

Discuss whether the role of priestesses in African derived religions in America can empower women in today's society.

The role of priestesses in African derived religions in America can serve as a compelling example of ways women in today's society can be empowered. Religions and traditions such as Vodou, Santeria and Candomble place women in positions of authority, holding roles such as healers, custodians of sacred knowledge and spiritual authority, which often allow them to command respect and autonomy which contrasts with many other religions, especially those that are western. In the modern scene the women in these roles not only uphold these positions of power as role models but also provide an alternative to the patriarchal religious systems that dominate the western world, where women can hold powerful religious positions that are rooted in cultural and spiritual heritage. However, this empowerment is not necessarily easily accessed. Marginalization, intersectionality in regards to religion and gender and stigmas can hinder the extent to which women can feel empowered.

This essay will focus on the past, present and future of the role of priestesses in African derived religions in America, whilst also paying particular close attention to the empowerment that these priestesses can provide to women in today's society. This essay aims to provide an outline of the historical foundations of female spiritual authority and the cultural identity that was formed during times of repression, the empowerment in the forms of the spiritual and leadership, and finally the limitations to such empowerment, as despite all the inspiration and commendation there are many constraints which both the priestesses and women in society face that can restrict their ability to be empowered.

Before the question can be fully answered, it is important to determine the historical foundations of female spiritual authority: how the empowerment of women through spiritual authority came to be, and how it has since grown over time.

Religions in the western world all tend to have one major common factor in their leadership roles: they are all heavily male dominated. Despite some advances being made in certain religions to allow women to hold positions of power, such as the majority of Protestant churches allowing women to be Pastors or Vicars, women's authority in mainstream religions is still heavily restricted. Even with some small steps forward in equality, the patriarchal religious institutions still often favour men holding positions of power, therefore making it difficult or even rare for women to be able to hold authority. African-derived religions challenge this patriarchal structure, by allowing women to uphold positions of authority, offering women the opportunity to become high-ranking priestesses, to lead ceremonies and initiations, having authority that is often equal or can outrank the positions that men can hold and provides a space for women's knowledge and voices to be respected, being *'active participants but also leaders and spiritual mediators,*

serving as priestesses, mediums, healers, and keepers of sacred knowledge.’ (Aboekwe and Emilia, 2025 p.136). This in turn allows them to be listened to within their communities, therefore challenging the patriarchal normalities of leadership and authority that many mainstream religions still uphold.

The role of priestesses in African derived religions challenging the patriarchy, not only offers a new approach to religious systems in regards to a more equal and female centred system, but the role also allows priestesses to preserve the female-centered spiritual power that their religions promote. This essay will make reference to three particular African-derived religions that share this female centred view point: Vodou/Voodoo, Santeria and Candomble.

Vodou is a traditional Afro-Haitian religion that was brought to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade. Enslaved Africans wanted to preserve their cultural identity and heritage at a time when everything but their belief, knowledge and religion had been stripped away from them. However, when they arrived in the Americas, those that were enslaved were forced into Christianity, more specifically Catholicism. But instead of Catholicism overtaking Vodou, it acted as a cover, providing a space for the enslaved people to keep up their traditions and beliefs, under the safety of Christianity. In Vodou, ‘Priestesses, known as Mambos’ (Rose, 2024) are respected as spiritual authority, who preside over ceremonies, guide the community in aspects of knowledge, spirituality and life.

The next African derived religion that has the role of priestesses is Santeria. During the transatlantic slave trade many people were shipped from Africa to the Caribbean against their will, many of which followed the Yoruba religion. These slaves were then sold to settlers in Cuba. A distinction between the settlers and slaves had to be made, in regards to their race and their social standing, thus creating a hierarchy. Like Vodou, Santeria has elements of Catholicism within it. Ninian Smart writes ‘In some ways the Santeria in Cuba is the most interesting because it has imported so directly so many features of Yoruba religion and Yoruba rites. Its deities are Yoruba, but are also identified with Catholic saints.’ (Smart, 1998, p.544), thus akin to so many African-derived religions in America, Santeria is interconnected with Christianity. But as for the role of priestesses, in Santeria, women can hold the title of *iyalocha*, which is the role of the high priestesses who hold a pivotal role in leadership within the Orisha tradition. ‘*Iyalochas are often responsible for guiding initiates, conducting rituals, and overseeing the spiritual and ethical aspects of the community.*’ (Ọbàtálá, 2024) hence putting them in a pivotal role of leadership.

