



Debates on Women and Femininity in Cuban *Santería*: Postcolonial Interpretations

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Abstract

This text presents current debates concerning gender relations in Cuban *santería*. After a short presentation of the *santería* religious system, the concepts of femininity and masculinity among the *orichas* are discussed. Their meaning, differing from Western ideas on manhood and womanhood, is partly attributed to original Yoruba gender concepts widely discussed in recent anthropological literature. The role of men and women in *santería* organisational hierarchy and in ritual is also presented in the light of corresponding discussion on their status. The author suggests that the study of gender concepts within *santería* aids in the understanding of complex gender relations in Cuban society.

Keywords: Cuban *santería*, gender roles, women, femininity

Słowa kluczowe: kubańska *santería*, role płciowe, kobiety, kobiecość

Cuban *santería* is the most widespread ‘Afro Christian’ religion on the island and is usually referred to as ‘syncretic’ or ‘hybrid.’¹ The term *santería* derives from the Spanish word *santo* meaning saint. *Regla de Ocha* (rite/rule of Ocha) and *Regla Lucumí* (rite/rule of *Lucumí*) are its synonyms. In colonial Cuba, the slaves speaking Yoruba were called *Lucumí* and it was their religious world, merged with Iberian folk Catholicism and elements of other African belief systems which formed the origin of *santería*. Slaves brought to Cuba were baptised and introduced to Catholic religious practices. Under the figures of Catholic saints, they hid their own pantheon of deities (*orichas*). The association of *orichas* with their Catholic counterparts was based on the similarity of attributes or ‘spheres of life,’ like love or war, under their care.

¹ To the memory of Helen Icken Safa, who passed away in November 2013.

Religious parish fraternities gathering former slaves and their descendants in colonial cities of western Cuba favoured the consolidation of the *santería* belief system. To the present day *santería* is considered an important element of Cuban culture, being present in the language, everyday behaviour, visual arts and music. As a result of the migration of Cubans and the power of mass media and internet social media, the range of the influence of *santería* goes far beyond Cuban borders, and even beyond the largest diaspora clusters.²

The present text is based on the analysis of both published and unpublished *santería* stories on the *orichas* – *santería*'s deities – the latter gathered by the author over the course of three research periods in Havana, Regla and Havana's suburban districts between November 1978 and September 1979, in Santiago de Cuba and Guantanamo between September and December of 1985 and in Miami in 1991. Recent publications are also considered in the analysis. The number of studies dealing with gender issues in *santería* is limited and these are presented in the text. There is an abundance of literature dealing with Brazilian *candomblé* and this is referred to on several occasions; however, the author is far from pretending to give a complete account of the issue in the Brazilian context, or in the context of anywhere in the Black Atlantic.

As mentioned already, the relationship between Catholic and Yoruba elements within *santería* has been generally defined in terms of syncretism – the latest literature questions such an approach. Opponents of this view emphasise that Catholic elements are only part of the 'external' face of religion, while its essential content and values have little in common with Christianity.³ Such an opinion is supported, *inter alia*, by scholars researching Yoruba belief systems in Nigeria.⁴ In *santería*, there is no concept of absolute good or evil. The faithful, gathered around 'priests' – *babalaos* and *santeros/santeras*, through rituals and sacrifices try to win favour of the *orichas* and try to avoid the consequences of their anger. *Casas de santo* (private houses of *babalaos/santeros*) are the centres of worship; there are no separate religious buildings, such as temples or chapels. The priests' homes are equipped with the appropriate attributes. In the main room, there is an altar – like structure with figures of the most important saints – patrons of worship and of the priest. The African attributes of the *orichas* are kept in a glass cupboard called *canastillero*, in bowls and vases arranged in a proper order. *Canastillero* is situated in one of the internal rooms. *Santería* practices are based on traditions and customs handed down from generation to generation, guarded by the 'priests'. Stories about *orichas*, their world, mutual relations and influence on the fate of the world and people are an important part of the *santería* worldview. Every *oricha* is a protagonist of histories explaining the scope of influence, the origin of attributes and the colour associated to its figure. Stories are

² B. Lisocka-Jaegermann, *Migracje synkretycznych religii karaibskich – droga kubańskiej 'santerii'*, [in:] *Migracje a społeczeństwo*, E. Zamojski (ed.), Warszawa 2009, vol. 14, pp. 218–227; *eadem*, *Los caminos de la santería. ¿Hacia las prácticas religiosas híbridas?*, "Revista del CESLA" 2014, no. 17, pp. 43–62.

