GODS, HAVE MERCED! A DOCUMENTARY FILM

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*Gods, Have Merced!* chronicles the struggle of Jose Merced, a Santeria priest, with the city of Euless, Texas, where he has been residing for 17 years in an effort to overrule an ordinance that bans the most critical element of his faith: animal sacrifice. As the city officials justify the ban on the basis of public health, Merced thinks he is merely a victim of selective code enforcement aimed at restricting his freedom of religion. Local and national media covered the lawsuit he filed against the City of Euless, and Merced seems ready to take the fight over animal sacrifice to the United States Supreme Court. He wants American justice to give his African-originated religion recognized in a city where people seem uneasy about a practice that brings back the historic fears of Voodoo and its popularly assumed malefic practices. The film explores the complex structure of Santeria, its African roots, its renaissance in the Americas and the very controversial issue of animal sacrifice in the US.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREPRODUCTION RESEARCH</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Matter Research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People and Location Research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals of Production</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RECONCEPTUALIZATION BEFORE PRODUCTION</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND PRODUCTION</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theories and Rationales of Use</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaches</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of Additional Texts Reviewed for Research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRODUCTION</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crew</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Releases, Copyright and License Agreement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSTPRODUCTION</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconceptualization of Film during Postproduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EVALUATION OF COMPLETED WORK</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postproduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendices

A. BUDGET ..........................................................................................................................30
B. DISTRIBUTION ...........................................................................................................33
C. APPROVED PROPOSAL ...............................................................................................36
WORKS CITED ..................................................................................................................43
INTRODUCTION

The film opens with a montage of news archives from Dallas/Ft. Worth television networks WFAA, NBC5, FOX 4, CBS 11 and TXA 21. The montage ends with a report on CNN’s *Out in the Open* program.

The montage suggests that a controversy is happening in a Texas neighborhood where authorities and residents disapprove of one man’s religious practices. As a journalist of CBS11, following a cue from the previous newscast by WFAA, finally utters the name of the religion in question, we quickly learn that the religion that originates in Africa centuries ago condones animal sacrifices.

Jose Merced is a priest of Santeria, a syncretistic religion, a mixture of Ifá (a Yoruba traditional religion that originated in Nigeria, West Africa) and Catholicism. West African slaves brought to Cuba from the Yoruba region took advantage of the Catholic Church’s multiple saints to bypass their White owners’ ban on the practice of their beliefs. As a result they worshiped diverse deities known as Orishas whom they considered as saints. Hence the name Santeria, which stands for the cult of the saints.

The sacrifice of fowl and goats represents one of the prerequisites for the African slaves necessary to communicate with their gods. The blood then allows the Orishas to manifest themselves and provide the believers with their guidance.

This practice is the reason animal control officers showed up at Merced’s door one day to put an end to the sacrifices. Jose Merced, a priest of this religious group in Euless, Texas, explains in the film why such a ban constitutes a violation of his American right of freedom of religion, which is enshrined in the US Constitution.

Santeria followers in North Texas are from all walks of life: Merced, a flight attendant at
American Airlines, is joined in the film by Dana Gunia, a Wall Street Journal Account Coordinator for Advertising, and Florida International University faculty member, Ernesto Pichardo. These followers believe Euless officials are trying to shut their religion down. They vow to shake earth and heaven to have their rights respected and restored.

Back in Africa, Vodun (or Voodoo) priest Innocent Guendehoun justifies the sacrificing of an animal as a core step in healing somebody or rescue him or her from any deadly threat or curse. *Hounon* (Ifa priest) Guendehoun talks about the importance of animal blood and references the historical and biblical case of Abraham who, ordered by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, was given instead a goat for the sacrifice.

Sacrificing an animal’s life to the Orishas, according to Priest Innocent Guendehoun, is a mystical feeding intended to replace a patient’s life. The meeting with the *hounon* in Cotonou, Benin, takes us on a tour of inner Africa where we visit the Gate of no Return, a historical monument that immortalizes the memories of chained African slaves shipped out to the New World, as characterized by Jose Merced during a car ride through the streets of Euless.

We also witness a traditional procession that reminds us of the similarity between Santeria practiced in America and these African ancestral practices.

Meanwhile, the City of Euless, through its Planning and Development Manager Mike Collins, justifies the ban on animal sacrifice by an old ordinance passed by the city in 1974. That ordinance, however, as one of Merced’s lawyers implies on camera, had never been enforced until a neighbor alerted the city. Mike Collins refutes any idea of religious intolerance and also vows a legal fight to protect Euless residents’ health from any blood-borne contamination. The trial took place March 10, 2008, in Fort Worth, with Federal Judge John McBryde presiding.
Jose Merced has been living in Euless, Texas, for at least 19 years and works for American Airlines. He grew up in Umacao, Puerto Rico, but has spent much of his time as a flight attendant, which takes him around the world. Upon learning about his lawsuit against the City of Euless in spring 2006, I tried to get his contact information from the *Dallas Morning News* journalist who extensively covered the controversy over animal sacrifice. David Grabbell immediately e-mailed me Merced’s contact information. Our first meeting at his home, situated on Ironbridge Street in Euless, was rather warm but distant. Jose Merced seemed to me reluctant to invite strangers into the mystery of his faith. Merced expressed his disappointment over the biased coverage the local media aired against him. I have to confess that the trust argument finally convinced him to let me into his life. In the interest of full disclosure, I am an African-born graduate student and possessed some understanding of the faith he and some of his followers embrace. The intention of this project is to allow the film to capture and render the principles and precepts that inform the Santeria religion.

My documentary approach that I proposed to him compared to the sound bites that local and national media have used to portray him in a “negative light,” according to Merced, finally convinced him of the usefulness of my mission.

Trust, I believe, is a fundamental goal to pursue when searching for a character. I remember my preproduction class in graduate school when Professor Melinda Levin repeatedly told us how fortunate documentary filmmakers should consider themselves. In the process of documenting a personal story, people invite us into their lives, a privilege I have experienced during the ten months I have spent close to Jose Merced. Merced and the Santeria believers
welcomed me and my big camera and lighting equipment without any reservation. Have I felt at
times, though, that I was invading their privacies? Yes! Especially, during my multiple visits at
Merced’s sacred shrine. I also, however, recalled Professor Ben Levin’s analysis in 2006, when I
made *The Sounds of Gideon*. Professor Levin taught me documentary production during my
Master of Fine Arts second year at the Department of Radio, Television, and Film (RTVF) at the
University of North Texas (UNT). *The Sounds of Gideon* was about an African tribal chief, an
associate professor and a traditional priest who teaches African music and dance at UNT.
Professor Ben Levin stated *grosso modo* that my views of someone of the same African culture I
am part of provided more insight than all previous attempts to grasp Gideon’s multifaceted
personality.