Finally Candomble, akin to both Vodou and Santeria, is ‘the reorganization of the Yoruba deities into a new pantheon’ (Candomblé, n.d.); the religion blends both African beliefs and Catholicism. The religion is most prominent in Brazil, after slaves arrived and kept their beliefs alive via spiritual practices. In Candomble, priestesses are known as *maes-de-santo* which means ‘mothers of the saints’. Women in these positions often have

the responsibility of leading religious houses and ceremonies as they hold the highest ranking position of priestesses.

The role of priestesses in these religions is not a purely symbolic one. It gives them status, a power in a religious hierarchy. These women hold and receive a great deal of respect within their communities, a respect that was upheld even through the darkest times of oppression and slavery.

This brings us nicely to the cultural identity and resistance aspect of both African derived religions and the role of priestesses. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, during the transatlantic slave trade, slaves were stripped of all their possessions, except for their religion, beliefs and knowledge. This persistent belief in religion grew into a resistance against slavery, a way to preserve African identity in such an oppressive time, a way to escape the pain and seek hope. One such example is Vodou: *'Vodou is the system they have devised to deal with the suffering that is life, a system whose purpose is to minimize pain, avoid disaster, cushion loss, and strengthen survivors and survival instincts'* (McCarthy Brown, 2010, p.10), therefore, Vodou serves as the perfect example of how religions were used not only as a resistance but a means of hope, a hope that is still needed and utilised via religion to this day. With the rise of wars and misuse of political power, hope is pivotal to survival, just as it was during the oppression in the transatlantic slave trade.

Priestesses were a key role of the resistance as they were leaders, ones that led the community through pain and to hope. This hope still continues now, in modern day with priestesses still reinforcing cultural pride and value systems that differ from the patriarchal westernised ones and this reinforcement is done via the reconnection with ancestral routes. During the time of the slave trade, many would have lost hope and may have even questioned their faith, even those of African descent in modern day may not feel in touch with their ancestral roots due to intersectionality, stories not being passed down or even by simple family splits or adoption. Religion and the role of priestesses can serve as a means for women to learn more about their culture, heritage and ancestry, in turn causing their roots with their culture's history to grow in strength, and empower them. One other way that priestesses can be empowered by and learn about their cultural roots, is through their duty of passing down oral traditions, sharing stories, myths and heritage to the community, which not only ensures the religions stays alive but reconnects the believers to an important part of their history and the religion's beginnings.

Another one of the main ways priestesses can empower women in today's society is through leadership and visibility.

A Priestess does not only simply perform rituals, they also serve as leaders in their communities; they advise people in all ways, whether it be personal, social or spiritual. They are often sought out during times of need, a source of guidance for the community, often fulfilling roles such as being keepers of knowledge, holding the responsibility of

maintaining oral traditions, rituals and preserving cultural identity. This duty is vital as it keeps the religion's heritage and history alive and remembered, passing down the traditions and ancestry from generation to generation. Priestesses can also take on the roles of being healers and counselors, providing spiritual guidance for the community. As *'healing is at the heart of the religions that African slaves bequeathed to their descendants'* (McCarthy Brown, 2010, pp.4-5), the role of healing being at the heart is pivotal to the religion, as it is what forms hope. As mentioned in a prior paragraph, religion was used as a form of hope and resilience during oppression, not only preaching the importance of faith as a means of consolation but as a method of teaching. Priestesses also act as teachers and conflict mediators within their communities, giving them the responsibility to not only educate their communities on all matters but also stand as a pillar of support for feminist and social justice movements, as some women who fulfill the role may make the connection between activism and priesthood as a way to maximise their leadership and ensure women in the community can be empowered and have a voice that will be respected and listened to. In this aspect of leadership priestesses can engage and make a difference in movements such as anti-racism, reproductive rights, black feminism, environmental justice and movements that focus on healing the community. The mixing of priesthood and activism challenges the stereotypes of black women, allowing them to take a role in leadership that places them in a position of power and respect that not only helps their community, but can be used to support broader struggles in the battle for equity and equality. This not only empowers the priestesses but can inspire other women to take up the role, hence empowering not only the ones in the position of power but also women in general, filling them with confidence and even a desire to lead and make change for their communities to flourish and grow in equality and inclusivity.

