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Religion in Latin America

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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The role of priestesses



Ruth Landes (1908-1991)

- US-American anthropologist
- Student of Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict
- PhD at Columbia University in 1936
- Post-doc research in Brazil
- Author of *City of Women* (1947)



City of Women

- confirms a general impression that ascribed spirit possession, as Keller writes, 'to women, the poor, and the religious other (the "primitive", the "tribal", the third-world woman, the black, the immigrant)' (Keller 2002: 4).

- 'Religious traditions in which people are possessed have existed throughout recorded history and continue to exist on all continents of the globe. Women predominate in these accounts, and their predominance is noted by many scholars' (Mary Keller, 2002)

But

- “Spirits (deities) do not make any difference between men and women”
- only the individual ability is important
- According to Andrew Chesnut is the ratio between women and men in Afro-Brazilian religions (2–1) similar to Christian groups in Brazil (2003: 108).

Spirit Possession in Afro-American religions

- => enables communication between human beings and spirits /deities
- It is open to everyone but one should be trained in handling the spirits
 - > first possession experience often interpreted as call to become initiated into religion

Leadership in Afro-American religions

- Priests and priestesses, often referred to as godfather and godmother
- Initiation usually linked to spirit possession experience
- But there are also priests (called *babalao*s) connected to Ifa oracle divination => male only!

Women in the Spiritual Baptist Church (Shango/Shouter)



- A Baptist Yoruba Church in Brooklyn: Women - even the Queen mother – are sitting apart from the (male) leaders

Women in Vodou



This temple in New York is founded and led by a Haitian woman. She is in charge of the community and all members.

Women in Cuban Santeria (Regla de Ocha)



- Women as iyalocha – in charge of initiation, oracle reading and more
 - But excluded from Ifa

The role of women

- J. Lorand Matroy (2005) argues that the presentation of Candomblé as a matriarchal cult is based on misinterpretation by Landes and others
- -> number and authority of male priests equal or even exceed those of priestesses

However....

- Women take on authoritative roles in Afro-American religions
- They are not excluded from positions as they are in Catholicism
 - apart from Ifa divination in Cuban religion Santeria (and even in Cuba we see changes)

Mary Ann Clark (2005)

- Orisha-religion (e.g. Santeria) as female-based religion with a strong participation of women and homosexuals
- -> the Orisha-religion is the only religion where female is normative (Clark 2005, p. 143).

Clark argues that

- Newly initiated people take on female role because the initiation transforms them into wives of a deity
- -> female role becomes the norm
- former descriptions of Ifa-priests as "high priests" is misrepresentation of religion by (male) scholars
- Shell divination (diloggun) more important for devotees

Conclusion

- Women in Afro-American religions can take on leadership roles
- -> Religious positions as means of empowerment for women
- However: not only women

Ethnographic documentaries

- *Divine Horsemen* by Maya Deren
 - [Link to YouTube](#)
 - Filmed in Haiti in the 1940s and 1950s
- *Voodoo Mounted by the Gods* by Alberto Venzago
 - [Link to YouTube](#)