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Historical and Contemporary Transformations of Religious Phenomena in Guanabacoa: Syncretism and Territorial Identity

Transformaciones históricas y contemporáneas del fenómeno religioso en Guanabacoa: sincretismo e identidad territorial

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the historical and contemporary evolution of religious phenomena in Guanabacoa, from its colonial foundation to the 21st century, through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates historiographic categories such as symbolic hegemony, cultural resistance, and subaltern agency, alongside anthropological notions like popular religiosity, syncretism, and hybrid spiritualities. The central objective is to analyze how religious practices in this territory have been shaped by processes of symbolic mestizaje, doctrinal reconfiguration, and institutional transformation, in constant dialogue with the sociopolitical conditions of each period. Two key moments are identified: the consolidation of Afro-Cuban syncretism in the 19th century as a response to colonial imposition, and the religious diversification in the 20th and 21st centuries, marked by secularization, fragmentation of the religious field, and the emergence of personalized spiritualities. The study demonstrates that religiosity in Guanabacoa is neither static nor residual, but a dynamic, territorialized, and culturally embedded phenomenon that functions as a mechanism of identity construction and community resilience. The relevance of this research lies in its ability to offer a situated reading of the Cuban religious field, contributing to broader debates on the transformations of religiosity in postsecular Latin American contexts.

Keywords: Guanabacoa; Syncretism; Popular Religiosity; Hybrid Spiritualities; Identity; Cuba.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la evolución histórica y contemporánea del fenómeno religioso en Guanabacoa, desde su fundación colonial hasta el siglo XXI, mediante un enfoque interdisciplinario que articula categorías historiográficas como hegemonía simbólica, resistencia cultural y agencia subalterna, junto a nociones antropológicas como religiosidad popular, sincretismo y espiritualidades híbridas. El objetivo central es analizar cómo las prácticas religiosas en este territorio han sido configuradas por procesos de mestizaje simbólico, reconfiguración doctrinal y transformación institucional, en diálogo constante con las condiciones sociopolíticas de cada época. Se identifican dos momentos clave: la consolidación del sincretismo afrocubano en el siglo XIX como respuesta a la imposición colonial, y la diversificación religiosa en el siglo XX y XXI, marcada por la secularización, la fragmentación del campo religioso y la emergencia de espiritualidades personalizadas. La investigación demuestra que la religiosidad en Guanabacoa no ha sido estática ni residual, sino un fenómeno dinámico, territorializado y culturalmente integrado, que opera como mecanismo de construcción identitaria y resiliencia comunitaria.

La pertinencia del estudio radica en su capacidad para ofrecer una lectura situada del campo religioso cubano, contribuyendo al debate sobre las mutaciones de la religiosidad en contextos postseculares latinoamericanos.

Palabras clave: Guanabacoa; Sincretismo; Religiosidad Popular; Espiritualidades Híbridas; Identidad; Cuba.

INTRODUCTION

Guanabacoa, one of the oldest and most culturally rich municipalities in Havana, stands as a privileged setting for the study of religious processes in Cuba. Since its founding in the 16th century as a “town of Indians,” the locality has undergone multiple transformations in its population composition, social structure, and, especially, its religious landscape. Its history bears witness to the transition from a religiosity imposed and regulated by colonial Catholicism to the emergence and consolidation of Afro-Cuban cults such as Santería and Palo Monte and, in more recent times, the diversification of new Christian denominations under the influence of political, economic, and social factors. Through the analysis of historical, statistical, and anthropological sources and contemporary testimonies, this report explores, with a comprehensive approach, the main axes of the religious phenomenon in Guanabacoa: its historical evolution, trends in Catholic and Yoruba affiliation, the expansion of other Christian denominations, political and economic causes, and its manifestations in everyday life and local identity.