My first visit to Merced’s home in June 2007 brought me to terms with how resentful
and how cautious he was when it came to pointing my “camera-gun” at him. I would argue that
should *Gods, Have Merced!* become successful, it would have to be attributed to Jose Merced’s
trust in me to tell his journey that claims his right practice fully his religion. This connection to
the principal character of the film opened up the possibility of immersing myself in his mood, his
lifestyle and his schedule. I also met and interviewed for the film other people from the Santeria
religion.

People and Location Research

The Santeria religion follows the African religious belief that the place you live ought to
be the place where you worship. With that in mind, I knew this was not going to be easy for me
to go about the Dallas Fort Worth area searching for Santeria followers.

Santeria is largely misunderstood and has even been characterized as “secretive
underground religion” in the film by Mike McKammie, the attorney representing the City of Euless. Therefore, its followers often hide it. My research concerning other characters to be featured in the film evolved around people Merced knew. Once I got a hold of Merced, I asked him to introduce me to some of his fellow believers and some priests so that I could understand the religion in a practical light as well as in its complexities. I quickly found out that, even though Merced might not exercise his priestly duties in Euless, he is involved in every major ceremony organized in the Dallas-Forth Worth metropolitan area: ordination of new priests, drumming and prayers. Followers residing in Bedford, Dallas, Fort Worth and Arlington very often hold ceremonies only attended by initiated people. Thus, from July to November 2007, I was invited to many BA’TA, sacrificial and sacred drum parties organized to honor and connect with Olodumare, the supreme deity of the Lukumi or Santeria religion. My first visit to a BA’TA, held in Dallas, placed me in physical contact with Dana Gunia, a Wall Street Journal sales employee and mother of three, who agreed to be interviewed. She provided a very strong and passionate advocacy for why she thinks animal sacrifices should be understood as a remedy to help “somebody get better.”

Another character in the film is Oba Ernesto Pichardo, the supreme priest of the Lukumi Church Babalu Aye in Hialeah, Florida. Oba Pichardo won the United States Supreme Court ruling in 1993 against the city of Hialeah—the only high profile case involving animal sacrifice in the US. Oba Ernesto Pichardo, an accomplished scholar who teaches African religions at the International University of Florida, offers insight into the previous case and sheds additional light on some of the complexities of Santeria. I took advantage of his visit to Fort Worth where he participated as a witness for Jose Merced in the federal trial resulting from Merced’s lawsuit against the City of Euless, held on March 10 2008, to interview him.
On the reverse side, after two unanswered e-mails to the City of Euless and an unreturned phone call, I decided one morning to go to City Hall with Patricio Salinas, my cameraperson and fellow graduate student. While shooting some outside visuals, we literally forced ourselves into the permits and parking office where Mike Collins, in charge of City Development, agreed to be interviewed about the pending lawsuit. Mike Collins’ account validated my belief that the city did not create the ordinance banning animal slaughtering in the city limits of Euless to prevent specifically Jose Merced. As a matter of fact, that ordinance had been approved in 1974. Public health concerns only, according to Mike Collins, justify the need for such an ordinance. It is rather the enforcement of this ordinance that appeared to support Merced’s claim of being the victim of selective law enforcement since the same ordinance appears to have some loopholes in its application, as Merced’s attorneys would explain, that allow for the killing of fowls for table fare. Mike Collins’ account, confirmed by City Attorney Mike McKammie, gives a lot of credibility to the City of Euless’ justification of the ordinance. McKammie agreed to be interviewed for this film following his victory in federal court against Jose Merced in Fort Worth.

Another character in the film is Innocent Guendehoun, Vodun priest in Cotonou Benin, a renowned traditional healer whom I singled out on the only lengthy and complete film ever made about African traditional religions: Voodoo Secrets, produced by the History Channel. My research allowed me to give him a call before I left for Cotonou, Benin, a coastal country in West Africa, 200 miles away from where Santeria is said to have originated in Nigeria. My visit to his shrine was eye opening, as many similarities were obvious between the motifs and patterns of his Vodun faith and the Santeria faith. Priest Guendehoun offered me a thorough explanation as to why animal sacrifice is paramount to any African traditional faith.
Other interviewees include those I met in Washington DC in May 2008. Eric Rassbach and Lori H. Windham are attorneys for the Becket fund, a religious freedom advocacy group that decided in late March 2008 to appeal Judge John McBryde ruling on behalf of Jose Merced before the 5th Circuit Federal Court of Appeal in New Orleans. Court date has yet to be set for this appeal.

Funding

UNT’s RTVF and myself have provided funding for this film. My financial aid for fall 2007 and spring 2008, as well as summer 2008, supported my travel, food and communication expenses. Flights to Cotonou Benin and Washington, DC took the biggest part of the budget, as did my lodging and food expenses. Meanwhile, a timid fundraising effort I launched in September 2007 toward some friends from Togo and a couple of acquaintances who are American citizens proved helpful as I was able to raise $550 as a contribution to my travel expenses. My preproduction classes with Dr. Melinda Levin taught me that a successful fundraising should begin with close relatives or friends. With the relative success of this fundraising effort, I intend to extend it to many other friends on social networks such as myspace, Facebook and hi5.

The equipment costs were offset in-kind as I took advantage of the department’s state of the art equipment for my production as well as a part of my postproduction.

Distribution

I am confident Gods, Have Merced! has the potential for successful distribution in many cross-cultural, Hispanic and mainstream television outlets throughout the United Sates. It is a
documentary film shot on two continents: Africa and America; it touches issues Hispanics in the mainland and in the Americas can relate to. Over time, I am envisioning a dubbing or subtitling of Gods, Have Merced! in Spanish and the different characters in the film speak French both languages, along with English. Moreover, the dialogue the film is trying to initiate and the lights it seeks to shed on this controversial religion could make it a good fit for Public Broadcast Station’s (PBS) Point Of View (P.O.V) series, Univision, Telemundo, the Travel Channel and the Documentary Channel. Likewise, French speaking networks and Anglophone television channels in West Africa would be relentlessly pursued for the airing of this film. Another probable distribution route for this documentary would be the festival market across the nation and across the globe. I am hoping that the international and cross-cultural realities that transpire through the documentary make it even more relevant for universities, colleges, public libraries and the Library of Congress could also and would be targeted for the distribution of this film (see Appendix B).

