

OSHÚN VISITS THE BRONX – POSSESSED WOMEN IN THE CUBAN ORISHA RELIGION [*DISKUS* 9 (2008)]

Bettina E. Schmidt,
School of Theology and Religious Studies,
Bangor University

ABSTRACT

Spirit Possession is a key practice within many Caribbean religions but can be difficult to understand. This article focuses on the Cuban Orisha religion (generally known under its former name, Santería) and its development during recent decades with regard to gender. Inspired by fieldwork conducted in New York City, the author looks at an explanation for an increase in female participation in this Cuban religion.

INTRODUCTION

In 1998 I began a research project on Caribbean religions in New York City. Though I had studied some of these religions in Puerto Rico before, the research situation in New York was different. While non-initiated people were not allowed to attend most ceremonies in Puerto Rico, the New Yorker communities were more accessible and I was invited to several (but not all) of the ceremonies I encountered. One of my first was a *bembé* (a religious festival) in honour of the goddess Oshún.

Oshún is an important figure in the pantheon of the Cuban Orisha religion (generally known under its former name, Santería). She is ultimately derived from an Orisha (‘deity’ in the Yoruba language) of the traditional West African Yoruba religion and represents beauty, energy and love. It is said that she can cool the heat of Ogún, the warrior Orisha of iron and patron of smiths. Her touch brings health and refreshment. I used to compare her with Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty in the Greek pantheon, until I encountered her for the first time in person. I accompanied a friend, a drummer, to a ceremony in the Bronx where he was asked to play. The event was held on a Saturday afternoon in a large hall in the basement of a building. The grey hall with blank concrete walls was colourfully decorated with yellow and gold cloths and feathers. In one corner people had prepared an impressive throne for Oshún with an incredible amount of offerings for the Orisha on the floor in front of it, baskets full of fruit, fancy cakes and sweets. Near the entrance was a smaller altar for Egún, the Orisha who opens doors and is necessary for the crossing between the world of the humans and the world of the Orisha. In an adjunct room was a buffet with food for the participants.

When we arrived, the room was already full of people. My friend went directly to the other musicians, after advising me not to approach him while he was performing. Women are usually not allowed near the drums because the presence of women is believed to interfere with the communication with the Orisha. Able drummers can attract the attention of Orisha with particular rhythms and persuade them to descend to the human world for a short period of time. By incorporating (‘mounting’) a human body, Orisha can join the human world and dance with their devotees. According to Cuban belief every person has a special connection to one particular Orisha and is called a ‘child’ of this

Orisha. An initiation into priesthood in the Orisha tradition ('asiento' in Spanish) strengthens this link by 'placing' the Orisha in or on the head of a person (known as the kariocha ceremony <1>). The iyawo (person who is newly initiated) is regarded as 'wife' of the Orisha to whom he or she is connected. Usually, only an experienced person can fully handle the incorporation of an Orisha. When an Orisha 'mounts' an untrained person, it is interpreted as a call for this person to become a priest. A ceremony is considered to be 'good' or 'successful' if several Orisha 'mount' human bodies and join the celebration. In order to encourage this to happen, the organizer of the ceremony needs the presence of able mediums, experienced people who are trained to incorporate an Orisha. While in Cuba every temple has several priests, this is not the case in New York City where a community consists often of a single priest or priestess, usually the founder of the community, and his or her disciples and clients. A New Yorker community therefore needs the cooperation of individuals from other communities in order to ensure a successful celebration. Every devotee is expected to sponsor once a year a ceremony in honour of an Orisha. Sponsoring can mean the organisation of such a ceremony but also contributing money, help or offerings to a ceremony someone else is organising. Consequently the participants at this ceremony in the Bronx belonged to various religious communities who came together to celebrate Oshún.