The final source of empowerment that this essay will be discussing is spiritual, how priestesses can empower others via the spiritual realm, whether it be through acts such as interpreting divine will, performing rituals or spiritual possession. The role of priestesses in African derived religions entails many duties and roles, which are all deeply rooted in ancestry and leadership.

Priestesses have the responsibility to interpret divine will, meaning it's her responsibility to understand and pass on the word and the will of the divine onto the community, this can be done via oral traditions, guiding initiations or even performing rituals and overseeing or conducting rites of passage. These rites could be marriages, child birth rituals or even puberty rites. These put women in the forefront of the communities, acting in leadership of the divine, empowering both them and the women following spiritually.

All of these duties and responsibilities allow women to have a strong sense of purpose and control both in their lives and in their communities, with being allowed direct

access to and being given the ability to mediate the divine without the need for me. This once again combats the patriarchal nature of religious systems and thus empowers women.

A major route for female spiritual empowerment in African derived religions is through spiritual possession. Which *'commonly refers to the hold exerted over a human being by external forces or entities more powerful than she'* (Boddy, 1994, p.407). Each religion has different aspects, traditions and meanings behind spiritual possession, however they do all tend to share the commonality that the possession is not something to be feared or seen as evil, like it is in western religions such as Christianity, but it is a means to communicate and celebrate with the spiritual world. In Vodou, spiritual possession is *'an important function, for it serves as a main means of communication between spirits and humans, and enables spirits to participate in celebrations'*. (Smart, 1998, p.545). Hence, spiritual possession can empower women by connecting them with their heritage, allowing them to communicate and celebrate with the spirits of their ancestors in a celebratory manner. Candomble puts priestesses in the role of guidance during possession, to ensure safety and respect to both those of the mortal realm and the spiritual. Thus promoting a space for women to be central and hold an important role during the possession and having the opportunity to connect with their ancestral roots.

Despite all the good and empowerment the role of priestesses in African derived religions can provide women in America in today's society, there are still many limitations.

Many societies still have inequalities, especially in modern day America. Minority groups such as the black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) communities, or those who are from religions other than Christianity or dominant religions within the society, still find themselves as victims of prejudice, discrimination and stigmatization to this day. Even in the case of gender, women are still facing inequalities in society, with the patriarchy still being upheld in America; despite being challenged, women still find themselves victims to inequalities, whether it be unfair pay, lack of job opportunities in certain fields or in regards to religion, the inability to hold positions of power in some religions. Whilst African derived religions in America do offer roles of authority such as priestesses to women, the patriarchy is hard to ignore and may even affect the religions in some aspects. Whilst the African derived religions do succeed in providing a space for women's voices, they also stand out against the patriarchy which can be overlooked or even interpreted as threatening by those who want to keep the old systems in place.

With the rise in women's voices through religious spaces, the patriarchal religions may feel threatened, by being challenged with more forward thinking and equal ideals. This feeling of being threatened can be both good and bad; good as if the patriarchal systems take time and listen to the alternative systems that religions such as Vodou provide, then we might find ourselves in a much more fair and just society, where diversity is celebrated and religions are united. But this threat could also be bad, if systems take offence and institutions fear their downfall then some believers may fall into extremism, which can

cause wars, genocides and terrorism. This could then silence those that have threatened and silence or minimize those religions that do not fit into the mainstream religious ideology, thus, the question of empowerment would be null as there would be no means to empower or even none to be empowered.

With the prevalence of other religions dominating the western world, those other than the six world belief systems can get lost in the mainstream, pushed aside or even confused as being one with the others, due to lack of education surrounding the religions, or even ignorance. This mistaking or confusing one religion with another can be applied in the case of so many African derived religions in America, where they merged with a denomination of Christianity, most typically Catholicism, to act as a cover for the original African religion, thus creating a new religion in itself which has roots of the initial African religion with aspects of Christianity. Vodou is one such example of an African derived religion being merged with a form of Christianity and in turn being westernised. During the transatlantic slave trade, Vodou was brought to the Americas, where parts were taken and adapted, mixing some aspects of the religion with Catholicism. This version of the religion is what is known as Voodoo, and is most famously associated with New Orleans. *'Vodou is closer to its African roots than most other forms of New World African religion.'* (McCarthy Brown, 2010, p.5), whereas Voodoo has mixed elements of Catholicism, such as the role of Catholic saints. Catholic saints came to be associated with the Iwa or Spirits. An example of this is that St Peter, famously known in Christianity as the one who guards the golden gates of heaven, is often heavily tied to Papa Legba, who is the spirit of the crossworlds, serving the role of facilitator of communication between the divine and mortal realms. Even today *'Dozens of the resulting vodou-Catholic spirits continue to thrive in the twentieth century'* (McCarthy Brown, 2010, pp.3-4), proving that Voodoo is still going strong in the Americas. However, whether the westernisation of African derived religions in America is a limitation is up for debate. It can be perceived as a step forward, an example of how religions can unify and grow together to create more inclusive and forward-thinking communities, ones that hold spirituality at the heart and challenge the patriarchal systems that have such a strong grip on Western Religions. In Vodou *'Catholicism is not rejected, but used as a framework within which the African gods and spirits may be approached to help with the ordinary problems and tribulations of life.'* (Ninian Smart, 1998, p.545) this serves as a testament of how a religion can take a step forward to equality in religion for women to hold positions of authority, benefiting both the belief system and society as a whole.