Audience

The latest census figures show that the documented Hispanic population in the United States is roughly 46 million people, among whom Puerto-Ricans, Dominicans and Cubans represent almost 7 million.

It is feasible that the latter group of people, whether they be first generation Americans or born citizens will be interested in learning about a religion that plays a major part in their spiritual landscape. This population is one of the primary targets of Gods, Have Merced! As mentioned in the approved proposal (Appendix C), because religion and faith are another important form of social discourse, most Americans consider themselves religious. This means
they might be interested in a topic revealing another side of their primarily Christian faith. The PBS audience, meaning 25-49 year olds would be the other essential target. This documentary is also aimed at educating people, young college-educated African-Americans and Hispanics.

Last but not the least, certain intelligentsia in Africa struggling to reconcile Negritude with modernization will find the film refreshing. Gods, Have Merced! could re-open the identity debate and give young Africans a positive sense of pride and belonging in knowing that people in America have adopted a faith originating in Africa.

Goals of Production

At the end of this film, the viewer should possess a clearer understanding of the conflict between Jose Merced and the City of Euless over the right of Santeria believers to sacrifice animals and the city’s ordinance clearly banning it. Having chosen to spend more time with Jose Merced than with the City of Euless officials, my objective was to immerse myself in the complex reality of Santeria, a reality inseparable from history, race and power struggles. My goal was to provide the viewer with the most information possible about Santeria to get a firm grasp on its practices, the reason they sacrifice animals, the multiple deities shaping their belief system, the similarity of their religion with the current religious practices in Africa where the Santeria faith claims its origin.

Given the fact that production started during the time where the lawsuit was pending before the Federal Justice Court in Fort-Worth, part of the interviewing process was geared toward understanding and assessing the legal implications of the case. On March 10, 2008, the court ruled against Jose Merced, but it was not long before a non-profit religious rights organization based in Washington DC decided to represent Jose Merced in appealing this
decision. With the court date still to be set, I decided to understand why an organization that fought to defend the right of Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, Chinese Catholics and many other religions perceived to be under assault, decided to represent Jose Merced pro bono. My interview with two attorneys of the organization in their Washington office will give the viewer a sense of what options the religion contemplates, even as post-production wraps up. I would like the viewers to leave the film with the feeling that my coverage of the judicial aspect of the case has been thorough but also that the film has been conclusive, with the possibility of resuming shooting once a decision is rendered.

When going into production, my first goal was to report on the controversy over animal sacrifice. My second goal was to investigate why, as an African-born Christian whose education and upbringing were so rooted in the Western faith and values, I found baffling that non-Africans would choose to embrace the faith I was not raised in. That curiosity, stated in my proposal, systematically put me in the second role, next to Jose Merced as a character in the film. However, once the production kicked off, I decided to withdraw myself from the documentary, as positions on both sides of the controversies were so categorical, and Jose Merced and the City of Euless were making heated statements on the issue. I feared that placing myself in the middle of such a passionate case might compromise the film’s objectivity. I concluded that any personal involvement of the African-born director on issues opposing an African originated religion and a mostly White small town of Texas could derail the viewers’ judgment and lead them to protest bias. Removing myself from the storyline left me with the need to restructure the narrative and leave Jose Merced as the sole narrator of the storyline. He tells his story, and I use newscasts, print documents and subtitles to provide the viewers with the thematic thread. The only time my
voice is heard is when answers do not provide full understanding without placing them in context. My voice off-camera does restore this contextual clarity.
RECONCEPTUALIZATION BEFORE PRODUCTION

Prior to entering production, *Gods, Have Merced!* proposed a different path for the style. I wanted the documentary to be a reflexive, observational, dual-voice film about my own religious crisis as a Christian African discovering the embrace of my ancestors’ beliefs by foreigners while I, personally, have always considered these practices satanic. It turned out that my injection into the film could take out the prominence of Jose Merced as a main character of the film. This threatened, according to some friends, the impartiality required from a filmmaker dealing with such a delicate issue. After rethinking the ethical and aesthetic considerations mentioned above, I decided to withdraw any mention of my Christian faith and how the devotion of Santeria believers challenged it.

Another readjustment I made was the cancellation of my flight to Florida for lack of financial resources and the busy schedule of Ernesto Pichardo. In addition, on behalf of Jose Merced, the Becket Fund, an organization for religious rights based in Washington, DC, entered an appeal before the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans. The organization and Jose Merced are hoping to overturn the ruling Federal Judge John McBryde has made against Jose Merced, withholding the City of Euless’s ban on animal sacrifice. Obviously, this appeal changed the structure of the film and may suggest another ending to the film, pending the outcome of the appeal. It is very unlikely a ruling would occur before this film completes post-production.
INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND PRODUCTION

Theories and Rationale for Use

It is important to point out that the six different modes of documentary crafted by Bill Nichols in his important *Introduction to Documentary* define the genre: the poetic mode, the expository mode, the observational mode, the participatory mode, the performative mode and the reflexive mode. Choosing any of these modes is a function of what the filmmaker is trying to communicate. As defined by Nichols, “observational films exhibit particular strengths in establishing a sense of the duration of actual events” (Nichols, 112). This definition justifies many choices I have made in the process of making *Gods, Have Merced*!

In the opening sequence of the film, the montage of graphics composed of newscasts and newspapers titles convey the *media res* situation we are in: in the middle of litigation involving an individual and a Texas city. This situation of overt conflict put the viewers immediately inside the conflict and the following shots of Jose Merced dancing with his fellow viewers. The camera here is assumed to be “observing,” showing the microcosm of these people living out their faith in a suburb of South Dallas since Jose Merced received the city’s notification that activities involving animal sacrifice are illegal.

