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Renato Ortiz

RELIGIOUS MATRIFOCALITY

The presence of women in possession cults has frequently been noted. Thus women are usually the priviliged religious participants in Haitian Voo-doo and in the African Bori Hausa. Even allowing for the distinction of whether the role of religious chief is held by a male or a female, it seems women are in the majority in the cases representing almost the totality of those cultists who fall into a trance.[1] In this article we propose to compare the position of women within two possession cults in Brazil. One, *Candomblé*,* is of African origin; the other, *Umbanda*, is a synthesis of African religions, Catholicism, and the spiritism of Allan Kardec. We shall attempt in each case to associate the religious position of women with the social position they exercise in each society.

THE PRESENCE OF WOMEN IN CANDOMBLÉ

Ruth Landes, following a sojourn in Salvador in 1938, was the first to describe female participation in *Candomblé* in Bahia, particularly in that of Yorouba origin.[2] As a woman herself, she

Translated by Scott Walker.

[1] In this see M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, London, Penguin Books, 1971.

*A lexicon of terms used by Afro-Brazilian religions is given at the end of the article.

[2] Ruth Landes, "A Cult Matriarchat and Male Homosexuality", *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, vol. XXXV, 1940, pp. 386-397.

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was better able to appreciate how much this cult was adapted to persons of her sex and the primary role they exercised within it. She noted the presence of a veritable matriarchy in the city of Salvador, and even the title of her book, *The City of Women*, demonstrates how strongly she had been impressed with this facet of the Afro-Brazilian cult.[3] A particular Bahian tradition, according to Landes, tended to assign the direction of *Candomblé* to a woman rather than to a man who was considered unsuited for the exercise of such a sacerdotal function. He fulfilled the conditions necessary for the priesthood only in certain exceptional cases which only emphasized the feminine dimension of the cult; for a male priest had to dress himself as a woman in order to be accepted by the group. According to Ruth Landes, it is the necessity of imitating the *mothers-of-saint* which explains the large number of homosexual *fathers-of-saint*. As an oblique means of approaching the feminine condition, homosexuality could allow a man to enjoy the same prestige as the Bahian priestess.

Nevertheless if the predominance of women as daughter-of-saint is indisputable, on the other hand the presence of the mother-of-saint, i.e. feminine authority, varies according to the type of *Candomblé* considered. Quoting Edson Carneiro, Ruth Landes shows the distribution of religious authority according to sex and religious ritual in 1937:[4]

Rite	*Mother-of-saint*	*Father-of-saint*
Nagô	20	3
Caboclo	10	34

There is thus a majority of "mothers" in the traditional *Candomblé* (Nagô rite) and of "fathers" in *Caboclo Candomblé,* a syncretic rite enhanced by the participation of the Indian spirit (the *Caboclo*). It must also be pointed out that the Nagô rite served as model at the beginning for most kinds of *Candomblé* practiced in Brazil and that this priority gives it an added prestige. Hence the particular influence of the Nagô priestess on the pop-

[3] Ruth Landes, *The City of Women*, New York, The MacMillan Company, 1947.
[4] Ruth Landes, "A Cult Matriarchat and Male Homosexuality", p. 393.

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ulation of the Bahian capital. Edson Carneiro, who wrote the history of *Candomblé* in Salvador, has also noted that succeeding generations had retained particularly the names of the Nagô priestesses; those priests considered important enough to survive in memory belonged almost always to *Caboclo Candomblé*.[5]

The thesis of Ruth Landes was vigorously contested by two Africanists, Arthur Ramos and Melville Herskovits,[6] who tried to show that the Afro-Bahanian cult had nothing about it that was feminine and even less that was homosexual. We shall not treat here their criticisms of the homosexuality issue, for they stem from a moralizing attitude, especially in the case of Arthur Ramos, which simply refuses to face concrete results of research.[7] More interesting are the objections regarding the presence of women in the cult. The first objection, of a cultural nature, dealt with the authority of women as religious chiefs. As a matter of fact, in Africa (in Nigeria), it is the man who wields religious power and not the woman, who is only allowed to participate in religious ceremonies in a secondary role. Since the houses of worship were traditionally the guardians of the original, i.e. African, sacerdotal hierarchy, Arthur Ramos sees in this the proof that it is the father-of-saint who retains the responsibility for religious functions in Brazil. If, as a result of social and cultural evolution, woman has come to play a greater role in the ceremonies, this remains a minor role, and to speak of a matriarchy would be to misinterpret the problem completely.[8]

The second criticism uses economic arguments to cast doubt on the feminine character of *Candomblé*. Herskovits, the principal advocate of this tendency, accuses Ruth Landes of having overlooked the influence of economic factors on religious life. He points out that the number of men participating in services is in reality about the same both in Africa and in Brazil, and if women

[5] Edson Carneiro, *Candomblés da Bahia*, Rio de Janeiro, Ed. Ouro.

