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Spirituality means many things in syncretic Cuba

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Raisa Valdivia Hernandez is a passionate Catholic who regularly attends Mass. But she is also a "santera," a practitioner of the Yoruba faith that slaves brought to Cuba from their native Africa centuries ago.

There are many people on the island like Valdivia, who meld aspects of Christian and Afro-Cuban beliefs into a syncretic faith known here as santeria.

Valdivia was disappointed recently when she wanted to use the Catholic church in Rincon, just outside Havana, to baptize a doll in an Afro-Cuban religious ceremony. The local priest sent her away, saying that the church wasn't the place for such a ritual. But he told her she could take some holy water to do the baptism herself at home because "God is everywhere."

Cuba's religious syncretism has been on display in the weeks leading up the Pope Francis' arrival on the island on Saturday with processions that brought out crowds to honor two locally popular Catholic saints on their feast days: the Virgin of Regla and the Virgin of Charity.

While both versions of the Virgin Mary are recognized by the Catholic Church, they are also adored by practitioners of Afro-Cuban beliefs, who associate them with certain "orishas," or deities. Our Lady of Regla is associated with Yemaya, the Yoruba goddess of the sea, and Our Lady of Charity is linked with the deity Ochun.

Thus, spirituality is expressed in many ways in Cuba, where different creeds and religious practices are widely accepted, even when they are mixed together.

Along with Catholics and believers in Afro-Cuban faiths, there are Jews, Muslims, Protestants and Buddhists in the country that for decades had been an atheist state. The ruling Communist Party in 1991 began allowing religious believers to become members, and in 1992 the Constitution was amended to remove the reference to atheism.

Now, diverse beliefs can be found mixed together on altars in homes, with the Virgin Mary sharing space with a ceramic Buddha and a warrior spirit from the Afro-Cuban faith.

Plastic key chains sold as souvenirs feature classic Catholic images such as the Guardian Angel, the Holy Child of Atocha, St. Lazarus and the Virgin of Mercy alongside images of revolutionary hero Ernesto "Che" Guevara and the Cuban flag in the shape of a heart. A decal announcing the upcoming visit by Pope Francis is glued to the back of a bicycle taxi next to an image of a teenage girl in a ball gown advertising Sweet 15 parties.

Valdivia shares her Afro-Cuban faith with others, recently serving as godmother to 51-year-old Marisa Gutierrez Ramirez, who will study and go through a series of rituals over the next year to become a Yoruba priestess.

She led Gutierrez through initiation rites that included a cleansing ceremony in Havana's Almendares River and the donning of golden robes and a crown upon a symbolic throne.

The ceremonies also included prayers in a Catholic church dedicated to the Virgin of Charity.

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