Historical Evolution of Religiosity in Guanabacoa

The religious history of Guanabacoa is closely linked to its founding in 1554, as part of the “Indian reductions” promoted by the Spanish crown. In this context, a church dedicated to María Santísima de la Asunción was built and opened for worship in 1578, becoming the center of religious and social life in the town (EcuRed, n.d.; University of Havana, n.d.; Government of Havana, 2022). In its early years, Guanabacoa was home to “reduced” indigenous families, Spanish settlers, and Canarian populations, which led to an early process of miscegenation. Seventeenth-century parish records show the demographic decline of indigenous descendants and the growth of the black and mestizo populations resulting from the slave trade (Roura Alvarez, L., & Hernández de Lara, Odlanyer, 2024; Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019). During the 17th and 18th centuries, temples of great symbolic and architectural value were built, such as the Parroquial Mayor (1607), the Church and Convent of San Francisco, the Ermita de la Inmaculada Concepción (1644), and the Church of La Candelaria (1748), reflecting the power of the Catholic Church and the influence of the Canary Islands (Government of Havana, 2022). However, what distinguishes Guanabacoa is its high proportion of African and mestizo population, which led to a unique religious syncretism. Unlike other regions where Catholicism was imposed homogeneously, in Guanabacoa, it became the basis for the fusion of beliefs, giving rise to hybrid practices and new forms of popular religiosity (Roura Alvarez, L., & Hernández de Lara, Odlanyer, 2024; University of Havana, n.d.; Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019; Government of Havana, 2022).

The sugar boom of the 18th century intensified the slave trade and consolidated a black community that developed its own cultural practices, many of them religious (Roura Alvarez, L., & Hernández de Lara, Odlanyer, 2024; Slavery and Remembrance, n.d.).

Guanabacoa became a key enclave for Santería (Regla de Ocha), Palo Monte (Regla Conga), and the Abakuá society (The Cuban History, 2022; Rodríguez, n.d.; Rodríguez, 2015). The municipal

museum, founded in 1964, preserves altars, artifacts, and documents that demonstrate religion as a mechanism of resistance, identity, and social cohesion (Slavery and Remembrance, n.d.; Rodríguez, n.d.).

Guanabacoa syncretism manifests itself in rituals, offerings, and beliefs in orishas and saints, originating from the Yoruba matrix and adapted to Catholicism. It is common for the same person to participate in Catholic masses and Ocha or Palo rituals, embodying a “multi-spirituality” that defines contemporary Cuban religiosity (Edo Aznar, 2020; Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019; Rodríguez, 2015).

With the establishment of the republic in 1902, the Church gained formal autonomy from the state, and Protestant missionaries and new cults such as Spiritism arrived (Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019; Hernández, 2016). The 1959 revolution imposed Marxist atheism, relegating religion to the private sphere and generating discrimination (Hernández, 2016; Cubanet, 2022a). However, the crisis of the 1990s revalued religion as a source of identity and spirituality, revitalizing Catholicism and Afro-Cuban cults, now recognized as intangible heritage (Hernández, 2016).

Finally, archaeological and anthropological studies reveal the persistence of indigenous traditions until the 18th century, miscegenation, and the transformation of cultural expressions into domestic rituals and sacred spaces (EcuRed, n.d.; Roura Alvarez, L., & Hernández de Lara, Odlanyer, 2024; Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019). This research allows us to understand how Guanabacoa’s identity was forged in the melting pot of cultures and beliefs, transcending colonial impositions and giving rise to new forms of religiosity.

Affiliation Trends: Catholicism, Yoruba Religion, and Religious Diversification

Religious plurality is an essential feature of Cuban society, especially in Guanabacoa, where approximately 76 % of the population identifies as believers, whether practicing or not (Cubanet, 2022b). This affiliation is not limited to a single denomination. However, it manifests as the simultaneous or alternating practice of various belief systems, such as Catholicism, Santería, Spiritism, and Evangelical cults, making statistical analysis of religious affiliation difficult (Edo Aznar, 2020; Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019).

Catholicism, established as the official religion during colonization, has maintained a significant presence in Guanabacoa. Marian festivities, such as those dedicated to the Virgin of the Assumption and the Virgin of La Candelaria, continue to draw large crowds and reinforce local identity (University of Havana, n.d.; Government of Havana, 2022). Although there was an uptick in baptisms and church attendance after the papal visit in 1998, the Church faces challenges such as declining vocations, an aging clergy, and coexistence with Yoruba and Pentecostal religious expressions. The Virgin of the Assumption, the local patron saint, was never fully syncretized with the orishas, which reveals a peculiarity within national syncretism (University of Havana, n.d.). The historical presence of the Jewish community also stands out, although its influence is currently limited (University of Havana, n.d.).