[6] Arthur Ramos, *Pesquisas Estrangeiras sôbre o Negro Brasileiro in Aculturação Negra*, Rio de Janeiro, Ed. Cia Nacional, 1942, pp. 183-195; and Melville J. Herskovits, "The City of Women," *American Anthropologist*, vol. L, n. 1, 1948, pp. 123-125.

[7] For a discussion of the attitude of Arthur Ramos toward Ruth Landes see Edson Carneiro, *Uma Falseta de A. Ramos*, in *Ladinos e Crioulos*, Civilisação Brasileira, 1964, pp. 223-227.

[8] Arthur Ramos, *op. cit.*

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sometimes seem more numerous, this is due to the type of economic system used. In "modern" economies, the man leaves home to go to work outside his village, thus allowing the woman who stays home the possibility of participating more actively in religious life.[9]

It is interesting to note that the criticisms of Arthur Ramos and Melville Herskovits do nothing to diminish the feminine character of Bahian *Candomblé*. The fact that priestly functions are entrusted to males in Africa does not in any way permit the conclusion that the situation would be similar in Brazil. We will see later that today most religious functions there are the responsibility of women. The economic argument seems less a criticism properly speaking than an attempt at explaining the meaning of the presence of women in Afro-Brazilian cults and ultimately reinforces the thesis of Ruth Landes.

As a matter of fact, the preponderance of women in these cults is indisputable. In Brazil there are more "daughters" than sons-of-saints. Among the *Xangô* of Recife, the *Batuque* of Porto Alegre and Para, in Voo-doo of Maranhao, the female members are always in the majority.[10] Relative to *Gomean Candomblé* in Rio, Mme Binon Cossard has shown that of the 134 persons initiated between 1950 and 1960, only 17 were male.[11]

If we move from consideration of the daughters-of-saint to that of the mothers-of-saint, we note that feminine predominance continues. Ruth Landes thought she had inspected only *Candomblé* of the traditional kind and that the *Candomblé* of *Caboclo*, less prestigious, would probably involve more males. However, we now know that, on the contrary, there are a majority of priestesses in *Caboclo*. René Ribeiro, who has particularly studied the *Xangôs*, of Recife, has shown that of 62 houses of the cult, 60% were directed by women. When considered according to

[9] Melville J. Herskovits, *op. cit.*

[10] René Ribeiro, "Personality and the Psychosexual Adjustment of Afro-Brazilian Cult Members," *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, t. LVIII, 1969, pp. 110-119; Roger Bastide, *As Religiões Africanas no Brasil*, Saõ Paulo, Ed. USP, 1971; Nunes Pereira, *A Casa das Minas*, Rio de Janeiro, 1947; Seath and Ruth Leacock, *Spirits of the Deep*, Doubleday Natural History Press, New York, 1972.

[11] Binon Cossard, *O Candomblé Angola, thèse de 3e cycle*, E.P.H.E., 1970, p. 43.

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the kind of rite practiced, 46% of traditional *Candomblé* groups and 69% of syncretic *Candomblé* assemblies are led by women.[12] For the city of Salvador, the figures indicate the same tendency. Another recent study by Vivaldo da Costa Lima has shown that of 105 cult houses, 60% of those of traditional *Candomblé* and 78% of syncretic *Candomblé* were under female leadership.[13] Even if Ruth Landes's deductions have been turned around, her thesis about the predominance of females as religious leaders has been reconfirmed. The number of priestesses is always greater than that of priests.