Upon our arrival I noticed that some people were already possessed by Oshún and other Orisha such as Yemaya, the Orisha of maternity. It is possible to recognize the Orisha by their clothes and belongings. When an Orisha approaches a person, the human body usually shakes and trembles. This is the sign for the assistants to guide the person to another chamber where they provide the incorporated body with silk dresses, jewellery and other accoutrements (e.g., a fan or a fly whisk, a sword or an axe). People who arrived in normal clothes came out of this chamber dressed in impressive costumes in the colours of the Orisha. For instance, people possessed by Oshún wear yellow dresses, people possessed by Yemaya blue-white dresses, people possessed by Shangó red-white shirts and trousers. I was intrigued to see that the behaviour and body language changed with the different clothing. It was no longer a human being but Oshún who walked through the crowd in a royal manner. Her body language indicated: 'Look at me. I am a beautiful woman and you have to treat me with respect worthy of a queen'. And this was exactly how she was approached by others. A person who wanted to speak with Oshún prostrated in front of Oshún in an elaborate way before addressing the question. Even a person who wanted to offer Oshún sweets and honey liqueur did this only after prostrating in front of her. Though I have attended other ceremonies involving ecstatic experiences before, this was different. This transformation of a human being into a deity was remarkable. I also noticed differences between the experiences, a hierarchy between Orisha, expressed through their incorporation in human bodies, and a difference between a trained medium being possessed by an Orisha and the other participants who were touched by an Orisha while dancing. Most people were, for instance, gathering together in front of the musicians; some were dancing to the rhythms, some were only observing. When suddenly the behaviour of two young men became erratic, they attracted the attention of people around them. Nonetheless, their attitude towards the young men did not change because they were touched but not possessed by the Orisha. By observing the reaction of the people around them, I learned to assess and understand the kind of

experience I was witnessing. It was not a party with good music and tasty food but a religious ceremony blessed by the presence of deities. The personal interaction with the Orisha represents the core of the religious practice of this religion. An anonymous party hall became transformed into a sacred space; an ordinary person suddenly became a goddess. The sex of the human body was irrelevant. I saw men and women transformed into an Orisha regardless of the gender of the Orisha. The transformation was so radical that I had difficulties recognising the sex of the body the Orisha had chosen for the incorporation. The female Oshún and the male Shangó could manifest into a female or male body and this made no difference to the perceived identity of the Oshún. This observation confirmed what I had learnt in the early 1990s in Puerto Rico. When I started my research in the Caribbean I was told that both men and women can become vehicles for the manifestation of Orishas. Perhaps influenced by this experience, I took little notice of the sex of the body that Oshún incorporated during my first bembé in New York City. I can still see her in my memory, a tall figure dressed in a yellow silk dress walking like a goddess through the crowd. But was it a male or a female body? I do not remember at all. I had accepted what I had been told years ago by Cuban and Puerto Rican priests initiated into *regla de ifá* and *regla de ocha*, the two main ritual branches of the Orisha religion, and saw only the transformed person. However, there remains a tendency among scholars studying this religion to describe such possession as a female experience. Beatriz Morales, for instance, states in her PhD thesis (1990) that she saw more possessed women than men, most between the ages of 15 and 40. <2> Mary Ann Clark (2005) even portrays this tradition as a female-based religion that valorises female virtues and practices; hence a religion in which female identity is normative <3> though she also declares that sexual orientation and anatomical sex do not limit ritual participation. In this article I will discuss these observations and their possible consequences for the future development of this religious movement. I will start with its history and describe its development from an oppressed religion of enslaved Africans to a global religion with millions of devotees in the Americas, Europe, Africa and beyond. Then I will explain the gender division within the Orisha religion, focusing especially on divination and possession. In the third section I will discuss Clark's theory of Orisha as female oriented and add another perspective. Through discussion of the role of women in the Orisha religion I hope to move towards a new understanding of spirit possession.

THE RELIGION OF THE ORISHA IN AMERICA: FROM CUBA TO THE US

The Cuban religion was labelled 'Santería' (Spanish for 'the cult of the saints') due to the identification of the central figures in the pantheon, the Orisha, with Catholic saints during the 17th and 18th centuries. However, an increasing resistance to the blending of popular Catholicism and Caribbean religiosity during the 20th century led to the introduction of other names. In Cuba the religion became labelled the religion of the Lucumí (the Cuban name for enslaved and freed Yoruba), and hence as an ethnic religion. In the USA, however, where it became more and more popular among people of non-Cuban descent, the usage of the term Lucumí would be inappropriate because it refers to Cuban history (US historical tradition does not recollect enslaved Yoruba in great numbers). African Americans in the US prefer terms such as Yoruba religion,