³ A. Hearn, *Transformation: Transcendence or Transculturation? The Many Faces of Cuban Santería*, "Humanities Research" 2003, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 56–62.

⁴ W. Abimbola, I. Miller, *Ifa Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yoruba Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*, Boston 1997.

an important part of the divination system, which is the responsibility of *babalaos* occupying the highest position in the religious hierarchy. Through the intercession of the *oricha* of the future – Ifá – the *babalao* mediates in the contacts of the faithful with their deities. He does so using the so-called Ifá chain and a table during special consultations given to his clients. The believers also have the opportunity to use a less solemn form of contact with deities, visiting *santeros* or *santeras*, who are lower in the hierarchy than the *babalaos*, applying a simpler divination system based on specially crafted shells (*caracoles*). During a visit to a *babalao* or *santero/a* the origin of problems of the faithful is explained and remedies are defined.

Music, especially the rhythms performed on holy drums, chants and dances, plays an important role in rituals and ceremonies. Yoruba is still being used as a sacred language, in which chants related to *orichas* are sung. Episodes of possession – the most direct and intense form contact with the *orichas* – take place during the ceremonies.

Jorge and Isabel Castellanos,⁵ followers of the works of one of the best-known traditional scholar of Afro-Cuban religions, Lydia Cabrera,⁶ summarise the most important elements of all Afro-Cuban cults, *santería* included, as follows:

- a specific fusion of visible polytheism with hidden monotheism;
- belief in the existence of a spiritual force called *aché*, held by *orichas* that can also be passed on to some people; some plants, stones and other elements of the natural world, and objects with magical properties also have *aché*;⁷
- belief in the spirituality of the natural world (related to the previous idea);
- complicated rituals regulating relations between the faithful, the *orichas* and other spiritual beings (ancestors, the dead), the procedure of initiation, sacrifice, possession – a ritual trance into which the faithful fall during the ceremony devoted to *orichas* – being the most important;
- divination systems, allowing the *babalaos* and *santeros/santeras* to predict the future;
- the presence of magic, and healing practices referring to magical treatments and *aché* of plants and animals;
- the great importance of music and dance in the liturgy;
- lack of a hierarchical organisational structure, lack of church, which is associated with a certain flexibility of forms in which particular groups of believers, under the care of their *babalaos*, or *santeros*, perform religious practices;
- own concepts of boundaries between what is sacred and what is secular, which do not correspond to the western criteria.⁸

⁵ J. Castellanos, I. Castellanos, *Cultura afrocubana 3. Las religiones y las lenguas*, Miami 1992.

⁶ L. Cabrera, *Contes nègres de Cuba*, Paris 1936; *eadem*, *Cuentos negros de Cuba*, La Habana 1940; *eadem*, *¿Por qué? Cuentos negros de Cuba*, La Habana 1948; *eadem*, *El monte: igbo finda, ewe orisha, vititinfinda (Notas sobre las religiones, la magia, las supersticiones y el folklore de los negros criollos y del pueblo de Cuba)*, La Habana 1954; *eadem*, *Refranes de negros viejos*, La Habana 1955; *eadem*, *Anagó: vocabulario lucumí (El yoruba que se habla en Cuba)*, La Habana 1957.

⁷ As Lydia Cabrera writes, “everything that is born, grows and lives under the Sun [...] escapes the deceptive limits of nature [...] everything is spiritual: trees and plants are equipped with souls, intelligence and will... The forest is like a temple,” *eadem*, *El monte...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 14–16.

⁸ J. Castellanos, I. Castellanos, *op. cit.*, pp. 16–18.

Recent publications confirm the author's conviction that "Afro-Cuban religions are in themselves deeply, indeed, irremediably heteroglossic hybrids."⁹ Ethnographic material gathered many years ago, before *santería* was accepted by the Cuban authorities as a popular religion in 1991, as well as later studies, particularly those from the 21st century, as well as observations conducted in different sites (Havana, Santiago de Cuba, Miami) show the religious system's flexibility and capacity for adaptation. The way it penetrates everyday life in differing contexts may also make us wonder whether the concept of religion itself suits the reality observed, similarly to other notions belonging to academic language.¹⁰

Santería and gender

Even a superficial contact with the world of *santería* makes us reflect on the concepts of masculinity and femininity involved because gender relations and gender behaviour observed in its context seem to differ from those we deal with both in the European and the mainstream Cuban culture. This difference can be observed both on the level of the religious system itself and within the religious hierarchy and roles performed by men and women in rituals and ceremonies.