Another phenomenon as well confirms the feminine dimension of *Candomblé*: the prevalent homosexuality among the males. Despite the moralistic criticisms of Arthur Ramos, evidence indicates that the majority of the male members and religious leaders are inverted. Just as Ruth Landes had already noted this characteristic among the fathers-of-saint of Salvador, René Ribeiro was able to administer a series of tests on a sampling of 62 men (both members and leaders) from Recife and determined that 34 of these manifested homosexual tendencies.[14] Mme Binon Cossard, initiated into the *Terreiro* of Gomea, considered most of the sons-of-saint to be homosexual.[15] In a study by Jean Ziegler on funeral rites likewise, there seems to be a father-of-saint of the *Casa de Mina* in Maranhao[16] who manifested a similar behavior. Roger Bastide and I have made the same observations among the *Candomblés* of Saõ Paulo and of Santos. Nevertheless the explanation of Ruth Landes, who saw religious homosexuality as a means of arriving by imitation at the same prestige as that of the mother-of-saint, seems to us incorrect, and one could here make the same criticism which Durkheim in *Le Suicide* addresses to Tarde. There is no imitation, in fact, and it would seem that male homosexuality is provoked by the mere presence of the mother-of-saint. Thus the explanation must be sought at another level, and here it seems that the functional interpretation of René Ribeiro is more exact. *Candomblé* does not cause homosexuality,

12 René Ribeiro, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
13 Vivaldo da Costa Lima, quoted by René Ribeiro, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
14 René Ribeiro, *op. cit.*, p. 113
15 Binon Cossard, *op. cit.*, p. 226.
16 Jean Ziegler, *Les Vivants et la mort*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1975, chap. 1.

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but it provides a milieu and a language favorable to its development without, however, causing such individuals to be considered abnormal by the group.[17] On this point the rules of the religious society are in complete contradiction with those of the rest of society. If in the latter homosexuality is considered a moral and cultural aberration (we must not forget the existence of *Machismo* in Brazil), in the former society it is given a positive value through sacred language. In addition there are analogies between the feminism of the cult and that of homosexuality, first in the matter of daily chores (sewing, cooking, housecleaning), and then of religious vestments (the man dresses as a woman). Nevertheless it is in the act of possession of the individual by bisexual divinities or divinities of the opposite sex that homosexuality can flourish without restraint. There is *Logunede* who lives six months as man and hunter and six months as woman and goddess of water, and *Oxumare* the serpent-rainbow. As bisexual *orishas* they provide a framework in which the sexual ambivalence of the individual can have free rein. The same can be said for the female divinities such as *Iansã*, at once woman and warrior, with a trait so masculine that in Brazil she has been assimilated into a masculine Catholic saint: Jerome.[18] And so it would seem that this Afro-Brazilian cult offers possibilities of reintegration to persons emarginated by rules of conduct which are rather strict in Brazilian society thereby reinforcing the feminine dimensions of which we spoke in connection with the "daughters" and mothers-of saint.

Matrifocal Authority

Ruth Landes spoke of matriarchy in connection with *Candomblé,* but it would be more correct, it seems to us, to consider it a matrifocal cult. The concept of matrifocality seems much richer for the analysis of feminine authority, for it permits a comparison of this type of authority to another which is characteristic of a matrifocal family and thereby the discovery of a series of elements common to these two types of organization. But first we must

[17] René Ribeiro, *op. cit.*
[18] On this see Nina Rodrigues, *L'Animisme fétichiste des Nègres de Bahia*, Bahia, 1900.

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see what matrifocality means. The definition given by Nancie Gonzales is helpful here. The matrifocal family is distinguished, according to her, by the presence of four distinct traits:[19]

a. The mother is the central figure around whom the other members of the family are grouped.

b. The family maintains closer contact with the parents of the woman than those of the man.

c. The woman wields authority over the children and the household.

d. The mother is perceived by the children as the strong member of the family. Her strength derives not just from her maternal function, but also from the authority she exercises within the family nucleus.

The second of these points does not interest us here, for if *Candomblé* can be considered a family, it is nevertheless a family of divine right. The parents of the woman will also be the parents of the children here, the *orishas* who constitute the religious fundament of the group. The religious society is born always from the bonds which unite the faithful who belong to the sacralized profane world with the divinities who constitute the inexhaustible source of the sacred.