Orisha religion or even Orisha-Voodoo in order to avoid the term Santería because of its Catholic association <4>. The current trend among scholars is to refer to ‘Orisha religion’ but also to distinguish between two different branches, each characterised by its main ritual feature: regla de ocha (the rules of ocha) and regla de ifá (the rules of ifá). Ocha refers to the spiritual entities (the Orishas) and Ifá to the central Yoruba divination system. David Brown regards them as historically distinct cults <5> while I argue that both represent two different but connected ritual systems. <6>

The establishment of the Afro-Cuban religion is connected to the trade of enslaved Yoruba from West Africa to Cuba. George Brandon distinguishes between five different time periods, starting with the ‘African and Pre-Santería period’. During this first period the Yoruba city-states were established and the transatlantic slave trade began. In Cuba the population was left relatively unrestricted because Spain’s interest shifted to the continent and its gold resources after the radical conquest of the island and the near extinction of its people. The result was the birth of a relatively homogenous Creole culture emerging from the mixture of freed African slaves, indigenous population and European settlers. <7>

During the ‘early Santería period’, between 1760 and 1870, a sugar boom in Europe led to increased importation of enslaved people from Africa to Cuba. The result was the establishment of a racially organised slave system. Africans from the Benin area constituted the largest group, but Cuba also imported a significant number of indigenous people from Yucatán as well as Chinese workers. The owners of large sugar, coffee and tobacco estates became the dominant power. By evangelizing the enslaved Africans the Roman Catholic Church helped to develop an early version of ‘Santería’ <8>. In order to pacify the slaves, the Spanish government allowed the mixing of Yoruba deities and Catholic saints, which led to the creation of new Afro-Catholic religions in their colonies. In 1598 the first Black cofradía (Spanish for a kind of lay brotherhood) was founded by enslaved Africans. Under the protection of the church, members of the cofradía were allowed to meet in order to worship saints with dancing and singing. These associations gained more importance under the pressure of the first large-scale slave imports. After a while the cofradías developed into cabildos de nación (Spanish for a society, club or other social association) whose main function was the religious education of its members.

The transformative period in which the religion was finally established as a predominant Yoruba-Spiritist-Catholic mixture <9> was the time between 1870 and 1959. At first the cabildos declined due to repression by the government, which had increased pressure against all organizations of enslaved or freed people of African descent when the resistance against slavery increased. Even a Catholic procession through the streets was prohibited. In 1866 slavery was finally abolished in Cuba. However, one consequence was that the cabildos de nación lost their protected religious status. When the former slaves migrated from the countryside to urban centres, they needed new networks in order to survive. Based on the common belief in Orisha, they transformed the cabildos de nación into small house temples, the casas de santos (Spanish for ‘houses of saints’). These houses offered economic, political and social support to the former enslaved people, but their main function related to religious practice.

In 1898, Cuba gained its independence from Spain. The first years were difficult, mainly due to the occupation of the island by the U.S.A.. Though the military occupation lasted only a few months, the US effectively became the dominant political and economic power in Cuba. Cuba had won its political independence but lost control of its resources to the US. It became, according to Brandon, infected 'with a racial virus even more virulent than the home-grown variety' <10>. Afro-Cubans were denied their lawful position in Cuba's history as well as in society; consequently, the practice of Afro-Cuban religions became secret. The members of the *casas de santos* had to hide their ceremonies because even drumming was prohibited. <11> However, the situation changed radically under the increasing influence of Fernando Ortiz in the 1920s. Ortiz was a lawyer who started his research into Afro-Cuban religions because he wanted to investigate the alleged criminal activities of Afro-Cuban religious groups. <12> His work produced deep insights into Afro-Cuban culture and led to the creation of *Afrocubanidad*, an Afro-Cuban movement that inspired many Cuban artists and intellectuals. Brandon regards this movement as a 'response to the political, social, and cultural problems of the Cuban Republic and as a response to international influence of the European artistic and intellectual avant-garde of the time' <13>. A result was a more positive orientation to Afro-Cuban religions, in particular in the urban centres. Because of the increasing interest of artists and intellectuals the Orisha religion was no longer regarded as superstition but as Cuban folklore.