Gender within the world of *orichas*

Describing *santería* implies a series of conceptual dilemmas. Categories available within academic language¹¹ do not correspond to the lived and felt sense of reality observed. It is difficult to find a term that could sufficiently communicate the concept of *oricha*. Neither 'deity' nor 'saint'/'santo' reflect its exact meaning. Menoukha Case, referring to Yoruba religion, explains it as a force of nature and/or crossroads of *ashe*, stating that

an Orisha is 'selected' consciousness that acts with intensity beyond comprehension. The Wind, Ocean, a particular River, and so on, is understood as an enormous nexus of divine energy that dwarfs humans. *Ashe* continually permeates everything, never placing human over nature, never favouring white over black, male over female, rich over poor, and is distributed as the unique *Ori* in each entity – and thus there is a multiplicity of Orisha. Orisha, then, are 401 (with one standing for "more than you can imagine") proto-manifestations of *ashe*, situated at the juncture of nature and ethics, science and art.¹²

⁹ S. Palmier, *The Cooking of History: How Not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion*, Chicago 2013, p. 11.

¹⁰ See *ibidem* – introductory chapter for discussion on the issue.

¹¹ Many of them still being used were coined by the first *santería* scholars applying in their times a strongly racialised worldview.

¹² M.R. Case, *Gender in Yoruba Culture & Religion*, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/9781118663219.wbegs729> [access: 1.07.2019].

In Cuba, the emphasis is put on the *orichas*'s human qualities, passions and problems combined with supernatural *aché*. Their characteristics and relations are described in *patakis* (or *patakies*) – stories that are part of the divination system. However, they are not only known to the followers of *santería*. *Patakis* are part of folk culture, and their motifs are borrowed and processed by artists and writers regarded as representatives of 'high' Cuban culture, as well as by actors of popular culture. *Patakies* anthropomorphise *orichas*, which as a result 'live' and accompany in everyday existence both the faithful and people not really closely related to *santería*, but remaining in the circle of influence of some of its elements. The essence of this phenomenon is perfectly reflected in contemporary Cuban literature¹³ as well as in Cuban-American literary manifestation.¹⁴

While reading the *patakies*, we have problems with the entire system of our general ideas constructed on the basis of binary oppositions: important – invalid; good – bad, male – female, etc., which a European researcher imposes on the analysed material, trying to classify and hierarchise the phenomena under study as it hinders rather than facilitates their understanding, thus leading us towards more serious ontological dilemmas. Martin Holbraad's book on Ifá divination,¹⁵ which discusses ontological differences looking closer at the concept of truth in the Western world and 'truth in motion' within Ifá divination, is the first serious attempt to confront the fact that it is not only the issue of how things might *appear* differently to people but "also about different ways of imagining what those things *are*" – as stated on the last page of the book.

Most authors describing the pantheon of Cuban *orichas*¹⁶ are trying to organise their hierarchy, which is not easy to establish. At the top of the divine order, there is the superior deity named Olofi, Oloddumare, Olordumale or Olorun, to whom the faithful never speak directly. According to Case,¹⁷ these are the names of the primal source of divine universal energy. Oloddumare's closest representative is Obatalá. The hierarchy of the remaining *orichas* is not entirely clear. Special status is enjoyed by the *oricha* of the future and oracles – Ifá. There is a special order of summoning individual *orichas* during ceremonies. Not all of them can be patrons of the faithful, ascribed to individuals during the initiation ceremony. The group of the leading, most powerful and most popular Cuba *orichas* includes both male and female entities: the male warriors Changó and Ogún, and two females: Ochún – patron of rivers and sensual, feminine love, a symbol of grace and beauty that corresponds to the Catholic patron of Cuba – Our Lady of Cobre; and Yemayá, associated with the sea and motherhood. A closer look at the femininity and masculinity of the *orichas* mentioned above complicates

¹³ J. Cuervo Hewitt, *Aché, presencia africana: tradiciones Yoruba Lucumí en la narrativa cubana*, Nueva York 1988.

¹⁴ C. García, *Dreaming in Cuban* Ballantine Books, New York 1992.

¹⁵ M. Holbraad, *Truth in Motion. The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination*, Chicago–London 2012.

¹⁶ N. Bolívar Aróstegui, *Los Orishas en Cuba*, La Habana 1990; R. Lachatañere, *Manual de la santería*, La Habana 2001; L. López, *Estudio de un babalao*, La Habana 1975; L. Rosbach de Olmos, *De Cuba al Caribe y al mundo: La santería afrocubana como religión entre patrimonio nacional(ista) y transnacionalización*, "Memorias" 2007, vol. 4, no. 7, pp.129–160.