The other elements of the definition will be more important to us, but before examining them we must explain the hierarchical organization of the cult in order to understand the interpersonal relations within the group.[20] *Candomblé* is a closed community where supreme authority rests with the mother-of-saint; above her is only the power of the *orishas* (which power is represented by the "mother" herself). Below her can be distinguished two hierarchical lines, one on the feminine side and the other on the masculine. The feminine line includes the "little mother" (the person who is second in line behind the *iyalorisha*), the daughters-of-saint and the *ekede*. A multitude of intermediary positions exists between the "daughter" and the "little mother." The male line is composed of "sons" and the *ogã*. This sexual hierarchy is further complicated by the fact that the ability to fall into a

[19] Nancie Gonzalez, *Toward a Definition of Matrifocality in Afro-American Anthropology*, New York, Whitten and Szwed, ed., 1970, pp. 231-243.

[20] For a more detailed analysis of the hierarchical organization of *Candomblé*, see Edson Carneiro, *op. cit.*

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trance must also follow the prescribed pattern. Thus on the female side, only the *ekede* are not possessed by the divinities, while among the males no *ogã* is a "horse" for the gods. The sexual division also implies a division of labor. If the *ogã* exercise the roles of drum beaters and sacrificers (*ashogun*), the tasks of the "daughters" are more feminine. They must clean the place of worship, cook for the *orishas*, sew the vestments of the gods. The sexual specialization of labor is such that it even exists within the female line. Thus in the *terreiro* of Gomea, the "daughters" of a male *orisha* do not take part in domestic tasks; only the *jaba*, i.e. the "daughters" of a female *orisha* may cook for the gods.[21]

It is the spiritual family which interests us primarily. The familial dimension of the religious society can be seen, on one hand, in the hierarchical organization and personal relations within the group, and on the other in the religious structure of the cult, notably the ceremony of initiation. First we will examine relations among persons within this tightly closed and hierarchical community.

If we consider the titles given to different members of the group, we see immediately the familial character of the cult. The "daughters" and sons-of-saint truly are the spiritual children of the mother-of-saint. Moreover the "daughters" call one another "sister," and they address the *ogã* as "father."[22] Even more important is the existence of sexual taboos between "daughters" and their "fathers" and also between "sisters" and their "brothers" (the sons-of-saint). Mme. Binon Cossard avers that these taboos are less rigorous for distant "sisters" and "brothers," i.e., neophytes initiated at different times. But the ban is strict for close "sisters" and "'brothers," i.e., those who were initiated together.[23] Such restrictions preserve the family organization from incestuous relations.

The spiritual relation established between the "mother" and the daughter-of-saint is the primary element which confers on the group a type of divine kinship. Here the meaning of the initiation ceremony for the neophyte is critical since in fact it is

[21] Binon Cossard, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
[22] Edson Carneiro, *Os Candomblés da Bahia, op. cit.*, p. 341.
[23] Binon Cossard, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

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here that a bond of spiritual relation is created between "mother" and "daughter." Thus we can say that the "daughter" is born of the *orisha* and the mother-of-saint.

The birth symbolism of the initiation rite is well known. Roger Bastide has shown that the ceremony always takes place under the sign of *Oshala*, the *orisha* of fertility, and the purpose of the ceremony is to "kill" the profane personality of the neophyte in order to introduce her into her new life, that of the religious community.[24] The religious vocabulary clearly expresses the relationships formed between the "mother" and the "daughter" during the ceremony. The *iyalorisha* is the artisan who makes the "new head" of the future *iawô*; thus as soon as she places her hand on this head, it belongs to her. The "daughter" is now and forevermore bound to her "mother" and to her *orisha*. Just as biological descendancy implies the existence of bonds of consanguinity, so spiritual descendancy establishes a kinship relation of a divine nature. Once the "daughter" is introduced into the family of *Candomblé* she can never leave it. From now on she has obligations of a religious blood relationship towards her "mother," her "fathers" and her "sisters." Each *Candomblé* is a family distinct from the others. If the whole group of members of the cult associates on festive occasions, it is only a matter of polite visits. They have no common family ties. An individual belonging to one *terreiro* will never participate in the liturgy of another house of worship. The family bonds prohibit all religious participation outside one's own group. If a "daughter" by chance no longer lives in the city of her "mother," she is not allowed to participate in a *Candomblé* of her new city.

