THE ALTAR OF MY SOUL
(The Living Traditions of Santería)

By Marta Moreno Vega

Part spiritual memoir, part history, part travelogue, THE ALTAR OF MY SOUL (September 2000; $25.95 One World/Ballantine Books) illuminates the long-secret often misunderstood Santería religion. Weaving her personal story with a history of Santería, scholar Marta Moreno Vega brings this gentle, loving nature-based religion to vivid life.

As an Afro-Puerto Rican child in a New York barrio, Marta did not know that her family practiced Santería. She was fascinated by her grandmother’s altar, inspired by her mother’s strong faith, and curious about miracles that happened behind closed doors, but no one spoke of Santería. Like thousands of families born from generations of African slaves, who carried the religion to the Americas in the fifteen century, Marta’s family hid their worship behind images of Catholic saints.

Though Marta grew up to find great happiness as a mother and a community activist, she struggled along the way with feelings of emptiness, and had not found a religion to guide her. When she visited Cuba in 1979, on behalf of her work as the founder of the Caribbean Cultural Center, her eyes were opened to Santería. Contrary to negative myths, Marta learned that Santería is based on such beliefs as the sacredness of every individual, our connection to nature, and our responsibility to our families, friends, and societies. Witnessing the public portions of a friend’s initiation into Santería, Marta was struck by the wisdom and serenity of the elders, the joyful songs and tranquil prayers, and the beautiful rituals involving Florida water, flower petals, incense, and fragrant oils. “My soul stood on edge as I heard the songs calling the spirits,” Marta said. This awakening inspired her to undertake the years of study required to initiate into Santería as a Yoruba priestess.

Mentored by her godparents in Santería, Marta began to learn the legends of the orishas—the African goddesses and gods who represent various forces of nature. In Cuba, Marta took part in magnificent rituals where spirits possessed initiates’ bodies. She enjoyed the warm camaraderie of the women as they prepared rice and beans, and seasoned meat, and gathered beaded necklaces and raffia curtains for the ceremonies. Marta’s ultimate transformation came during her own initiation, when she discovered the orisha who held her destiny, her own guardian angel.

More than a compelling study of one of the world’s most fascinating religions, this inspiring account maps one woman’s profound journey from emptiness to overwhelming peace and joy. THE ALTAR OF MY SOUL is a graceful tribute to a timeless religion, a testament to the transformative power of discovering your own spiritual guide, whatever that may be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marta Moreno Vega, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Black and Hispanic Studies Department at the City University of New York’s Baruch College. Professor Vega is founder of the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute and Amigos del Museo del Barrio. She has curated major visual arts exhibitions, including “Santería and Vodun in America,” and organized three international conferences on “Orisha Tradition and Culture.”

Selected By the Quality Paperback and One Spirit Book Clubs.

Look for a review of The Altar of My Soul to follow in Diálogo No.6!