¹⁷ M.R. Case, *op. cit.*

such a simple gender classification. Individual *orichas* have several incarnations, even more than a dozen, called *caminos* (roads, paths). Individual *caminos* bear different names, always in Yoruba. They have different attributes and competences. There may be beings of the same gender or different gender than the main character, and each of them may also have a different, Catholic equivalent of the same or different sex.

Obatalá is the most important among the *orichas*, created and shaped by the highest deity in its image, so he could be in charge of all the other *orichas* and care for the earth and all beings. Julia Cuervo Hewitt calls him the ‘created creator’¹⁸ in accordance with a well-known *pataki*, saying that when Olloddumare ‘came down’ and decided to create Earth, he took Obatalá with him asking him to create humans. Obatalá created the human body in which the ‘supreme deity’ breathed a spirit. Interestingly, the story does not contain any information about the sex of the being thus created. In the liturgical songs, Obatalá is called a ‘white father,’ and is usually referred to as being male. In my collection of notes from an Ifá book belonging to a babalao from Regla, I was allowed to consult in 1979, there is a story of three brothers and their mother, Obatalá. According to different authors, Obatalá has sixteen or twenty four ‘paths’ (sometimes called ‘avatars’ in the literature). Five of these are female. As some *patakies* tell us, he is both the father and the mother of the first generation of *orichas*, which includes Changó, born by Yemmu who is one of the female incarnations of Obatalá. Natalia Bolívar¹⁹ considers Yemmu to be the mother of all the Obatalás and identified with ‘Pure Conception.’ The same author also describes the following female ‘avatars’ of Obatalá: Obanlá, Ochanlá o Orichalá – an old woman, who is always cold; Talabí – identified with Saint Rita; and Yekú-Yekú o Yekú Oño – another old lady ‘syncretised’ with the Holy Trinity with Saint Joaquin.²⁰

It is not only in the case of different ‘paths’ of the same *oricha* where gender can differ. Their catholic, ‘syncretic’ counterparts can represent a different gender than that identifying the corresponding *oricha*. The most vivid example is Changó, the *oricha* – warrior ostentatiously emphasizing his masculinity and virility, who controls storms, lightning and thunder, ‘syncretised’ with Saint Barbara, “womaniser and drinker, quarrelsome, courageous, and daring... the god of music, master of the sacred bata drums, of thunder and lightning.”²¹ It seems that within the Changó – Saint Barbara association, the femininity of the saint is less important than her attributes: the crown on her head (Changó is the mythical king of Oyo), the red coat and a white robe (red and white are Changó’s colours) and the sword in her hand. According to a legend, after the royal daughter was beheaded by her father, a lightning bolt killed him. It is easier to understand male-female identification if we look at Yoruba descriptions of the Changó cult. Faló’okun Fatunmbi²² wrote that male dancers

¹⁸ J. Cuervo Hewitt, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ N. Bolívar Aróstegui, *op. cit.*

²⁰ *Ibidem.*

²¹ M. Barnet, *La Regla de Ocha: the Religious System of Santería*, [in:] *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean*, M. Fernandez Olmos, L. Paravisini-Gebert (eds.), New Brunswick–New Jersey 1997, p. 91.

²² F. Fatunmbi, *Inner Peace: The Yoruba Concept of Ori*, New York 2005.

performing for *Sango* wear women's clothes or female hairstyles which represents the male-female balance. Similarly in Cuban *patakies*, there is a mention of Changó wearing his wife Oya's female clothes and braids in order to escape from enemies²³ – something we do not expect from a symbol of masculine power and strength. The interpretation of this kind of gender transgression has been a subject of vivid disputes among scholars of the Yoruba religion and its New World versions – not only the Cuban *santería* but also the Brazilian *candomblé*.