The maternal function is reinforced by the weight of authority. Because the mother-of-saint is in close contact with the *orishas,* she exercises all power within the sect. She is the central figure around whom the members of the community assemble. Her word is law, and no one dares challenge her. Mme. Binon Cossard says that the concentration of power in her hands is such that no one can undertake anything without her express orders. The members thus are deprived of all initiative.[25] It is the "mother"

[24] Roger Bastide, *Les Candomblés de Bahia*, Paris, Mouton, 1958.
[25] Binon Cossard, *Le Rôle de la femme de couleur dans les religions afro-*

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who rewards or punishes (punishment can also be corporal), and all the responsibilities of the "house" rest on her. Theoretically this authority is limited exclusively to the community circle, but since it is of a sacred nature, it can sometimes even be exercised outside the *terreiro*. The private life of the "daughter" is subject to the careful scrutiny of her "mother."[26] But if the "mother" exercises a repressive power, she also has a directive power. Each time the "children" have a problem of some kind (money, love, disease), they go to the "mother" for advice. With her divine knowledge she can interpret these problems in religious language and give them an adequate solution. Punishment is balanced by these advantages to which the member of the community is entitled.

A final point which reinforces the matrifocal character of *Candomblé* is the matter of the kind of work of the cult leader. Ruth Landes has noted that the "fathers-of-saint" had a certain tendency to work outside the religious ceremonies. The mothers-of-saint, however, devote themselves exclusively to domestic cult obligations.[27] The priestesses, then, conform to the ideal image of a Brazilian woman, a woman of the home.[28]

The Umbandist Woman

If we turn our attention from an analysis of *Candomblé* to a study of *Umbanda*, we see that the position of woman changes considerably. A new factor comes into play, determined by the type of cult itself. In another work we considered different Umbandist practices as integrating agents for an ensemble which constantly shifts between two poles:[29] one pole "less Europeanized" which resembles Afro-Brazilian beliefs, and another "more Europeanized" which is imbued with spiritual ideas taken from the teachings of Allan Kardec. The interesting factor in such a classification

brésiliennes in *La Femme de couleur en Amérique latine* (Roger Bastide, ed.), Editions Anthropos, 1974, p. 79.

[26] Edson Carneiro, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

[27] Ruth Landes, "A Cult Matriarchat and Male Homosexuality", p. 397.

[28] On this see Maria Isaura Pereira De Queiroz, "Amérique Latine: une image nouvelle,", *La NEF*, Paris, n. 38, Oct.-Dec., 1969, pp. 60-67.

[29] Renato Ortiz, *La Mort blanche du sorcier noir, thèse de 3e cycle*, E.P.H.E., 1975, pp. 116-120.

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is that a relation can be established between the kind of cult practiced and different social classes. The "less Europeanized" pole corresponds to the lower classes, while the "more European" pole conforms rather to middle class values. We will see that although the position of women can sometimes remain the same from one pole to the other, nevertheless, there is occasionally an important cult-class division.

As in *Candomblé*, the number of female members of *Umbanda* is greater than the number of males. However, the proportion of men is notably higher in the latter. Some figures can give us a more exact idea of the breakdown of the two sexes in the *Umbanda* religion. A survey taken in the city of Saõ Paulo showed that in 35 houses of worship, 64% of the members were women and 36% were men.[30] When we recall our previous observations regarding *Candomblé*, we see that male membership is here relatively high. If the presence of homosexuality reinforces the feminine aspect of the Afro-Brazilian cult, its absence in *Umbanda* throws in relief the masculine side of this cult. It is even more interesting to note that this absence is not just a casual circumstance but is a result of a formal ban. Here we find the opposition of two different moralities with *Umbanda* espousing a Catholic morality which forbids sexual deviation.[31] An analysis of Umbandist spirits from a sexual point of view is interesting in this respect as well. This shows that bisexual divinities of an African origin here either disappear or are distinguished sexually. For example *Oshala*, who is Jesus in *Umbanda*, loses completely his character of an androgynous god. If he was syncretised at one time with St. Anne and St. Barbara in *Candomblés* of Bahia and of Rio de Janeiro, this sexual "confusion" disappears completely in *Umbanda*.[32] For Umbandists, Christ is a man which consequently implies the incontestable masculinity of *Oshala*.

[30] Renato Ortiz and Paula Montero, "Contribuição para o estudo quantitativo da religião umbandista," (to appear in *Ciência e Cultura*, published by the Sociedade Brasileira para o Progresso da Ciência, Saõ Paulo).