Another restraint to empowerment is that these roles of leadership require years of commitment, commitment that is not necessarily accessible to some women especially in current times with the cost of living rising: the role of being a priestess may not be fully accessible not only time-wise but economically. However, this limitation may not necessarily be applicable to all women as some may be in better financial stability than others, but then a problem of inequality between women may occur, with those with better financial standing being able to access more opportunities of religious authority than

others. Remaining on the topic of accessibility, there are still some roles in African-derived religions that women cannot hold. For instance, in Santeria, women cannot hold the position of *Babalawo*, which is a high ranking priest in the *ifa* divination system. But the role of *Iyalocha* is not available to men, and is almost an opposite role. However, it can still be interpreted that the Babalawos' role is at a higher rank than the Iyalocha, but their power is complementary.

But is all that has been mentioned thus far in this essay still relevant in today's society? The short answer is yes. Despite the aforementioned limitations, the role of priestesses in African derived religions in America can and does still empower women in today's society.

The role of priestesses offers positions focused on care, spirituality and leading communities in flourishing, providing a space for all voices, especially women to be listened to and valued both in everyday life and in the religious sphere. Their leadership stands as a testament, a challenge to the dominant narratives surrounding gender and religion, taking a stand against the patriarchal systems that dominate the mainstream western religions and inspiring the new generations of women to be leaders and advocates within both religious institutions and society as a whole.

But it is important to note that not only women take on these roles and there are still positions in African derived religions in America that women cannot fulfill, such as the babalawos in Santeria, but there are also roles that men cannot or struggle to hold, such as mothers-of-saint in Candomble where '*a male priest had to dress himself as a woman in order to be accepted by the group.*' (Oriz, 1979, p.39), whilst this does not necessarily mean that men are not able to be accepted into the group, it would hinder the amount of men who try and access the position, whilst allowing a space for homosexual men to take on the same prestige in the group as there are a large number of homosexual men in the fathers-of-saint group.

Finally the last limitation in modern day society is the current state of politics. As times are changing, so is the political world. With a rise in dictatorships, ones focused on marginalising minorities, it is entirely possible that those in African-derived religious communities may find themselves under attack. With governmental funded enforcements such as ICE in the USA targeting minorities, especially people of colour, there is no doubt that religion of African descent will be affected unless something changes.

The role of priestesses in African derived religions in America serve as a potent example of female empowerment in today's society, deeply rooted in ancestral, spiritual and cultural heritage. Traditions and religions such as Vodou, Santeria and Candomble place women in roles of spiritual authority, as healers and leaders in both community and spiritually, combating the westernised patriarchal religious systems, ensuring that women are able to hold such power. These alternative systems place women in a higher role, one where their voices can be valued, their knowledge can be validated and provide them with a career

which can allow them to become role models and thus inspire other women to be empowered, as well as bring them closer to their heritage. However, this empowerment does come with some limitations. Social structures, marginalisation and the accessibility to both traditions and roles can hinder the extent to which women can be empowered. The possibility of future constraints can also be a factor of the limitations, with uprisings in dictatorships and misuse of political power. However, that is only a mere future possibility, and ultimately the role of priestesses in African derived religions can most certainly empower women in today's society, but only to some extent. The role of priestesses alone cannot fully take down the inequalities of systems, especially religious, patriarchal ones, but it serves as a good beginning, a meaningful alternative that provides a path for women to reclaim power and leadership roles, contribute to their communities and create a more inclusive system which will empower more women to make a difference.

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