Some Yoruba culture researchers inspired by Oyeronke Oyěwùmí²⁴ criticise Western translations of Yoruba cultural texts accusing their authors of false understanding of Yoruba conceptualisation of gender roles. Neither the concepts functioning in the Yoruba language nor the linguistic grammatical structures place emphasis upon gender differences. The pronoun 'o' can mean 'he,' 'she' or 'it' – there are no categories corresponding to the three English expressions.²⁵ The words defining a man and a woman refer to 'an anatomical male or female of reproductive age' and they do not suggest hierarchy or subordination. Gender, in Oyěwùmí's opinion,²⁶ does not affect the social position resulting from complicated and dynamic networks of mutual relations. Neither names, nor the names of professions or descriptions of the activities performed have a grammatically masculine or feminine form. There are no separate words for son and daughter or brother and sister. Language determines the age-related status – pronouns communicate whether we are talking about someone older or younger.²⁷ The author was severely criticised for attributing too much importance to language and denying the universal meaning of the category of gender. Although she wrote about the impact of the "genderful world on genderless language," she was accused of overly idealising the idyllic 'genderless' community.²⁸

A closer look at the *orichas* considered female as Yemayá, and Ochún helps to understand that even if 'feminine' features seem to prevail in their image, their femininity is not equal to the Western female ideal. Yemayá is considered a symbol of motherhood. However, Lydia Cabrera writes that she is androgynous, of amphibious sex, being both *El Mar* [the 'male' sea, the sea with a masculine pronoun] and *La Mar* [the 'female' sea, the sea with a feminine pronoun].²⁹ The same ambiguity is mentioned by Case, referring to Yoruba *Yemoja*.³⁰ She writes that at times, Yemoja dresses like a warrior, and wielding a machete helps her son *Shango* in his fights. There is also a Cuban *patakí* that relates the story of Yemayá's passion for the beautiful Inle.

²³ J. Castellanos, I. Castellanos, *op. cit.*

²⁴ O. Oyěwùmí, *The Translation of Cultures: Engendering Yoruba Language, Culture and World Sense*, [in:] *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, E.A. Castelli, R.C. Rodman (eds.), New York 2001, pp. 76–97.

²⁵ M.R. Case, *op. cit.*

²⁶ O. Oyěwùmí, *The Translation of Cultures, op. cit.*

²⁷ *Eadem, The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, Minneapolis 1997, p. 28, 40.

²⁸ J.L. Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*, Princeton 2005; *idem, Is there gender in Yoruba culture?*, [in:] *Orisa Devotion as World Religion*, J.K. Olupona, T. Rey (eds.), Madison 2008, pp. 513–558.

²⁹ L. Cabrera, *Yemaya y Ochun: Iyalorichas y Olorichas*, Cuba 1980.

³⁰ M.R. Case, *op. cit.*

She kidnapped him, took him to the bottom of the sea, satisfied her desire and felt bored with him. She then brought Inle back, but in order to avoid him telling people about everything he saw in her realm, she cut out his tongue.³¹ Such a violent behaviour cannot be interpreted as very female and proper for a symbol of motherhood.

We might conclude that although *orichas*' gender and gender roles are visible, they are not their most important characteristics organising their social and spiritual world. The position resulting from their causative power is more important, and both masculinity and femininity can serve it, as is the case in the story about Yemayá's passion for Inle. Another great example is the *pataki* about the intervention of the beautiful Ochún in a conflict between the fierce warriors, Ogún and Changó. Ogún took refuge in the forest, where the power of Changó could not reach him. Wanting to please Changó and win his love, Ochún undressed and naked, smeared her body with honey, tied the waistband in five appropriate colours, and her sensual dance and aromas of sweetness lured the unfortunate Ogún from the forest hideout to the open field, where he was vulnerable to attack. As Changó won the duel, Ochún won his attention, but after staying with him for some time, unable to bear his affairs with other women, she soon abandoned him for another man.

Both femininity and masculinity are treated as powerful forces, but there is no relationship of subordination between them. They are also fluid rather than fixed. Female characters fall in love with men, they are related to them, they are jealous, they leave them to look for other relationships. Both female and male characters use gender attributes to outsmart their opponents. Both can be promiscuous, and promiscuity is not treated as a vice in the texts of *patakis*. It is simply a feature that characterises different characters to varying degrees. There are no fixed and defined gender role models – both males and females can be gentle or violent, benevolent or cruel. Matory's book on gender and the politics of metaphor in Oyo Yoruba religion³² demonstrates that gender categories could be changed by the negotiation of politically interested actors, both male and female, and it seems that a similar principle is present within the *orichas*' world of Cuban *patakie*s.

Women in *santería* hierarchy and rituals

The participation of women and men in ceremonies and rituals, and their place in the structure of worship, is no less complex than the gender roles of *orichas*. Extremely differing interpretations of the status of women in *santería* can be found in literature. Some scholars believe that *santería*, like the Afro Brazilian candomblé, is “essentially a feminine religion that puts clearly on the pedestal women's attitudes and practices, such as caring, the role of the nanny and companion of life.”³³ Clark follows

³¹ N. Bolívar Aróstegui, *op. cit.*; *Yemoja: Gender, Sexuality, and Creativity in the Latina/o and Afro-Atlantic Diasporas*, S. Otero, T. Falola (eds.), Albany 2013.

