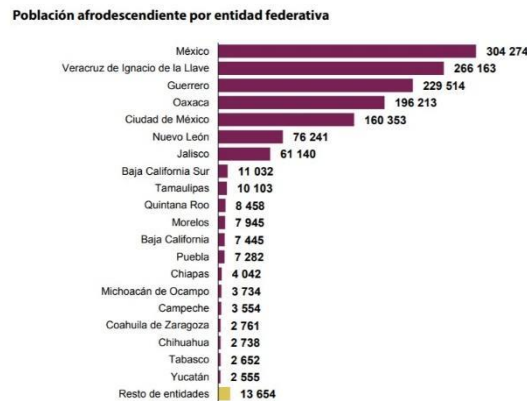


Fig. 4: Number of the African descendants in 2015 in the Mexican states (Internet Archive 2017:3)

Veracruz, on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, founded by the Spanish colonist, Hernán Cortés in 1519 under the name of Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, has been an important commercial city since the 16th century (half of Mexico's exports now take place here) and is the key part of to the Caribbean world. (Castañeda 2007:132-134). It will become an indispensable link not only between America and Europe, but also between the Caribbean Sea and the mainland. Within that, Cuba is also an important point in this relation. There has been a regular connection between Veracruz and Havana for centuries (Castañeda 2007:142). The discovery expedition to the shores of Veracruz also started from Cuba in 1518, led by Diego Velázquez. Tourism, and professional journeys are significant between the two cities, cultural exchanges have been established, the Cuban music in "Son" and "Danzón" style has been listened to in Veracruz, and in the 20th century the influence of the Afro-Cuban Santería has reached the multicultural city of Veracruz. (Argyriadis 2006:8).

There are two reasons for the Cuban attachment. On the one hand, since Cuban ancestry is more accepted, it is often suggested that black skin colour is a legacy of Cuban ancestry, rather than evidence of African origin. This kind of reinterpretation of their origin helps to avoid stigmatisation (Argyriadis 2006:8). On the other hand, the reasons why they can refer to themselves as Cubans are can be traced back to their shared history. It was highlighted by Charles Wagles and Sydney Mintz as well. That is, the most important common elements are colonization, slavery-based plantation farming, the slave trade carried over from Africa, and the greater presence of descendants of African

ancestors in our time. In light of all this, it is easy to understand why in the period of rediscovering Afro-Mexican identity, trying to find their historical and cultural heritage, redefining themselves, why they became interested in Santerian religion whose origin came from the Yoruba kingdom in Nigeria, interwoven with African-Christian elements in Cuba.

Their believers performed their rites in secret during the Spanish colonial period, as Catholicism was considered the official religion, and Santería was considered only a superstitious religion of blacks, which they sought to ban as much as possible (Dornbach 2016b:106). The situation did not change in the following decades. After Cuban independence (1898), in the first half of the 20th century, the Santería has branded a “faith of the poor and black people” (Juarez-Huet 2018), then, after the 1959 revolution, the local practice of the religion without official control was prohibited in a secularized state based on Marxist-Leninist ideology (Dornbach 2009:142), thus, believers could still not express their religious affiliation freely. However, Mexicans were able to inform about the Santería from movies, Cuban performances, and Cuban immigrants who fled to Mexico. The change was brought about for political and economic reasons by the 1990s, when tourism started in Cuba and the regime became permissive with the Santería, partly as an attraction for tourists (Dornbach 2016a:171). Thus, Mexicans susceptible to the Afro-Cuban religion were also able to gain personal insight into the ceremonies in their original homeland, where it was the most common religion among blacks and mulattoes. The reason for this was that the Spanish colonists, and later their descendants, followed the Catholic religion, which remains the religion of the majority of the white elite and middle class to this day. Thus, Santería remained the religion of the marginalized class, the black and mulatto population, for whom it plays an identity-bearing role (Argyriadis 2006:3).