The Cuban revolution in 1959 ended this period. When Brandon published his history of the religion in 1993, 'Santería' was still regarded as a secret movement because most practitioners did not trust the government and feared restrictions. <14> However, the situation has changed due to the economic problems which emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Afro-Cuban religions today are accepted as part of the Cuban heritage despite the persistently secularist attitude of the ruling party. These religions even achieved economic significance when the government realised that it might be possible to make money out of the growing international interest in Afro-Cuban religious phenomena. This innovation was, however, subject to centralised government control. All foreigners were required to ask permission before consulting a priest or priestess or attending a ceremony. State officials even directed foreigners to a selected number of temples and provided foreigners (for a fee) with the name and address of a temple where they could attend a ceremony and consult a priest or priestess. Any contact between non-Cubans and the Cuban religions was controlled by a special office of the government. Since the end of the 1990s, however, the government has adopted a more liberal stance towards the Cuban religions. Though some people are still reluctant to speak openly about their practice, the government no longer restricts the temples, and even approved the opening of a museum of the Orisha in Havana.

The developments in Cuba represent only part of the Orisha religion, and an increasing number of devotees live outside Cuba, some with no Cuban heritage. The Cuban Revolution led to an incredible dispersion of the movement, first to the U.S.A., then to non-Cubans and subsequently around the globe. Brandon focuses in particular on two developments in the U.S. (the fifth and last phase in his overview), the mixture with

Puerto Rican Spiritism, which he calls Santerismo, and the mixture with Black Nationalism that he labels Orisha-Voodoo. <15> Inspired by the Cuban religion, Walter Eugene King, an African American from New York, founded a village called Oyotunji in South Carolina (between 1970 and 1971) in the style of a traditional Yoruba city state. <16> Though this development represents an important step in the spread of the Orisha religion to non-Cubans, the developments in Florida changed its image even more. After the Cuban Revolution Miami became the capital of the Cuban refugees. Most of the early refugees were white Cubans from the middle and upper classes who were Catholics and rejected the religions of the poor Afro-Cubans. However, in exile the belief in Orisha became an important way in which to express Cuban identity. Juan Jorge Sosa even argues that it helped Cuban refugees to overcome terror and alienation because it offered a distinctively Cuban practice. <17> The involvement of the political refugees started a process called blanqueamiento (Spanish for becoming 'whiter'). Palmié estimates that during the time of his investigation (in the 1980s) 10% of Cubans in Miami practised the Orisha religion and an even larger number participated in ceremonies or consulted a priest regularly. <18> One consequence of this process was the commercialisation of religious practice. The price for an initiation and even for a consultation increased so dramatically that Cuban refugees in the 1980s, who came predominantly from the lower social classes, felt alienated from the traditions which were associated with their homeland <19>.

During more recent decades the centre of the Orisha religion has shifted to New York. While most of the refugees of the first decade after the revolution went to Florida, most of these migrants later moved to urban centres in the north. The arrival of these Cuban migrants influenced the practice of the Orisha religion in New York City. Though the first santeros (Spanish for initiated devotee of the Orisha religion) in New York can be traced back to the 1940s <20>, practice remained unstructured and unorthodox due to a lack of trained ritual officiants. However, among the arrivals during the 1980s were a large number of ritual specialists who re-established Cuban rules and a strict cultic hierarchy. <21> However, the spread of the religion to non-Cubans has generated new developments such as the foundation of Black temples that reject any Catholic association and even challenge Cuban authority. The power struggle between some of the priests and their communities represents a growing threat to the religion. In order to offer an alternative some people try to establish new forms of institutionalization such as egbe (a Yoruba term for a guild, club, or society <22>). Instead of being organized around a priest, an egbe focuses on the cult of one Orisha who is honoured by regular ceremonies. However, this innovation has been as yet unsuccessful because of its perceived lack of authority among Orisha devotees. In spite of the African name these houses are regarded as an American invention and not as a traditional African institution. <23> Nonetheless, the spread of the Orisha religion continues. One can find today devotees of the Orishas all over the world, for instance in Venezuela, Mexico, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Spain, Portugal, France and Germany. It is, however, impossible to calculate the number of people practising the Orisha religion worldwide (conservative estimates speak in terms of millions).