³² J.L. Matory, *Sex and the Empire that is no more. Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion*, New York–Oxford 2005.

³³ M.A. Clark, *Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule: Santería Ritual Practices and Their Gender Implications*, Gainesville 2005, p. 145.

the relatively unknown American researcher of candomblé, Ruth Landes, who was rejected in her times by the academic establishment. In 1947, in the anthropological and autobiographical book *The City of Women*,³⁴ she drew attention to the paradoxes of the Western reading of non-Western sensing structures, stressing that the communities of the faithful she studied were led by women and functioned for women, without ruling out or subordinating men.³⁵ Clark denies the importance of men's roles and claims that men in *santería* must, in fact, take over the attitudes and roles that she considers to be feminine.³⁶ She shares Landes' ideas reflected in an explicit account of a candomblé affiliate cited in her book:

sometimes they call the priestess the wife of the god, and sometimes she is his horse. The god gives advice and place demands but often he just mounts and plays. So you can see why the priestesses develop great influence among the people. They are the pathways to the gods. But no upright man will allow himself to be ridden by a god, unless he does not care about losing his manhood... Now here is the loophole. Some men allow to be ridden and they become priests with the women; but they are known to be homosexuals. In the temple they put on skirts and mannerisms of the women... sometimes they are much better looking than women.³⁷

The acceptance of homosexuality within Yoruba-based Afro-American cults and its interpretations are another subject of the vivid debate inspired by Oyeronke Oyèwùmí,³⁸ which has already been mentioned. Lorand Matory³⁹ discusses risks of the possible misunderstanding of differing meanings of man-man sexual jokes and/or relations in the Yoruba, Bahian and Western context. Dynamic gender relations do not necessarily translate into homosexual relationships. However, in Cuban *santería* differences between the 'masculine' Ifá cult and effeminated general *santería* patterns are sometimes mentioned.⁴⁰

Clark⁴¹, like several other researchers, is inclined to attribute the corporeality of women to the forces associated with the natural world and uses them to interpret, among other features, the ban on religious practices during menstruation. The same ritual 'prohibitions' – the exclusion of menstruating women from religious practices, or a ban to approach the 'sacred' drums – are also interpreted by some scholars as a manifestation of male domination. Cedeño Hechavarría⁴² is more likely to consider

³⁴ R. Landes, *The City of Women*, New York 1947.

³⁵ Prominent American researcher of African-American cultures, Melville Herskovits criticised Landes' book rejecting a priori the idea of the leading role of women and including veiled allegations of moral character – Landes did not hide that during her field research in Bahia, she worked with an Afro-Brazilian candomblé researcher, Edison Carneiro, who was also her partner; she was also accused by scholars of stressing the role of women for the sake of diminishing the one of homosexual men and 'moralising' candomblé.

³⁶ M.A. Clark, *op. cit.*

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 37 cit. by J.L. Matory, *Is there gender...*, *op. cit.*, p. 528.

³⁸ O. Oyèwùmí, *The Translation of Cultures...*, *op. cit.*

³⁹ J.L. Matory, *Is there gender...*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ M. Holbraad, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ M.A. Clark, *op. cit.*

⁴² Y. Cedeño Hechavarría, *Dime qué haces y te diré quién eres: Santería, mujeres santeras y representación social de sus funciones*, "Revista Contrapunto" 2014, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 128–144.

that the structures of the *santería* hierarchy are characterised by male dominance and the clear subordination of women. Only men can be the ‘priests’ with the highest position of *babalaos* – ‘fathers of secrets’ who have the right to maintain direct contact with Ifá. There is an interesting *pataki* explaining this rule. According to the story, Yemayá, the goddess of the sea, was married to Orula, the divination master of the land Ifé-Ilé. He was recognised as a person able to make miracles, so he had many clients who paid well for his divination-based advice. One day, he had to travel to a meeting with Olofi (the supreme deity) and the journey took him several days. As Yemayá run out of money, she decided to receive Orula’s clients herself and she was so successful that when Orula was on his way back home, he heard about a famous miraculous woman performing divination sessions. Orula went mad and he took Yemayá with him to complain to Olofi. The Supreme deity decided that Orula would be entitled to perform divination using the *ekuele* (which is the present-day Ifá divination chain), and Yemayá would have the right to perform divination with cowrie shells only.⁴³ This *pataki* is always cited when the ban of Ifá divination to women is being discussed. Women ‘priestesses’ – *santeras* – perform similar functions to *babalaos*, but they have the right to use only a simplified divination system using shells instead of the Ifá string and table, and applying a simpler interpretative repertoire of the shells. Their activity is considered as being of a ‘lower rank’ than *babalaos*. It seems that nowadays, some *babalaos* tend to see their Ifá divination system as somehow separate from *santería*.⁴⁴