The observational mode identified by Nichols also implies that the subjects allow the filmmaker into their world so that the director could be a part of their realities. I was allowed into Jose Merced’ home early on in the film, recording him interacting with his birds, playing with his dogs, retrieving mail from the mail box and receiving fellow believers at his Euless home. I was surprised when in North Texas, on November 3, 2007, Jose Merced invited me to shoot one crowning ceremony. Carmen Reyes from Mexico had selected Jose Merced to become her *padrino* (godfather) as she leaves her Christian faith for Santeria. The ceremony consisted of
prayers, dance, and music and animal sacrifice. If the observational mode implies that the filmmaker is in on the secret of what was happening in the realistic realm of the subject world, I must admit that I failed to record the most important part of the ceremony, which started a couple of days earlier. For this crowning ceremony of Carmen Reyes, animals had been killed, but Jose Merced did not invite me to that part of the ceremony. This precluded my opportunity to observe 24 hours a day. Nevertheless, my cameraperson, Patricio Salinas, and I did shoot the following Saturday, which was the entire ordination of two new male santeros and one female santera, as well as Carmen Reyes. Jose Merced did allow us into the sacred shrine and told me that although the ceremonies are only opened to members of the religion, I could shoot it. This observational part of the documentary lends credibility to the assertion early on in the film that Merced is indeed an *oba*, a priest who deals with the spiritual world. The scene epitomizes the radical difference between the most dominant religion in the United States, Christianity and the Santeria religion. This is the first time in the film that the viewer is taken into the sacred world of Santeria, watching Jose Merced perform the ceremonies in Yoruba, English and Spanish. Even though, based on the theoreticians of *cinema verité*, the filmmaker has to be hidden from the story and should not intervene, this scene was an opportunity for me to inform the viewers about what was going on. I asked questions and sometimes stopped the ceremonies while moving the boom microphone behind the cameraperson. These interruptions are not rare, nonetheless “the observational filmmaker adopts a peculiar mode of presence on the scene in which he or she appears to be invisible and non-participatory” (Nichols, 112). Nichols went on to ask, “When does the filmmaker have the responsibility to intervene?” (Nichols, 112). As stated earlier, I intervened a lot during the observational footage I was shooting, whether with the main subject, Jose Merced, or when I was interviewing the Vodun priest Innocent Guendehoun in Benin. The
answer to the question could be found in the second of Nichols’ typology of documentary modes: the participatory mode. Michael Rabiger sums up this mode as “interviews or interactions with the film’s participants and uses of archival film to retrieve history” (Rabiger, 56). Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin made this mode particularly relevant in Chronicle of a Summer (1960). The difference between this film and Gods, Have Merced! resides in the fact that I, as a filmmaker, pulled myself out of this film as an “acting” subject. The mode nevertheless allows me one time to be overheard asking precisions from the Euless attorney, Mike McKammie, in front of the Federal Court building in Fort Worth, Texas, the day the court ruled against Jose Merced. This simply complies with the third documentary modality described by Michael Renov (1993) in Theorizing Documentary: analyze and interrogate. Even though I, the director, am behind the camera, I have to analyze the statements made on record by my characters and should “interrogate once more if the answers are not satisfactory.” Thus, these modes combined reflect the filming modes of Gods, Have Merced!: observational and participatory. The newscast archives, family photos and newspaper clips serve the historical need of the story and set the frame for it.

Overall, Gods, Have Merced! is one of these films that place their focus on the individual rather than the social issue. At their best, they reveal the one by means of the other. Some personal portraits, or biographies, will repress the political in favor of a concept of the subject as self-contained, self-determining entity. (Nichols, 164)

Approaches

Gods, Have Merced! has no voiceover narration. I tried to limit the subtitles also so that the film is not fragmented. I agree with D.A. Pennebaker that “you don’t have the narration to instruct you so you can be sure and understand that it’s good for you to learn. You don’t need
any of that shit” (Pennebaker, 325). Even though Pennebaker was speaking about the *cinema vérité* movement, which *Gods, Have Merced!* does not have the pretention to emulate, I found it accurate that viewers are able to watch and decipher the moving image and its sound. It is also important to note that while the production in the US was pretty well lit, I made the choice not to use artificial lighting for any of the African footage and did not use a tripod either. This was to distinguish the two continents and present Africa as a spontaneous continent.

Review of Additional Texts Reviewed for Research

Since my thesis production explores the difficulties of the Santeria religion in a predominantly Christian environment, an interesting example is *Jesus Camp* (2006) by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady. The rage, the passion and radicalism of some charismatic Christians in this observational film speaks volumes about how religion can be perceived to be trying to reshape and take control of the legislative and constitutional apparatus in America by supporting judicial nominees who favor a conservative agenda. Ewing and Grady’s film poses the problem of a Supreme Court nomination by President Bush and how these Christians prayed for a conservative Judge Samuel Alito to be confirmed by Congress. This Academy Award® nominated documentary proves the point that no voice-over narration is necessary to convey a message, but rather, observational and participatory modes help a documentary reinforce the neutrality contract viewers come to expect from the filmmaker. Jose Merced and his struggle to have his faith recognized or tolerated by Euless officials play right into the politics of documentary film and video. It “helps give tangible expression to the values and beliefs that build, or contest specific forms of social belonging, or community, at a given time and place” (Nichols, 142). This position calls into question the possibility of being objective in
documentary filmmaking. Do my African roots favor my understanding of Jose Merced’s plight? I struggled with this question throughout the making of this documentary and am not even close to finding a definitive answer to it.

_Harlan County_ (1976) chronicles a lengthy strike organized by 180 coal miners in Harlan County, Kentucky, to unseat United Mine Workers of America (UMWA)’s president Tony Boyle, accused of conspiracy in the 1969 murders of union member Jock Yablonsk, his wife and daughter. While people admired and lauded the great genius of Barbara Kopple, is it not true that the overall observational footage sided with the miners and forced the viewers to empathize with the miners’ union and lead them to hate the mine owners? _Gods, Have Merced!_ could then be considered as an argumentative piece about a minority group, it would be a “minority voice” that usually “persuades, promotes, analyzes, interrogates and expresses” (Rabiger, 55). Although understanding and tolerance toward Jose Merced’s faith seem to be the apparent themes that drive this film, it is not intended to defend animal cruelty nor is it a pretext to condemn those who do not share the Santeria faith.