Thanks to Cuban migration, after the spread of this religion from Cuba to other countries in Latin America, as well as to the United States and the major cities of Europe (Argyriadis 2006:1), a kind of whitening process is taking place and Santería is already appearing among the white middle classes. However, in Veracruz, Mexico, as in Cuba, it was mainly the black population that began to sympathise with the Santería, while searching for their own identity. The process by which they came to discover their own identity in the second half of the 20th century can be seen as part of the process of cultural decentralisation. In Mexico, it was initiated by the federal administration in all states of Mexico through the creation of organisations and institutions that helped local cultures to

flourish (Rinaudo 2014:7). The difference is illustrated by the first official Veracruz tourism book published in 1940 by the Mexican Tourism Association and the Department of Tourism of the Gobernación Secretariat (Rinaudo 2014:4), entitled *Travel in the Land of Flowers*, which encourages readers to enjoy a beach holiday (fig. 5). In the 1920s and 1930s, when tourism began in Veracruz, tourists from Europe and the United States who enjoyed sports, bathing, and sunbathing arrived at the same time as constructing the rail network and modernizing urban transportation. In the tourist book, most of the photos show upper- and middle-class tourists in swimsuits or wearing urban, fashionable clothing in the idyllic surroundings of palm trees at the sea, while the happy local people sing, play music and dance. The latter were depicted in the spirit of post-revolutionary nationalism as those who had moved away from poverty and peasantry, and their posture and dress also symbolised the "whitening". This period and the centralist homogenizing cultural nationalism ended in the 1980s (Rinaudo 2014:7).



Fig. 5: Pictures from the Tourist Book of Veracruz, 1940 (Rinaudo 2014:4-5)

The National Council for Culture and Arts (Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes - Conaculta) was established in 1988 as an example of the cultural policy coordination aimed to create new relations between the state and society in the field of culture, followed by the National Endowment for Culture and Arts (Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes - FONCA) which fund individual or group projects and scholarships (Rinaudo 2014:8). As part of this, a national program was launched in 1989 under the name "Our Third Root" (Nuestra Tercera Raíz). It aimed to study Afro-Mexican heritage



and their cultural value by recognizing the “Third Root,” the African elements. All this led to the realization of research, exhibitions, symposia, and workshops. An example is the Dirección General de Culturas Populares, where ethnographers (Guillermo Bonfil and Luz María Martínez Montiel) organised research and a series of cultural events in different communities within the state of Veracruz (Hoffmann 2017:137), like the Afro-Festival in Coyolillo (fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Pictures from the Afro-Festival in Coyolillo (Hoffmann 2017:137)

The state-funded Veracruz Cultural Institute (Instituto Veracruzano de la Cultura - IVEC), consciously emphasizing “Caribbean”, was founded in 1987 (Rinaudo 2014, 7.), launching a series of university events and, as a consequence, , the now very popular International Afro-Caribbean Festival, which is organised every year (Castañeda 2007:136-137), was advertised with characteristic posters (fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Posters of the International Afro-Caribbean Festival (Rinaudo 2014:9)

Santería priests (santero, babalawo) were invited to the first event from 1994 (Castañeda 2007:137), who, in addition to local witches and healers, publicly introduced religious rites, built altars, and held consultations (fig. 8).



Fig. 8: Dancing to sacred drums at the festival in 1996 (Castañeda 2007:137)

However, the initial enthusiasm soon came to an end, one of the reasons being the presentation of the bloody scene of the animal sacrifice (fig. 9). In 1999, religious events were cancelled due to the start of protests by Catholic groups and animal welfare organisations (Castañeda 2007:138). Thus, the organisers eliminated the religious part of the festival despite being by far the most popular event regarding the participation. This was a sign that the presence of religion, especially Santería practitioners, had become

important to the local community in Veracruz. The change in the organisation of the festival has therefore been criticized by some local residents.



Fig. 9: Animal sacrifice at the festival in 1996 (Castañeda 2007:139)

The exclusion of the religious aspects of the festival called into question the original purpose of the event. In addition, a temporary change of the name was also made in 1999. The "Afro" part of the title has been omitted (fig. 10), and the festival was simply called "Caribbean Festival" (Castañeda 2007:137). The change of the name was a consequence of the protests against the African religious practices that were mentioned earlier. Furthermore, new festival themes were introduced, highlighting products directly related to the local and state economy in Veracruz (sugar, tobacco and coffee) which means that the festival was used for marketing purposes of the local products, with a real aim to increase the trade with the Caribbean neighbours. With this act, they "whited" the festival and ruled out the presence of Afro-Mexicans (Castañeda 2007:140).