The opponents of the idea of the absence of women within Ifá systems remind us that *babalaos* are often assisted by female helpers called *apetebbí*, which are usually female relatives responsible for household chores; however, they do take part in some of the Ifá ceremonies. Finally, as Martin Holbraad⁴⁵ mentions on the basis of his fieldwork observations that confirm the author’s own observations, the majority of clients who seek divinatory consultations are women.

Recent facts challenge the traditional role of women in Cuban Ifá divination system. In 2002, because in Yoruba land there are no impediments for women to practice Ifá divination, the first two Cuban women were consecrated with the rank of *Iyaon-ifá*, equivalent to *babalao* for men, in the Ìranlówo Ifá Temple House (Ìranlówo Ifá means ‘Salvation is Ifá’), led by Víctor Omolófaoró. The repositioning of women in the religious Afro-Cuban world began; as a result of this debates on the legitimacy of such a procedure initiated.⁴⁶

⁴³ T. Orozco, N. Bolívar Aróstegui, *Cuba Santa*, Madrid 1998.

⁴⁴ M. Holbraad, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁶ A.M. Beliso de Jesus, *Contentious Diasporas: Gender, Sexuality and Heteronationalisms in the Cuban Iyanifa Debate*, “Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society” 2015, vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 817–840; *idem*, *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion*, New York 2015; C. Rahut, *Santería und Ihre Globalisierung in Kuba: Tradition und Innovation in Einer Afrokubanischen Religion*, Baden-Baden 2012; C.E. Watson, *Witches, Female Priests and Sacred Manoeuvres: (De)stabilizing Gender and sexuality in a Cuban Religion of African Origin*, [in:] *The Bloomsbury Reader in Religion, Sexuality, and Gender*, D.L. Boisvert, C. Danie (eds.) Oxford–London–New York–New Delhi–Sydney 2017, pp. 187–197.

The author's field observations conducted many years ago and the recent descriptions of *santería* practices by other authors lead to interpretations based on two elements. It is definitely considered that the results of research on gender relations in traditional Yoruba culture are important, as they shaped the roots of the *santería* belief system. The book written by Lorelle Semley *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass. Gender and Colonialism in a Yoruba Town* (Bloomington 2011) is another voice in the debate on the complexity of gender categories in the Yoruba culture, seen in the context of their history. The author emphasises that without historical references, it is impossible to understand the changing relationship between gender roles and power. She shows the scope of power and its deficits referring to the inhabitants of Ketu in various epochs, explaining contradictions emerging between the traditional indeterminacy of gender roles and other, different patterns over time. The conclusions presented by the author allow for a deeper understanding of underdetermined gender roles in the *orichas* world. The dynamics of changes observed in Africa is an additional argument for taking the temporal dimension seriously into account in the research of gender relations in the *santería*. *Santería* organisational structure is not particularly formalised. Since the very beginning of its existence in the New World, the believe system had to adapt to the changing context. *Santería* fostered changes that did not undermine its basic core. It was thanks to this flexibility that it was able to survive in unfavourable conditions of the repression and prohibitions periodically in force in Colonial and post-revolutionary Cuba. Nowadays, thanks to the ability to adapt to new environments, it is being accepted in various contexts: among Cuban migrants and new believers in North America, South America and in Europe.⁴⁷ The latest phenomena, such as the commercialisation of religious practices and the institutionalisation of cult including, for example, the creation of the Babalaos Council, which were described by the author in two earlier texts, change the power relationship within the religious community. Changes taking place in patriarchal societies lead to the emergence of conflicting interpretations of the real meaning of men and women within the cult. These can be significantly different among the believers, as the debates on female Ifá priestesses show.

Final remarks

Recent literature reflects a growing interest in relations between cultural gender roles and religion.⁴⁸ Undoubtedly, this can be partly attributed to development of social feminist research. There is also an increasing amount of research on the issue in the particular context of Cuban *santería*.⁴⁹ As stated above, enriching research perspectives

⁴⁷ B. Lisocka-Jaegermann, *Migracje synkretycznych religii...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 218–227; *eadem*, *Los caminos de la santería...*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ S. Marcos, *Religión y género: contribuciones a su estudio en América Latina. Introducción al volumen religión y género*, "Estudos de Religião" 2007, vol. 21, no. 32, pp. 34–59.