When Marlon Riggs made _Tongues Untied_ (1989), he was not condemning the African-American community, for its hatred and intolerance of Black gay men; rather it was a dialogue-seeking film. Another film that guided my research in making _Gods, Have Merced!_ is _500 Years Later_ (2005), a film recently released by a group of black British avant-garde filmmakers led by Owen Alik Shahadah which inspired my trip to Benin, West Africa to trace the slave trade routes. The film, while re-establishing some truth and rectifying some generally accepted myths about slavery, did not seek to condemn; rather it was an invitation to revisit the history of Black Africans. Likewise, there are so many assumptions about African religions and the Santeria faith just as hard to dispel.
In 1963 Ousmane Sembene, the Senegalese novelist-turned-filmmaker released *Borrom Sarret*, popularly known as *La Noire de...* in French, and which later got an English title, *Black Girl*. Sembene, demystifies the role African women play in the preservation of the customs and traditions of the Black continent. Like the Voodoo servants in the multiple shrines where only women are allowed by the gods to keep their shrines clean and beautiful, Diouana functions in this way and represents the last Guardian of the Temple, the last woman who decides to keep what remains of African culture from being lost. Sembene himself always praises the importance of women in African culture. “It’s a fact that African culture has been preserved by the women,” he told *Cineaste*, “and it is thanks to them that what has been saved has been saved.” (Georgakas and Rubenstein, 43). The African males dancing with the masks immerse themselves in the powerful flow of ancestral spiritualities of the village. The masks also serve as a display of pride, a cultural pageant positing the mask wearer as complete member of a tribe or an ethnic group. Manthia Diawara, therefore, elevates the mask to the status of signifying African identity in his ethnographic and political essay *In Search for Africa*: “Masks represented Africa better than intellectuals and artists” (Diawara, 187).

Hence, in preparation for her own death, Diouana rescues the mask from the hands of her mistress, for the mystic and symbolic value of what seems a carved piece of wood, not for its artistic and mercantile worth. She holds the mask tightly, leaves it in her room and goes in the bathroom to cut her throat, in a ritualistic immolation manner. In Africa, goats and hens are offered to goddesses and idols in analogous mode.

Jose Merced’s formal interview was filmed against a backdrop of a billboard bearing the words *Templo Yoruba*. Jose Merced proposed having a doll of a Black girl in the frame, as a sign of the role enslaved black women from Africa played in preserving the traditions that gave birth
to Santeria in Cuban plantations. This doll, however, is not the only sign representing or remembering Africa in Jose Merced’s home. Scores of statues are visible in his hallways. Masks hanging on walls or the shelves remind the viewers of his total attachment to the roots of this religion.

In 2000, when the BBC commissioned Richard Stanley to produce a film about Haitian Voodoo, the producer captured on tape the paradoxical universe Haitians were living in. Forced to become Christians so that Christian missionaries could give them food through humanitarian aid, Haitians are portrayed in *White Darkness* (2000) as Christians by necessity and Voodoo worshipers by conviction. The observational style of the film reinforced by the extensive time the filmmaker and the crew spent in Haiti to make *White Darkness* a production inspired me in terms of production techniques.

The History Channel’s *Voodoo Secrets* (2005) appears to be the most accurate investigation to date about traditional African beliefs. Using academics’ opinions and testimonies about African religions and their negative connotation in the western hemisphere, *Voodoo Secrets* presents the viewers with sequences of shell divination, spirit possession, and ceremonial dancing. The history of the different rituals is traced back to Africa, and their exportation to the New World is studied through graphics, art objects and archives. Innocent Guendehoun, the only Vodun priest of Benin to be interviewed in *Gods, Have Merced!* was also featured in *Voodoo Secrets*. 
PRODUCTION

Overview

Production for *Gods, Have Merced!* started as a documentation of a controversy over animal sacrifice intertwined with constitutional religious rights. Due to the prominent press coverage this story had enjoyed in the national and international press, I decided to take advantage of the momentum, anticipating an end to the case when the federal judge issued his ruling. Instead, I was led into a long legal battle consisting of delayed trials, motions for dismissal of the lawsuit by one side and other complicated issues. It is likely that this film will finish final post-production before the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals makes any ruling on the case. Nevertheless, the legal side of the film presents the viewers with the arguments in favor of their case. Besides the legal aspect of this documentary, I wanted to unveil the Santeria religion by introducing the fundamentals of the religion to the viewers: the deities or Orishas, the set of beliefs, the history of the religion and the rationale behind the slaughtering of animals.

Therefore, the bulk of the film consists of interviews with the City of Euless officials, Jose Merced and the Santeria religion’s followers, the Vodun priest in Africa, and the attorneys fighting for the legal settlement of the case. As stated above, the stylistic approach is observational and participatory. A lot of the music comes from diegetic recordings. Newscasts recorded by Jose Merced were turned over to me. Also, newspaper clippings and archive photographs helped drive the story line and orient the viewers toward the conclusion of the film.

I felt like I spent enough time with the subject of the film and interviewed enough to give the viewers a sense of what really was going on. In Africa, my limited resources only allowed me to go to three different locations.
Schedule

The last shoot of this film happened Saturday, July 18, 2008, in Oak Cliff, a neighborhood in the southern part of Dallas. This shoot was made of Jose Merced’s visit to a botanica, which is a place where rare herbs, balms, statues and other religious paraphernalia may be purchased. This sequence showed Merced’s relationship of Santeria with nature and with the Catholic Church. If we consider that production began shortly after October 14, 2007, I have spent 7 months in production. Most of this period involved following Jose Merced and his fellow believers in ceremonies and drumming parties and interviewing him. Four sit-down interviews were scheduled with Jose Merced. Another important part of the schedule was the production phase in Africa. I was off to Africa for a total of 11 days. Production in the US resumed right after my return.

Crew

Patricio Salinas has been a helpful hand in the production process of this film. After having taken production classes together in the Department of Radio, Television, and Film (RTVF) at the University of North Texas (UNT), we both took the intermediate and advance filmmaking classes. These classes familiarize the student with film production techniques at a higher lever with an in-depth seminar on the film industry’s career paths. We developed a synergy that proved to be extremely useful when discussing lighting, framing and audio recording. Patricio, an Hispanic graduate student, showed an enthusiasm for my project and contributed to make the mostly Hispanic Santeria followers in Dallas feel comfortable around the camera. More than half of the time though, I had to go into production alone, either because
Patricio was busy filming his own thesis or because I could not afford to his airfare for production away from the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area.