Fig. 10: It was written “Caribbean Festival” on the poster of 1999 (Rinaudo 2014:10)

Under great pressure, they were finally forced to restore the Afro-Caribbean name in 2001 (Castañeda 2007:140), even in 2005 it was already emphasized that “Festival for everyone”, open to everybody (fig. 11).

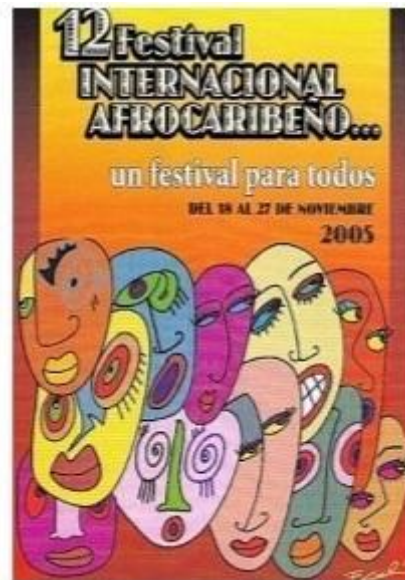


Fig. 11: Poster of the festival in 2005 (Rinaudo 2014:10)

The symbols representing Afro-Caribbean religion and culture were reintroduced on the posters of the festival in 2002, with a strong depiction of an African man and pearl necklaces that directly relate with Santería (Castañeda 2007:140-141). When individuals are initiated into the Santeria, they get to know each deity and give them ritual offerings. By the multi-level initiation, people acquire their necklaces, which symbolize the particular deities (fig. 12). Such pearl necklaces can also be seen on the 2004 posters (fig. 13).



Fig. 12: African men with pearl necklaces on the posters of 2002 (Castañeda 2007:141)

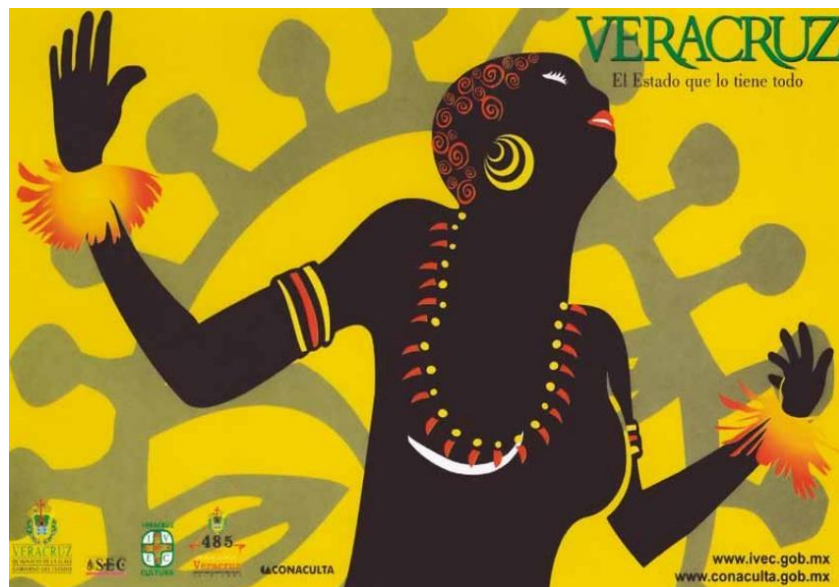


Fig. 13: Ritual dance and pearl necklace symbolizing the initiation on the poster of 2004 (Hoffmann 2017:138)

Thus, highlighting the Afro-Caribbean identity, the festival was given a unique character that differed from other state events in Mexico. Nevertheless, the state-sponsored, elite-organised festival actually used the local ethnocultural group for economic purposes, yet the Afro-Mexicans succeeded in the search of their self-definition, as it demonstrated the need of the local residents to revive the identity of their community. In addition, the public acceptance of religion and rituals within the festival made it more convenient for locals to practice their religion openly, of which several examples could be seen. An example is the small sanctuary of a local restaurant in Veracruz, depicting the Holy Infant of Atocha (Santo Niño de Atocha), who has been

dressed in elegant red and black since 2004, thus, from now on, his figure was identified with Elegua orisha / natural force, who has similar personality: childlike, healing power, and protector of the travellers (Castañeda 2007:145). The transformation of this altar exemplifies how the religious performances affected the local people (fig. 14).