[31] For a religious explanation of homosexuality according to the principle of reincarnation see Byron T. Freitas and Tancredo da S. Pinto, *Camba de Umbanda,* Rio de Janeiro, Ed. Aurora, p. 99.

[32] On synchretism see Roger Bastide, "Contribuição ao estudo do sincretismo católico-fetichista" in *Estudos Afro-Brasileiros*, Saõ Paulo, Ed. Perspectiva, 1972, pp. 159-192.

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Another hindrance to masculine sexual indifferentiation is the fact that a man cannot receive the spirit of the opposite sex. A common occurence in *Candomblé*, this becomes increasingly rare in the Umbandist *terreiros*. On the other hand women can be possessed by masculine spirits, and we must even add that they are frequently "mounted" by masculine entities. To understand this, let us see how *Umbanda* spirits are divided sexually: *caboclos*, "old-blacks," and "children." The "children" represent childhood and hence are sexless. The spirits of *caboclos* have their female counterparts in the "Old-Black line."[33] If we consider the "lines" with an African name, *Oshala, Yemanjá, Shangô, Ogun, Oshossi,* we see that the female spirits of the *caboclas* can appear only under the feminine relationship of *Yemanjá*. They are thus much more limited in number than the spirits of the *Caboclos*. Moreover, these female spirits have only a small role in the daily cult services; they are involved instead on feast days. From this we can conclude, and religious practice confirms this, that the majority of the women are possessed by masculine spirits of *caboclo*.

If we look now at the spirits of female "old-blacks" we see that their number is notably higher than that of the *caboclos*. They share only one "line" with their homologues, the male "old-blacks," and we find them in possession incidents much more frequently than Indian spirits. We know that in Umbandist symbolism the "old-black" represents submission and humility since the Blacks have always been considered inferior to the Indians in Brazilian society. The Indian, on the contrary, is conceived as a symbol of force, i.e. of masculinity. However, we see that the female spirits are concentrated precisely in the category which seems to be the very symbol of inferiority. Does this phenomenon not show the submission of woman to the principle of masculine superiority?

We can note that, if feminine presence is still important in the possession cult, a study of Umbandist cosmology shows us a trend toward masculinity. Nevertheless, it is an analysis of religious authority which demonstrates to what point the masculine

[33] The Umbandist cosmos is divided into seven "lines," that is, seven spiritual groups: 1. Oshala. 2. Yemanjá. 3. Shangô. 4. Ogun. 5. Oshossi. 6. Children. 7. Old-Blacks.

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dimension is asserted in *Umbanda*. Unfortunately sociological data on this subject is lacking, and we must be satisfied with ethnological observations.[34] According to our survey made on the spot, it seems that feminine presence is concentrated in the "less Europeanized" cults. In the *terreiros* of the suburbs of Saõ Paulo and Rio de Janeiro which we visited, we dealt for the most part with priestesses. On the other hand, in the "more Europeanized" houses whose clientele was drawn essentially from the middle classes, it is masculine authority instead which prevails. We can thus draw a conclusion which is the inverse of that of Ruth Landes and say that when prestige is no longer associated with fidelity to Africa but to the social position of the faithful and of the houses of cult within society as a whole, the fathers-of-saint predominate over the mothers-of-saint. If in Salvador the most prestigious *terreiros* are under the direction of women, the most famous Umbandist *tentes* are led by men. There is, for example, in Rio the "Tente Mirim" under the authority of Benjamin Figueiredo, and the "Tente Spirite Confraternisation Umbanda Saint Benoît" in Saõ Paulo, directed by "Pai Jamil."

Nevertheless, it is with the appearance of a new kind of authority, with the systematic organization of the *tentes* ordered in a rational manner to facilitate inter-sect relations, that the masculine presence becomes dominant. If the religious authority of the mother-of-saint is limited to the *terreiro* of *Candomblé*, the Umbandists introduce a new form of power situated outside the house of the cult. They create federations which unite under the same aegis several *tentes*. Above the charismatic power of the priest is superposed an even higher power, that of the federations of *tentes*, which federations are then organized to create a directive body. At Saõ Paulo, for example, the *Superior Orgão de Umbanda* includes most of the federations existing in that state. These federations have as a goal to co-ordinate the propagation of the Umbandist faith and at the same time to direct the religious operation. Thus all public manifestations of *Umbanda*, whether for religious festivals or political and social action, now pass through the intermediary of new decision-making centers.

