

Strongman, Roberto

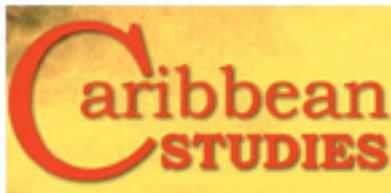
Reseña de "Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule: Santería Ritual Practices and Their Gender Implications" de Mary A. Clark

Caribbean Studies, Vol. 35, Núm. 1, enero-junio, 2007, pp. 274-276

Universidad de Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico

Disponible en: <http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/src/inicio/ArtPdfRed.jsp?iCve=39211831014>



Caribbean Studies

ISSN (Versión impresa): 0008-6533

viiglesias@rrpac.upr.clu.edu

Universidad de Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico

¿Cómo citar?

Número completo

Más información del artículo

Página de la revista

Mary A. Clark. 2005. *Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule: Santería Ritual Practices and Their Gender Implications*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 186 pp. ISBN: 0-8130-2834-5.

Mary Ann Clark's pioneering latest work, *Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule*, establishes a landmark in the Academic fields of Religious Studies and Gender Studies by providing the first book-length treatise devoted exclusively to the role of women in Afro-Cuban Lukumí—a religion known to most outsiders as “Santería.” Through a chapter-by-chapter elaboration of the major thematic components of the Lukumí ritual experience—divination, initiation, possession, sacrifice, and witchcraft—Clark foregrounds the slippage between sex and gender in Cuban Orisha worship communities. She argues that, in sharp contrast to the masculinist stance of the dominant world religions, Lukumí is a religion in which the female is the gendered epitome of spirituality.

Building upon existing scholarship in both the Nigerian and Cuban Yoruba religious traditions, Clark's work participates in a greater movement towards a transatlantic understanding of African religions. In Chapter Three, “Destiny and Divination,” Clark's argument utilizes works by Nigerian cultural critics Wande Abimbola and Segun Gbadegesin to explore the ways in which traditional scholarship on the Yoruba religion has advanced without taking gender into account. She then engages her critique of these African scholars through an exploration of the thematics of gender in works by Cuban ethnographers Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera. The skillfulness with which she weaves the counterpoint between Nigeria and Cuba exhibits some of the finest work in the new transatlantic scholarship on the African Diaspora, situating Clark's work confidently alongside more established critics such as Joseph Murphy and her mentor Lorand Matory. Her political alignment with Matory becomes clear at the end of Chapter Three in her dismissal of Oyeronke Oyewumi's thesis in *The Invention of Women* (1997) that there was no idea of gender among the Yoruba in the pre-colonial period—an argument that Matory also contests in *Black Atlantic Religion* (2005).

Clark's research on Iberian practices of *brujería* allows her to study the Hispanization of Yoruba religion in Cuba and to emphasize the relevance of her work to Latin American Studies scholars. In Chapter Seven, Clark explains how practices of witchcraft such as healing, spells, potions, performing abortions and cursing continued in the New World

through Yoruba rituals in spite of the Spanish Inquisition. The religious practices of Non-Islamic Africans were largely outside the scope of the Inquisition because of its focus on the eradication of Jewish, Islamic and Protestant beliefs. This allowed for a continuation of practices of witchcraft that would leave a permanent mark on the Hispanic culture of Cuba. As such, Clark's *Where Men are Wives and Women Rule* points to the need for more academic attention to the confluence of Latin American Studies and Africana Studies.

Nevertheless, her First World/Third World and Transatlantic axes could have been complemented by more regional Caribbean comparisons. While the book's emphasis on Lukumí gives it a sharp focus, it is important to observe that an absence of discussions of gender in Haitian Vodou and Brazilian Candomblé are blind spots. The book certainly fits in a lineage of feminist scholarship on New World African religions that begins with Ruth Landes' work on Candomblé *City of Women* (1947) and continues with the Vodou scholarship of Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola* (1991) and Claudine Michel and Patrick Bellegarde Smith's *God in Every Woman* (2007). As such the work remains unaware of its own important location in the field of literature of African religions in the Western Hemisphere.

Her proficiency in European philosophers of religion like Girard, Freud, Burkert and Durkheim provides a theoretical foundation of her work, assuring it firm grounding within the field of Religious Studies. In Chapter Six, "Sacrifice," Clark uses works by these theorists to propose "that the originary violent event(s) involved a murderous act against a prominent member of the community" (p. 105). Under the broad strokes of theory, the notion of "sacrifice," as well as the notion of "witchcraft," have the tendency to become essentialized, but Clark is able to foreground the particular from the universal. Clark presents how the controversial notion of animal sacrifices of the Lukumí tradition serves to explain the roles of triangulated totemic offerings and expiations found in more abstracted form in the dominant religions of the world. As in the rest of *Where Men are Wives and Women Rule*, Clark's discussion of sacrifice could have profited from ethnographic interviews in which practitioners would have been able to corroborate or dismiss the claims of the theorists and critics the author utilizes.

In the spirit of the Lukumí Cuban experience, Clark distills knowledges of various theoretical and disciplinary traditions and creolizes them into a new discursive formation that allows her to advance the idea that Lukumí is a female-normative system in which men and women

are compelled to assume female gender roles. For Clark “Santería is an essentially feminine religion that valorizes female attitudes and practice” such as care giving, feeding, and wifeliness (p. 145). Clark argues that the centrality of these ritualistic female virtues guarantees the privileged status of women in the religion. Extending this argument, she contends that men in the religion conform to this female ideal as they adopt and perform these qualities.

Nevertheless, the duality underpinning her argument betrays the very gendered fluidity she describes, rendering her argument overly rigid and fragile when exposed to some of the exclusion women face within the religion. Clark’s attempts to re-signify proscriptions for pre-menopausal and menstruating women in certain rituals push the boundaries of what is possible through rhetorical advocacy. The argument that these restrictions are not based on notions of pollution but on “fluctuations of power” is not very convincing and would have been strengthened through an elucidation of how these restrictions point to a certain selectivity in the ideal gendered body of the religion. To tackle such a question could have produced a corporeal model that would account for Lukumí’s ambivalent stance toward women’s reproductive potential. It seems to me that a more courageous acknowledgement of the misogynistic aspects of the religion would have revealed that the quintessential spiritual body of the African-diaspora is the impregnable body of the initiate in trance—one pregnant with the spirit of the Orisha—and that the privileging of this metaphysical fertilization operates discursively through an evacuation and erasure of its material referent. It might be more accurate to say that in Lukumí men become wives and women rule not through their total subscription to feminine gender roles, but through their ritual performance of penetrability, openness and expectant disposition to the Divine.

Roberto Strongman
University of California, Santa Barbara
rstrongman@blackstudies.ucsb.edu

Reference

- Matory, J. Lorand. 2005. *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.