On the other hand, Guanabacoa is considered the spiritual capital of Santería in Cuba. Since the 1990s, the Regla de Ocha, Palo Monte, and Abakuá societies have gained visibility and legitimacy both nationally and internationally (Rodríguez, n.d.; Periódico Cubano, 2022). The municipal museum preserves emblematic pieces that demonstrate the evolution of these Afro-descendant religious practices (Slavery and Remembrance, n.d.; Rodríguez, n.d.). According to the Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba, there are more than 30 000 formal members, although

many more practitioners are estimated to be in Havana and its surroundings. Guanabacoa is home to numerous houses of saints and altars, making it a pilgrimage destination for Cuban and foreign believers (Rodríguez, 2015). These practices have acquired heritage, identity, and tourist value (Periódico Cubano, 2022; Rodríguez, n.d.), and the phenomenon of migration has contributed to their internationalization (Rodríguez, 2015).

Since the Special Period in the 1990s, there has been rapid growth in evangelical and Protestant churches in Cuba, a phenomenon also present in Guanabacoa (Hernández, 2016). Denominations such as Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Assemblies of God, Jehovah's Witnesses, and multiple Pentecostal churches have proliferated (Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019; Hernández, 2016). Their success is attributed to their ability to adapt to economic crises, the social support they offer, and the closeness of their religious leaders (Hernández, 2016). Currently, about 20 % of the Cuban population identifies as Protestant or Evangelical, with sustained growth among young people and popular sectors (Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019).

The coexistence of beliefs is a distinctive feature of religiosity in Guanabacoa. From the predominance of Catholicism in the 16th to 18th centuries (80-90 %), with an incipient African presence (10-15 %) and almost no Protestantism, there has been a shift towards increasing diversity. By the end of the 19th century, Catholicism had fallen to 65-70 %, Afro-Cuban religions had increased to 25 %, and Protestantism had reached 3 %. In the 1990s, Catholicism fell to 50-60 %, Afro-Cuban religions rose to 30-35 %, and Protestantism to 10-12 %. In the 2010s, Catholicism stood at 35-45 %, Afro-Cuban religions at 35-40 %, and Evangelicals at 15-20 %. Currently, estimated figures indicate 30-40 % Catholics, 35-45 % Afro-Cubans, and 20 % Protestants. These figures reflect trends, not exclusive affiliations, as it is common for the same individual to participate in Catholic, Afro-Cuban, and Evangelical rituals (University of Havana, n.d.; Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019; Hernández, 2016; Cubanet, 2022b; Edo Aznar, 2020).

Political and Economic Causes of Religious Transformation

The Cuban state has been decisive in shaping religious life over the last century. From the 1959 revolution until the crisis of the 1990s, a model of state atheism was imposed that marginalized religious practices and excluded believers from public life. This situation forced many to live their faith in private or to resort to syncretism and clandestinity (Hernández, 2016).

With the constitutional reform of the 1990s, the state ceased to be officially atheist and defined itself as secular. Restrictions on believers' membership in the Communist Party were lifted, but state control over religion persists. Churches must register, obtain permits to build temples, organize activities, and access the media (Cubanet, 2022b). In the case of Afro-Cuban religions, although there is some institutional tolerance, they are still not fully recognized in the legal sphere. The Yoruba Cultural Association acts as an official link, but babalawos operating outside this structure may be subject to harassment (Slavery and Remembrance, n.d.).

Although the current constitutions guarantee religious freedom, social studies and independent organizations indicate that more than 60 % of believers have suffered discrimination or know religious leaders whose work has been limited for political or administrative reasons (Cubanet, 2022b). Repressive actions include denial of permits, surveillance, threats, fines, and arbitrary detentions (Cubanet, 2022b).