[34] Our observations are in reference only to the states of Saõ Paulo and of Guanabara.

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But in these centers there is an exclusively masculine presence. We were able to assist at the Third National Umbandist Congress in Rio, a meeting of different national federations, and we noted that female participation was practically non-existent. The speakers were always men, especially individuals belonging to the middle level of society. Here we should point out a very strong characteristic of the Umbandist religion. Since the institutional power cannot command respect without the reinforcement of a charismatic power of a sacred nature, there is a complicity between the federations and the "more Europeanized" houses of cult, and quite frequently a federation is aligned with an Umbandist *tente* which enjoys a certain prestige. For example, the three national congresses of Umbandists in 1941, 1961 and 1973 were all conducted under the "protection" of "Caboclo Mirim," that is, the spirit who possesses Benjamin Figueiredo, head of the Tente Mirim in Rio. Thus we can say that the charismatic authority of the priest is coextensive with his institutional authority as chief or as member of a federation. This reinforces the power of certain Umbandist fathers-of-saint but, at the same time, increases the distance which separates the masculine power of the "more Europeanized" houses from the feminine power of the "less Europeanized" cults.

Institutional authority is manifested in other ways too, but it can be seen that women are always excluded therefrom. For example, we think of the power which is conferred by the written word. In *Candomblé*, the spoken word alone serves as the instrument for transmitting knowledge, for the spoken word is sacred. It has a mystical power, that of *ashê*.[35] Religious initiation can only be effected through oral means, for this initiation consists especially in a union of the new member with the force transmitted by the cult priestess. This is why *Candomblé* has no theology; recourse to the written word is forbidden, for this would interrupt the transmission of the *ashê*.

This all changes with *Umbanda*. African religious thinking here becomes instead Brazilian religious thinking, and therefore the sacred power, the *ashê*, no longer makes sense. We saw that

[35] See Deoscoredes and Juana Santos, "La religion nagô génératrice de valeurs culturelles au Brésil," *Colloque de Cotonou*, Ed. Présence Africaine, 1970, pp. 156-171.

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the Umbandists introduced a new dimension to religious authority in the cult, an institutional dimension. However, it is through books that this latter is affirmed in an incontestable fashion. The written word gives the faithful and the religious chiefs a new source of power: they can become writers. We know, as a matter of fact, that books played an extremely important role in the diffusion and the codification of the Umbandist religion.[36] Since 1941, the date of the first national Umbandist Congress, an intellectual caste has been created whose mission is to produce studies on dogmas and religious rituals; the status of "scholar" which members of this caste have thereby acquired endows them with a decisive power in the religion without parallel in the history of Afro-Brazilian cults. Nevertheless this new form of authority is monopolized exclusively by men; women are completely excluded from this domain. It suffices to examine books published by Umbandist publishers to see that female authors are rare, only one among the 35 books chosen for the bibliography of our dissertation. The absence of feminine participation in institutional authority is thus apparent.

Conclusions

The problem of the matrifocal family in black America has long occupied Africanists. In general there are two theories on this subject: one sees the matrifocal family as a holdover from the African family. The other, radically opposed, considers matrifocality as simply a form of adaptation by blacks to the socio-economic conditions of American societies.[37] The first thesis was held especially by Herskovits.[38] The second finds its chief spokesman in Frazier.[39] Today the tendency is not to see an African holdover in matrifocal society. In the case of Brazil, Frazier's critique seems decisive. His study of the black family in Salvador shows that African familial elements disappear precisely there where the collective memory at the religious level is the most

[36] On the role of books see Renato Ortiz, *op. cit.*

[37] For a discussion of this subject see Roger Bastide, *Les Amériques noires*, Paris, Payot, 1973, pp. 37-47.

[38] Melville J. Herskovits, *L'Héritage du Noir*, Présence Africaine, 1966.

[39] Edward F. Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, Chicago, 1939.