Another helpful hand was Avino J. Ledesma, an undergraduate film student who served as cameraperson interviewing John Gibson, Jose Merced’s attorney from Dallas. Before coming to the US, I worked as producer and television programming manager for two television outlets in Togo, my home country. Benin being a neighboring country to Togo, I benefited from the presence of Alain Holala, a former employee of mine at TV2, a privately owned television station I worked for from June 2001 to January 2003. Alain Holala was also my camera operator on my entertainment shows at the Togolese public television, TVT, for more than five years. He traveled from Togo to join me in crisscrossing the landscapes of Benin in quest of images. He stayed with me for three days, but when he left, I had to shoot much of the remaining footage on my own.

Even though a small crew or a one-man crew certainly has advantages in guaranteeing some level of intimacy with the different characters and make the travel cost inexpensive, the ideal situation would have been to have at least three persons to help.

Equipment

The footage of Gods, Have Merced! comprises three different sources: footage produced in the course of this film, newscast archives and footage of my former documentaries shot while still living in Africa. Most of the film is shot on the JVC 5100™. JVC Corporation introduces this camera as a:

high-performance Professional DV 3-CCD camcorder that boasts advanced features such a 12-bit ADC (used only in broadcast cameras), with a new, upgraded 24-bit DSP for superior ultra low noise and expanded image control including a 16:9 mode. A performance step up from JVC’s popular GY-DV5000U, the 5100™ produces sharper
images with far less noise. An additional XLR microphone connector has been added, along with a standard "Gold" Anton Bauer battery mount, and improved integration with JVC’s Direct to Edit (DTE) hard disk recording module, the DR-DV5000U. (http://pro.jvc.com)

This camera enabled me to enjoy a deep sense of confidence for the quality of the images being recorded and for its dependability when used in a travel situation. I checked to make sure I would have in Africa the power plugs to charge the batteries. Using this camera proved effective in that I was able to apply a cinemode to my pictures to give them a film look. This cinemode feature, in combination with the 16/9 aspect ratio usually gives the viewer a crisp image when lighting is adequate. While in Africa, the weight of the JVC 5100™ allowed for keeping some balance in windy situations in the absence of the tripod.

My audio recordings varied and depended greatly upon whether or not I had a crew. With a crew, I systematically recorded my audio through a Sony mixer to regulate and monitor the audio input. More often I had to rely on the direct plugging of the microphone XLR cables into the JVC 5100™ input when I shot alone. The use of the new Sennheiser™ wireless microphones made my observational phase with Jose Merced easier. The reliability of the equipment in a production as ambitious as this one was important to its success. Quoted by Michael Renov, avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter has said, “Technology, overcoming time and space, has brought all life on earth so close together that the most remote ‘facts,’ as much as those closest to hand, have become significant for each individual’s life. Reason has given rise to a secularization of the divine” (Renov, 171).

Releases, Copyright and License Agreements

All my subjects have signed a written release agreeing to be filmed or to appear on camera. This was always done on location and safely secured. In Africa, however, the rules are
different from those in the US. For instance, before any interview, the Vodun priest Innocent Guendehoun requested a bottle of Schnapps, a gin brand widely used in West Africa. He said the beverage allowed him to get permission from the deities for the interview to proceed. After the libation with the Schnapps, I sought an on-screen verbal permission. This method is not rare and has been used many times by Frederick Wiseman in his observational films. I also used this on-screen permission technique to secure release from Mike Collins when he unexpectedly agreed to an interview with me because the release forms were in my car, which was parked far from the city office.

I have used some newscast clips recorded off-air by Jose Merced. Based on principles of fair use in the federal copyright law, it was necessary to use the footage that illustrated the point I am making about media hype and public outrage over the animal sacrifice controversy. The Stanford University website explains that fair use is legal depending on “the purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of a commercial nature or is for nonprofit educational purposes -- Courts are more likely to find fair use where the use is for noncommercial purposes” (http://fairuse.stanford.edu). *Gods, Have Merced!* is an educational documentary.

As of the scanned family pictures of Jose Merced in San Juan and Macao, Puerto Rico, I received Merced’s permission to use them.

**Budget**

Details of the budget for this film can be found in Appendix A.
POST PRODUCTION

Schedule

Due to the ongoing legal fight between Jose Merced and the City of Euless, the first rough cut was submitted to committee members on May 3, 2008. Postproduction did not start until April 4, 2008, when I learned that Merced had decided to appeal the first ruling. Another cut was presented to committee members a few days after based on the feedback received. After my return from Washington, DC, May 29, 2008, the structure changed a little bit because of the new elements introduced by the attorneys representing Merced at the Court of Appeals. Many audio peaks, structure flaws and image color have demanded reworking and fine-tuning. The final version of this film takes into account the diverse corrections and suggestions provided by thesis committee members.

Equipment

The University of North Texas (UNT) Department of Radio, Television, and Film (RTVF) possesses a state of the art editing suite. I took advantage of this asset to capture all my footage through the Final Cut Pro™ software installed on the Apple G4™ desktop, but copied all the footage on my personal MacBook Pro™, also equipped with Final Cut Pro HD. I chose the non-linear Final Cut Pro HD™ instead of Avid HD™ because I had just finished, during spring, editing a short fiction film using AVID HD and wanted to keep my knowledge of Final Cut Pro HD up to date by editing my thesis with it. My MacBook Pro™ is 2 gigabytes powerful in RAM memory and 74 gigabytes in internal disk space. However, I used a 500 Seagate™ external hard drive to work all the footage since I need a lot more space that my computer has.

I have also scanned all print documents and photos using the scanner located at the
graduate access library. A purchase of blank DVDs allowed me to provide my committee members with copy of any cut I have made.