⁴⁹ M.A. Clark, *op. cit.*; L. Rosbach de Olmos, *op. cit.*; Y. Cedeño Hechavarría, *op. cit.*; G. Castellanos Llanos, *Identidades raciales y de género en la santería afrocubana*, "La manzana de la discordia" 2009, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 63–72; M.M. Castro Flores, *Religions of African Origin in Cuba*:

with a post-colonial approach, seeking new interpretations of the roots of contemporary phenomena and processes, and taking into account the influence of colonial structures on changes and their trajectories can contribute to the analysis of complex and ambiguous relations that escape commonly used categories. Gender as a social category existing among the Yoruba was marked by flexibility and complex configurations and this explains concepts underpinning present-day imaginaries. New approaches questioning Cartesian rationality as the only reference framework lead to novel interpretations of *santería*-related behaviour. In one of the newest publications on the subject, Strongman⁵⁰ suggests that transcorporeality is the key to understanding not only gender roles but also human psyche and spiritual life in the Black Atlantic; all three of these can be seen as multiple, removable, and external to the body, as his brilliant reading of the Cuban film *Fresa y chocolate*⁵¹ with deep *santería* references, demonstrates.

In addition to the above, it is also important to link research on religious ideas and practices with sociological and anthropological interpretations of gender relations in contemporary Caribbean societies. The matrifocality of Caribbean cultures is most often associated with the heritage of slavery.⁵² This is also attributed to the poorest social strata, in which, also for economic reasons, blood ties seem to be stronger than marital ties. In relation to English-speaking countries, the phenomenon of the feminisation of poverty and the influence of neoliberal policies introduced in the 1980s on changes in gender relations⁵³ have been described. In Cuba, the changes brought about by the ‘special period’ crisis have forced the redefinition of gender and family relationships. Such changes also resulted in the functioning of Cubans on the island and Cubans in the diaspora. Helen Safa⁵⁴ wrote about the increase of the role of matrifocality in Cuba – which is somewhat contradictory to both the equality policy of post-revolutionary Cuban authorities and the cultural model of male domination attributed to Latin American societies. Matrifocality results from the financial autonomy of women undertaking professional work, the nature of households functioning within extended family structures – in which women can count on the support of female relatives, especially mothers, sisters and aunts – and the decreasing status of a legitimate marriage. All these elements are found in Cuba, although they are visible to varying degrees in different social strata. During stays there in the late 1970s and in 1985, the author observed them among both the inhabitants of the marginal suburban districts, mainly Afro-Cubans, and within the middle-class Mulatto urban

A Gender Perspective. [in:] *Nation Dance: Religion, Identity, and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean*, P. Taylor (ed.), Bloomington 2001, pp. 54–62; K. Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances: the Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería*, Washington 2001.

⁵⁰ R. Strongman, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions: Transcorporeality in Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou*, Durham, NC 2019.

⁵¹ *Fresa y chocolate*, T. Gutiérrez Alea, J.C. Tabío (dir.), Cuba–Mexico 1993.

⁵² H. Safa, *The Matrifocal Family and Patriarchal Ideology in Cuba and the Caribbean*, “Journal of Latin American Anthropology” 2005, vol. 10, iss. 2, p. 314–338; *idem*, *Hierarchies and Household Change in Postrevolutionary Cuba*, “Latin American Perspectives” 2009, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 42–52.

⁵³ *Idem*, *The Myth Of The Male Breadwinner: Women And Industrialization In The Caribbean*, Boulder, CO–Oxford 1995.

⁵⁴ *Idem*, *Hierarchies...*, *op. cit.*

environment. Both groups were related to *santería*; in the first case, the religion was practiced on an everyday basis by all members of the extended family/neighbourhood group, and in the second, occasional and selected practices were explicitly acknowledged only by older women and homosexual men, however others also shared them without acknowledging it openly. The unfavourable attitude of official authorities to religious practices in this period partially explains the reluctance to acknowledge them among middle-class aspiring Cubans. The author is convinced that a more complete confrontation of the different concepts of femininity and masculinity present in Cuban society – including gender relations in *santería* – would help to understand the complex patterns with which we are dealing today and would undermine the stereotypical perception of women and men and the relations between them.

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