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intense.[40] Slavery, then its abolition, urbanization, industrialization have all created important social upheavals which have destroyed African family heritage. However, it is Raymond Smith who has shown in the most detailed manner the force of the economic factor in the formation of the matrifocal family. Among Blacks in British Guaiana, for example, matrifocality does not depend on any particular system but constitutes an economic aspect of family life.[41] Since the man goes far away from home to work, it is the woman who takes command of the household. If the "husband" is unable to support the family, the wife takes another "husband" who can assure their subsistence. She will also have new children by this "husband," but she will retain all authority in the education of her first children.

If one accepts the preponderance of the economic factor, nothing obliges an African cultural explanation for the matrifocal family. In any case this kind of family structure is also found outside the sphere of black influence. Nevertheless, matrifocality is not found just anywhere. On the contrary it seems to be more characteristic of certain families of the lower classes. Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz encountered this kind of family in the *favelas* of Rio[42] and Oscar Lewis in the *vencidades*, which are the lower class neighborhoods of Mexico City.[43] The latter even goes so far as to base his concept of a "poverty culture" on this trait, so characteristic of certain poor families in Latin America.

What can be said, then, of religious matrifocality? Here a supposed relation with Africa cannot be upheld. Even Herskovits is opposed to this interpretation brought forward by Ruth Landes. The criticisms of Arthur Ramos are decisive on this point for they show that in Nigeria the priesthood is a masculine preserve. However, it is interesting to note that the economic arguments which Herskovits raises against Ruth Landes find a real parallel in those which Smith addresses against Herskovits himself. To say that religious authority devolves on women because the men

[40] Frazier, "The Negro Family in Bahia," *American Sociological Review*, 7 (4), 1942, pp. 465-478.

[41] Raymond Smith, *The Negro Family in British Guiana*, London, 1956.

[42] M.I. Pereira de Queiroz, "Enfance et adolescence dans les favelas brésiliennes," *Carnets de l'Enfance*, n. 7, Jan. 1968, pp. 71-93.

[43] Oscar Lewis, *Antropologia de la Pobreza*, Fondo de cultura económica, Mexico, 1963.

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frequently go away from home to work, is this not to translate the social reality into religious language? Religious matrifocality thus would find its counterpart in familial matrifocality, a conclusion which would seem all the more correct in that the same relations which exist between matrifocal family and social class are repeated in the matrifocal cult. In fact, the woman priest in whom are concentrated all powers is valid only for *Candomblé* and for the "less Europeanized" Umbandist sects. Since these two types of cult flourish especially among the lower classes, it is not surprising that the religious societies take as a model values proper to these very classes where woman occupies a privileged position with respect to man within the family.

If we move from the lower to the middle classes, we see that the image of woman changes considerably, just as it does at the religious level in the "more Europeanized" Umbandist houses. Everywhere the Umbandist priestess is replaced by the director of the *terreiro*. Nevertheless, it is especially at the institutional level that she is supplanted by men. And we have demonstrated elsewhere that Umbandist ideology is characterized by a constant effort at adaptation and integration into the ideology of society as a whole.[44] The evolution of the image of woman is no exception, and it follows the same path as other religious values. Hence woman is perceived as inferior to man. Moreover, sociological studies confirm this subordinate position. Eva Blay has shown that industrialization has not modived the position of woman despite her working but has simply confirmed her position of inferiority by reinterpreting it according to the new possibilities provided by the labor market.[45] *Umbanda*, which has taken hold especially in industrialized zones, is conformed to this social concept of woman; or better, this concept is integrated into its new religious cosmos.

If we accept Lewis's thesis that possession cults play a compensatory role for women, we can say that both in *Umbanda* and in *Candomblé* this role normally is fulfilled.[46] They are always the privileged participants of these cults. However, it must be

[44] Renato Ortiz, *La Mort blanche du sorcier noir, op. cit.*
[45] Eva Blay, "O Trabalho Feminino," *Cadernos*, Centro Estudos Rurais e Urbanos, University of Saõ Paulo, n. 6, 1973, pp. 129-145.
[46] Oscar Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion, op. cit.*

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emphasised that the cults which developed in the lower classes were nevertheless able to establish boundaries circumscribing feminine authority. Carefully distinguishing the "private" from the "public," these cults indubitably assign all that is "household" to woman. However, as the Umbandist *terreiros* adopt the legitimate values of society as a whole, the position of woman evolves little by little. Where institutional authority influences religious practices, masculine domination comes to the fore, a domination which corresponds to the rules of Brazilian society.

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