Reconceptualization of Film during Postproduction

Having made the decision to make a voice-over-free documentary, I found myself challenged in assembling audio and graphics to convey a coherent story. If Eiseinsteen’s theory of editing insists on the juxtaposition of “images, or shots, in ways that jarred the viewer into achieving new insights,” the editing of Gods, Have Merced! presented me with some hard times in tying together heteroclitic shots from the Euless, Africa, Dallas, Washington, DC, newscasts and print elements. When I was going into production I saw myself as a character alongside Jose Merced to tell two stories of varying relevance: my dealing with my Christian religion crisis and his struggling to ensure he could practice his African faith in total freedom. Once the dual-voice story is reviewed, the entire film imposed what Alan Rosenthal called a new “slant” to the story. The newscast clips and the press clips are my “slant” into the story as they function as the indication of where the story is at a given point in time. As a director who abhors using subtitles in a documentary, I had to settle for some, as I needed to situate the locations where actions were taking place and fill some elliptic gaps in the observational narration. I also had the difficult task of choosing from so many materials I shot and that I like. However, as Rabiger rightly acknowledges, “directors are handicapped in this area through over-familiarity with their own intentions” (Rabiger, 408). I would have been a better editor without an “obligated and unprejudiced eye” (Rabiger, 408).

The exercise of re-conceptualizing the film’s structure helped me to replace and reposition Jose Merced as the central piece of the narrative. Another challenge of postproduction
that required me to rethink the structure is the appeal interjected in the case by the Becket Fund. It simply signaled that the film was not going to achieve the classic native goal of “equilibrium” at the end. It would end as it had begun: the conflict is on!
EVALUATION OF COMPLETED WORK

Production

If there is one thing I am very proud of during production, it has to be the degree of collaboration and trust between Jose Merced and me. I came to measure this trust in the afternoon of March 10, 2008, when a very disappointed Jose Merced allowed me into his house and came out to tell the CBS 11 news crew that he did not want to talk to any media outlets… “except Richard,” he added. These statements made in front of a major player in the Dallas-Fort Worth media market made me appreciate the degree of confidence he had in me, even though I was merely a one-person-media outlet. This trust most assuredly provided the film with some verité moments that I am not sure Jose Merced would have allowed anyone else to film. My relations with the city officials have also been exceptional, granting me the opportunity to have their accounts of the controversy. Some ethical issues, however, took hold of me when I complied with orders from Jose Merced to shut down the camera because of some ceremonies being too secret. Should I have acted as if I had turned the camera off but continued to roll tape without anyone knowing for the sake of evidence and the public’s right to know? These ceremonies were those during which animals were being killed. I decided not to apply this ruse. I was able, instead, to film similar ceremonies in the past in my home country without any objections. Is sensitivity to animal sacrifice an effective issue depending on cultures, nationalities or race?

Furthermore, I could have done a better job in anticipating the duration of the events and all the legal implications they finally posed. Besides, financial resources turned out to be an obstacle to how I envisioned the scope of the film, as I had to take Hialeah, Florida out of the
film. I, however, am very pleased with the technical quality of the film’s images as well as its overall audio quality.

Postproduction

Final Cut Pro™ has helped the film maintain a certain fluidity and flow of image. After having struggled a little bit about how to tell the story, I think the formula I found using news and print documents as lead-ins for the story works just fine. The music gives a sense of gravity to the movie, and the observational footage mixed with the different interviews give a good sense of what the story is. As no one can predict what the outcome of the case could be in court, I used press clippings to announce the upcoming trial in New Orleans. As a self-critique, I think a better anticipation of the storyline change could have saved me the time spent trying to restructure the film after the director as a character had been removed.
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APPENDIX B

DISTRIBUTION
Festivals are a very important gateway to have independent films seen. Therefore, domestic festivals will be addressed applications for the screening of *Gods, Have Merced!* Plus, many festivals in Europe, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, France Africa and Canada will also be a good venue this documentary.

African Diaspora Film Festival, New York

Chicago International Film Festival, Chicago, Illinois

Hot Springs Film festival, Hot Springs, Arkansas

Austin film Festival, Austin, Texas

SXSW2000 Film Festival, Austin, Texas

Dallas Video Festival, Dallas, Texas

Hollywood Black film Festival, Hollywood, California

Pan African Film Festival, Los Angeles, California
FESPACO, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

Vues d’Afrique, Montréal, Canada

Ghana Film Festival, Accra, Ghana

Festival du Film de Deauville, Deauville, France

FIFIVIL, Lomé, Togo

Festival du Film de Carthage, Carthage, Tunisie
APPENDIX C

APPROVED PROPOSAL
José Merced, Hispanic American, is a flight attendant at American Airlines. He lives in Euless where his main hope is to resume practicing his faith, which is rooted in the Santeria church. Merced is waiting for the US Supreme Court to rule on his lawsuit after police repeatedly interrupted the ceremonies he held at his house. The police were citing an ordinance banning animal sacrifice in Euless. Santeria, a church that claims hundreds of thousands of believers in the United States, the Caribbean and France, recommends animal sacrifice as part of its religious rituals. However, officials of the City of Euless view this immolation of goats and chicken as animal cruelty, while José Merced proclaims they are preventing him from the “free exercise” of his religion as guaranteed in the First Amendment of the Constitution (Michael Grabell, 2007).

Merced’s lawsuit is not unique. Another Santeria church based in Hialeah, Florida, successfully won a similar case *Santeria vs. City of Hialeah* back in 1993. Despite the previous victory, it is very unlikely that the new Supreme Court, with two notoriously conservative appointees by President Bush, Samuel Alito and John Roberts, will follow the footstep of retired Sandra Day O’Connor, late Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist and other current Supreme Court judges who deliberated in the *Santeria Vs. City of Hialeah* case.

Pending the Federal Court decision on Merced’s case, many newspapers and websites across the world have brought the shy José Merced into the spotlight. CNN, FOX 4, WFAA and CBS11 have knocked at his door to enquire about his controversial religion. Newsweek, the Dallas Morning News, the Associated Press and the Miami Herald tribune were fascinated by the tale of a religion born in Africa thousands of years ago and ferried across the Atlantic within the hearts of the slaves in the 16th Century (Michael Grabell, 2007). Their curiosity deepened when they later learned more about the rituals of this religion and the ethnicity of its followers.
According to David Ovalle of the Miami Herald Tribune, Santeria was born “among the slave population of colonial Cuba. Santeria combines elements of Catholicism with practices of African nations and will go on to outlive slavery and spread among Cubans of all background.” (David Ovalle, 2003). While no one disputes Cuba as the birthplace of Santeria, more remains to be known about Santeria and the Yoruba land, in West Africa where Santeria has its roots. In his book *Santeria, a Practical Guide to Afro-Caribbean Magic*, Luis M. Nunez places the birth of the religion at 1517, “when Yoruba slaves had their first bitter taste of Catholicism in Cuba.” (Nunez, 2007, 3). Because the Spaniard masters would not acknowledge the faith of the African slaves, the slaves made their religions “undergo severe transformations in order to survive.” (Nunez, 2007, 4). Santeria transformed into a syncretistic cult combining European Christianity in the form of Spanish Folk Catholicism, Traditional African religion in the form of Orisha worship as practiced by the Yoruba and nineteenth century Kardecian spiritualism from France (George Brandon and Joseph Holloway 1991, 250). After the religious fusion, the “Orisha, deities of the Yoruba pantheon were identified with the saints of Roman Catholicism.