Fig. 14: Holy Infant of Atocha (on the left) has been converted to Elegua Orisha (on the right) (Castañeda 2007:145)

The popularity of Santería, made public by festivals, also increased in the early 2000s for economic reasons. As unemployment increased in Veracruz, people turned to alternative solutions, and the Santería was able to provide spiritual healing (Castañeda 2007:144-145). Today many people offer consultations, there are several Santería centres within Veracruz where people offer consultations in the form of predictions, and this has become a good source of income for locals. In a newspaper, for example, between two announcements of anti-stress massages, consultations with a Yoruba priest (actually of Veracruz descent) who could solve every problem for \$ 25, are promoted (Castañeda 2007:146).

One of the most important differences in its religious development, in contrast to the Cubans, is that the religious community is absent or only very weak (Castañeda 2007:142). In Afro-Caribbean religions, as in Voodoo in Haiti, religion serves to create community as a religious family. In Cuba, a strong link is established between the initiator

and the initiated. The initiator can count on the spiritual help of the “godfather”, the “godmother” throughout his life. In Veracruz, however, this strong connection does not exist within the Santería. Instead, people are called together to perform a ritual, and after that they often never see each other again. Many times Cuban priests are invited to Veracruz to perform the most complex rituals, paying their costs, and no longer keep in touch with believers when they return home.. Moreover, the Veracruz santeros care little about being godparents (Argyriadis 2013:18). They work individually and adapt to the needs of the local people in solving material wealth, health, marriage, and love problems. As believers are not attached to them, this creates a competitive situation and jealousy. They cite an example where a person whose initiation took place in Veracruz decided to organise individual rituals in Cuba, and upon his return, the local santeros refused to support him (Castañeda 2007:143-144).

Since the local priests work individually, it means that they are trapped outside the transnational network of religion. They miss out on the congresses, the main debates, and do not use enough the opportunities of the Internet (Argyriadis 2013:10-11). The model of ritual networks is thus not reproduced, they are only organised at the local level. Moreover, since this Cuban culture is foreign, not their own, it also slows down the spread process. Becoming santeros is a real identity problem in Veracruz: the character of the Santería is Cuban, its African nature is not a good enough argument for the acceptance in the whole Afro-Mexican community, and its religious status is questioned, as it does not fit properly with the church model and Christian rites (Argyriadis 2013:18). This is why local interpretations have emerged on one hand, the ritual practices are often "re-Catholicized", and on the other hand, it is removed from the scope of institutional practices, so the only place that remain is the local market. This is the reason why there is no mention of Santería in the videos and posters of the International Afro-Caribbean Festival in 2019 and 2020, despite the fact that in 2019 the guest of honour was Havana. In conclusion, the common historical past, the large number of the African descendants, and the similar culture is not enough to immediately absorb and master certain Caribbean elements. It is a long process that presupposes a regular connection between the two regions in order for a cultural phenomenon to survive for long term. The acceptance of the Santería as an official religion in Cuba can only be dated to the 1990s. In any case, the religion interwoven with African elements has clearly aroused the interest of the Afro-Mexicans of Veracruz, who, as a result of the festivals, aroused a kind of desire to confront

their past and to redefine and rethink their identities. However, the institutions, cultural programs and festivals that promote cooperation within the region are regulated. From the outset, the various actors of the cultural policy have rejected the rapprochement with the African origins and the Caribbean culture and the recognition of all forms of common heritage. Instead, the aim was to strengthen tourism and trade relations. The state-sponsored festivals which were organised by the elites for political and economic goals rather than local identity-building purposes. Moreover, since the ceremonies have provoked among the Christians and the animal rights activists, in the future it will only depend on the organisation of the residents with the invitation of Cuban santeros, which has obviously high costs. The accepting, adaptable and flexible nature of the religion helps its survival and spread, and it can also be a new source of income for the local people. Another interesting fact is that, in contrast to Mexico City, the “Yoruba centralist” (back to the original Yoruba religion) movement did not develop in Veracruz. Above all, the practitioners of the Santería emphasize the “Afro-Cuban” character, even if there are many African elements. This is partly due to discrimination based on skin colour, which is not enough reason to talk about “Caribbean” in Veracruz. Since the definition of the “Great Caribbean“ is only a geopolitical concept, an artificially created entity that is being tried for political and economic integration efforts, it may be considered more correct to accept the view that there are many parallel identities within the region (Girvan 2006).

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