The crisis of the "Special Period" in the 1990s, caused by the collapse of the socialist bloc and the tightening of the embargo, led to social breakdown that favored a "flight to the sacred"

as a mechanism of resilience. Churches, temple houses, and spiritual centers became spaces of solidarity, gaining legitimacy and new followers. The Catholic Church regained prominence through charitable actions, popular education, and spiritual accompaniment. Afro-Cuban cults reinforced their role within the community, offering health, protection, and spiritual success. Evangelical and Pentecostal churches also grew, especially in working-class neighborhoods, thanks to their messages of hope and social assistance (University of Havana, n.d.; Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019).

In the recent post-revolutionary context, economic openness and self-employment have influenced religious organizations. Celebrations such as Wemilere and patron saint festivals have been reinterpreted as cultural heritage, attracting tourism and generating income (Periódico Cubano, 2022; Rodríguez, n.d.). Santería has become internationalized, turning Guanabacoa into a pilgrimage destination, generating tensions between authenticity and commercialization (Rodríguez, 2015; Rodríguez, n.d.).

Finally, internal and external migration have contributed to the expansion of new religious denominations and the international spread of Guanabacoa religiosity. Migrants bring with them traditions that reinforce religious identity as a mechanism of belonging and social prestige (Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019; Rodríguez, 2015).

Diversification and Emergence of New Christian Denominations: Causes and Consequences *The current evangelical and Protestant scene*

The growth of evangelical, Protestant, and Pentecostal churches is part of an accelerated continental trend, also strongly evident in Guanabacoa (Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019). The number of legal congregations and informal houses of worship dedicated to worship, preaching, and community assistance has grown exponentially since the late 1980s, reaching an estimated 900 temples throughout Havana, and dozens in Guanabacoa alone (Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019).

The causes of this boom must be analyzed in political, social, and, above all, economic terms:

- Social responses to the crisis: Protestantism and Pentecostalism have offered social, emotional, and material assistance (soup kitchens, medicine distribution, community aid) where the state has been unable to address basic needs. This reinforces the perception of these churches' efficiency and closeness. Adaptability and plurality: The new churches have been able to adapt their liturgies, recruitment strategies, and discourse to local audiences, incorporating young people, women, and sectors traditionally underserved by the Catholic Church (Hernández, 2016). Influence of globalization and digital networks: The use of modern communication resources, such as live-streaming services and social media presence, has enabled a much greater reach, especially among young people.
- Formal political openness: Although strict state control remains in place, Cuba formally recognizes religious freedom and the legal existence of 54 Protestant and Evangelical denominations nationwide. International pressure and ongoing negotiations between religious leaders and authorities provide some room for maneuver (Cubamet, 2022b; Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019).
- Economic impact: The model of financing through tithes, donations, and support from foreign churches sustains the expansion and relative autonomy of these denominations, differentiating them from the formal dependence on the state shown by the Cuban Catholic Church in some respects (Hernández, 2016).

Changes in daily life and social manifestations

The expansion of Protestant churches brought changes in forms of socialization, cultural consumption, and community organization. In the neighborhoods of Guanabacoa, religious activities have shaped the social agenda, from gospel music and charismatic worship services to projects that support the elderly and at-risk youth (Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019).

At the same time, these movements have generated dogmatic and organizational tensions, such as disputes between pastors, the emergence of independent churches, and, on occasion, rejection by traditionalist Catholic or Spiritist sectors, as well as by practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions themselves.

It is also worth noting the emergence of people who move from one denomination to another (religious “wanderers”), representing the search for renewing experiences, a sense of community, and immediate solutions to material and spiritual problems (Hernández, 2016).

The state perspective and religious control

Evangelical growth also prompted greater state control, which, through institutional offices such as the Communist Party’s Office of Religious Affairs, promotes the registration and supervision of these communities, authorizing their operation, controlling their social work, and regulating their access to resources, travel permits, and aid from abroad (Cubamet, 2022b).

However, many congregations operate under tacit tolerance or in semi-clandestinity, especially in peripheral neighborhoods, which makes them vulnerable to repression or administrative arbitrariness (Cubamet, 2022b).