The saints were referred to as *Orisha* or Santos, hence the term Santeria, meaning worship of the saints” (George Brandon and Joseph Holloway 1991, 251). The masking of the numerous Orisha with Catholicism was made even easier because of the Roman church’s “numerous patron-saints.” (Baba Ifa Kakarade, 1994, 5.) Due to this fusion, the middle class Cubans, White, Jews and Blacks moved to embrace the new religion. Different communities embraced the religion which, despite “the catholic influence, remained essentially African (in its ritual system and cosmology) with a strong fidelity to Yoruba practices.” (George Brandon and Joseph Holloway 1991, 251.)
Although José Merced has no African descent, he identifies himself with the Santeria religion. Puerto Rico-born Jose Merced embraced Santeria wholeheartedly at the age of 17. His conversion to the religion was due to a life threatening disease that he suffered while a teenager. Merced recalls, “No modern doctors could find what was wrong with my stomach but I was sure I was going to die”. At the advice of his mother’s friend, he entrusted his life to a Santeria priestess who healed him. Since then he vowed to devote his life to the Santeria church. Herbal medicine, healing rituals through incantatory verbal utterances constitute the main Santeria practices.

A- Santeria in the United States of America

Santeria reached the United States of America in the early 1940’s through individual immigration of some priests. However, the Cuban revolution in 1959 and the rise of Socialist Fidel Castro created a massive migration situation onto the Floridian bay. George Brandon reports that between 100,000 to 200,000 Cuban families were in US territories in 1974, (60 percent of whom settled in Florida), were mostly White. (George Brandon and Joseph Holloway 1991, 253.) Right around that time, the first African-Americans got initiated to Santeria, more for “ethnic identification” than any other reason. The African-American priests unwrapped Santeria from its catholic cover. They then created nationalistic religious denomination called Orisha Voodoo: for them, the saints had to become black again, without any artifices. Oba Oseijiman Adefunmi Efuntola I epitomized this African-American re-appropriation of Santeria by founding the Oyotunji Village in South Carolina. The Village rejected the use of Catholic artifacts in their rituals.

B- Animal sacrifice: A brief history of a controversy
Currently, Santeria in the United States is confined to a predominantly White Hispanic base. However, the rituals and sacrifices are performed in the Yoruba language. It is surprising for any observer, to see these people born in America chanting in the Yoruba language, dancing on West-African drums and proffering Yoruba incantations. José Merced himself has a title, in the hierarchy of the Santeria religion: Oba-Oriate, high priest of the Santeria religion and is in charge of all rituals. José Merced has earned the authority to initiate men and women to become Santeria worshipers during sacred ceremonies.

It is during one of the sacred ceremonies that animals have to be sacrificed. Many well-established and “respected” religions have had a long history of animal sacrifice as a part of their worship and rituals. In the Bible, Abraham, the Jewish patriarch to whom God made the promise of the Palestinian land, almost sacrificed his son Isaac to God. However, before Abraham could sacrifice his son, God advised him to offer an animal instead. “Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.” (Genesis 22:13.) Even before this animal sacrifice, the Bible has accounts of animal sacrifice in the Garden of Eden. The first offspring of Adam and Eve ended up in a fratricide when Cain killed his younger brother Abel. Cain became jealous when God preferred his younger brother’s “fatty sacrifice” to his vegetable gift. (Genesis 4:2 8.)

Islam is another religion that alludes to animal sacrifices. The Quran, the holy book of the Muslim faith, also talks about Abraham’s sacrifice and prescribes animal sacrifice as a way to request mercy from Allah and also as a way to show gratitude. “The animal offerings are among the rites decreed by God for your own good. You shall mention God’s name on them while they are standing in line. Once they are offered for sacrifice, you shall eat there from and
feed the poor and the needy. This is why we subdued them for you, that you may show your appreciation.” (Quran 22:36)

My travel to Cotonou, Benin, on the steps of the African roots Santeria people claim confirmed the importance the animal sacrifice ritual holds in the process of cleansing, healing and adoration. The African believers still live the ambivalent life former slaves taken to the plantations in the Americas were living: Christians or Muslims yet deeply faithful to their Orishas, their Voodoos, their deities.

From the building of the first Temple in the book of Leviticus until the third destruction of the Temple, the Judaist faith has multiple recommendations of animal offerings to God. Even if the ritual practices had stopped by 70 C.E, Jews still eat slaughtered animals according to the kosher proceedings. It is thus relevant to point out that Jewish groups in Florida backed the Santeria church in the lawsuit against the city of Hialeah back in 1993. So how can we explain the uproar and the unease most Americans feel towards the Santeria church? Is it solely based on the fight against animal cruelty as epitomized by the recent NFL player Michael Vick highly televised saga? What about the fishing sports shown on TV everyday? What should we think about the multiple shooting sports with their conservative and radical members who justify their killing of animals by their right to control animal population? Is the American population becoming vegetarian community? Is the Santeria “persecution” a double standard politic based on the essential nature of this religion? Is Santeria singled out for the city ordinance enforcement in order to shut it down like there was the case in Hialeah, Florida?

Throughout the production of this film, my focus has been to understand through participatory interviews the different and divergent points of view of the two parties. The main antagonists I wanted the film to have were:
1) Jose Merced, his Santeria faith fellows, his attorneys as well the African voodoo priest who provides a historical and a certified “cachet of origin” to their faith.

2) The City of Euless officials and their attorney, defending the rationale for the city ordinance and why they chose to enforce it against Mr. Merced.

An important part of the story is told through the titles and leads of local and national newscasts, titles and excerpts of print newspapers as well snapshots of websites.
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