Manifestations of Religiosity in Everyday Life and Social Celebrations

Festive traditions and popular religiosity

Religious life in Guanabacoa goes beyond the strictly ritualistic sphere, becoming intertwined with popular culture, community life, and identity. Festivals such as the Tutelar de la Virgen de la Asunción, the Wemilere festival (dedicated to the orishas and African roots), La Candelaria, and the Day of Saint Lazarus mobilize thousands of people each year in liturgical acts, processions, Afro dances, community meals, and trade fairs (Periódico Cubano, 2022). These festivities provide a space for social integration and heritage reappropriation, functioning as living scenarios for the mixing and interrelation of diverse religious affiliations (Rodríguez, 2015). In homes and streets, faith is manifested in everyday details: necklaces of saints and orishas, images, mixed altars, prayers, spiritual cleansing, and “despojos,” consultations with babalawos, healing and protection practices, participation in evangelical services or Catholic masses. Religion, far from being a simple act of worship, becomes a strategy for survival, identity building, and a symbol of belonging to the local social fabric (Rodríguez, n.d.; Rodríguez, 2015).

Rites, syncretism, and creativity

The religious creativity of the locality is expressed in its ability to reconcile seemingly rival beliefs—Santería and Catholicism, Spiritism and Protestantism, etc.—generating ritual mosaics, offerings, meals, dances, and songs in which symbols, saints, and orishas coexist. It is not uncommon to see domestic altars adorned with both the Virgin of Charity and Changó or Ochún, and to share offerings and celebrate together in ways that bring together believers from multiple traditions (Rodríguez, 2015; Hernández, 2016).

Religion as heritage and cultural tourism

The tourism and heritage boom of recent decades has led to a revaluation of the religious phenomenon. The Municipal Museum of Guanabacoa, declared a National Monument, is a living example of the reinterpretation of these practices and the official recognition of the Afro-Cuban and Catholic legacy in the formation of the Guanabacoa and Cuban identity (Rodríguez, n.d.; Periódico Cubano, 2022).

Cultural and religious tours, the interest of researchers and foreign visitors in Santería and Cuban syncretism, are now an alternative source of economic and symbolic resources for the local community, although they also generate debates about authenticity, commercialization, and cultural appropriation (Rodríguez, 2015; Rodríguez, n.d.).

Anthropological Studies, Archives, and Local Testimonies

The religious field in Guanabacoa has been the subject of numerous anthropological, historical, and archaeological studies that delve into the dynamics of its beliefs, objects of worship, and ritual practices (Yanes Watson, B.I., 2019). The existence of abundant digitized parish archives allows tracing the transformations of the community at the demographic and family levels from the 17th century to the present (Rodríguez, n.d.). Testimonies from religious leaders and practitioners reveal the centrality of faith in everyday life and the pride of belonging to a region identified nationally and internationally as a “land of babalawos” and militant syncretism (Rodríguez, n.d.). The voices of the Guanabacoans themselves attest to the strength of community ties and the ability of religion to adapt, resist, and reinvent itself in the face of political, social, and economic adversity.

Comparison with Other Municipalities in Havana

Although the religious phenomenon in Guanabacoa shares structural similarities with other municipalities in Havana—such as Regla, Cayo Hueso, and Marianao—its uniqueness lies in the density, historical depth, and diversity of its traditions. The town is referred to in multiple studies as the epicenter of Cuban Santería, with a cultural and performative weight difficult to match elsewhere in the country (Rodríguez, 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

The transformations of the religious phenomenon in Guanabacoa, far from being a simple pendulum swing between religiosity, secularization, and resurgence, are the result of complex historical, political, and social processes. Catholicism took on new meaning in coexistence with Afro-Cuban cults, evangelical movements, and the “multi-spiritual” forms of Cuban modernity, in an environment marked by economic crises, institutional adaptations, and renewed searches for meaning. Guanabacoa today presents itself as a territory of cultural resistance, plurality, and religious creativity, where faith becomes heritage, syncretism becomes an identity solution, and devotional acts become sociopolitical and economic practices. The vitality of its festivities, the expansion of temple houses, and the international legitimization of its traditions are clear evidence of the depth and richness of the phenomenon.

Despite state limits and controls, the religious phenomenon in Guanabacoa demonstrates the capacity of communities to protect, transform, and expand their spiritual cultures. At present, religious manifestations are at once a reservoir of historical memory, an adaptive response to crisis, and a promise of a future for the inhabitants of Havana’s “water site.”

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