GENDER DIVISION IN THE ORISHA RELIGION

The ritual practice among Orisha devotees today is divided into two branches: *regla de ocha* and *regla de ifá*. I had noted during my initial research in Puerto Rico in the early 1990s tensions between some temples and priests, but explained them as problems between charismatic men over their conflicting interpretations of authority and not as different branches. <24> I had gone to Puerto Rico to investigate the role of women in Caribbean religions but whoever I asked, priests as well as ordinary devotees, told me that my research question was irrelevant: ‘We do not distinguish between women and men because the spirits and Orisha do not distinguish. They come to every person with the ability to accept them.’ Being relatively fresh in the field, I changed my topic and focused on identity. However, some years into my research I noticed in the literature a tendency to describe possessed women instead of possessed people. A thesis about the religion of the Orisha in Cuba even stressed female participation, as already mentioned. <25> Hence, there is a discrepancy between the statements of my interviewees in Puerto Rico and Morales’ observation in Cuba that might be connected to the discrepancies between *regla de ocha* and *regla de ifá*. Both forms represent two different cults, although one has to keep in mind that these two ritual branches represent only ideal forms; in practice there is a ‘continuum of numerous variations’ <26>. The crucial difference between the two forms relates to the divination technique that influences gender division. *Ifá* is the name of the divination practice that is traditionally restricted to a special group of male priests who are called *babalawos*; women and homosexual men are strictly excluded (though the prohibition to initiate women into *Ifá* has been relaxed in recent years <27>). *Regla de ifá*, therefore, is male-dominated because the (male) *babalawos* are in control. *Regla de ocha*, on the other hand, has no restriction based on sex. Women and men (regardless of their sexual orientation) can become priests and priestesses. These (male) *babalochas* and (female) *iyalochas* are also trained in a divination technique but with shells instead of the traditional *ifá*-board. With this technique they communicate with the Orisha, although some areas remain restricted to *Ifá* (e.g., questions about fate).

Unfortunately, the *Ifá*-centred form dominated the literature about the Orisha religion for decades. This was not only the case in Puerto Rico, where the first (and for a long time only) academic book about the religion was published by a scholar who worked with a well-known *babalawo* <28>, but also in Cuba and the US, as Brown demonstrates. He concludes that our knowledge about the religion was shaped for a long time by *babalawos* who influenced the first internationally recognised scholars of Orisha such as Lydia Cabrera. <29> Consequently *babalawos* were considered to be the leaders of the religion, the ‘high priests’. <30> However, this impression needs to be corrected in light of the emic perspective. In the case of a problem or question devotees consult, at first, the head of the temple they belong to, usually the priest or priestess who initiated them, their ‘godmother’ or ‘godfather’ <31> and not a *babalawo*. He cannot become godfather to a new initiate (*iyawo*) because he does not take part in an initiation. <32> Consequently he is excluded from an important ceremony that shapes the community of devotees and influences the religious practice of every practitioner. The link between an *iyawo* and the godmother or godfather is believed to last forever. People initiated by the same godmother or godfather are regarded as ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’, hence the link establishes a ritual kinship system that connects people all around the globe to a few ritual lineages. Even a white European devotee belongs to a ritual lineage that goes back to Cuba and via

Cuba to Yoruba-land in West Africa. The relationship between godmother/godfather and people they have initiated dominates the religious experience of every individual who belongs to the ritual house of the godmother or godfather for life. Everyone is expected to consult a babalawo on a regular basis (once or twice a year, depending on the individual) but they consult their godmother/godfather more often, for instance, before making any major decision (e.g., about a job offer, moving house, relationships). The babalochas and iyalochas are independent and each one works with little or no interference from other priests though they have to cooperate with each other and the babalawos for some rituals. But for a practitioner, initiation and divination are the two major rituals and both can be conducted by men and women. <33>

Even the perception that babalawos represent the religion to the outside world is misleading. <34> Brown writes that a different group of priests, the obá-orieté, has been more crucial for the development of the religion, in particular in the US. He refers, for instance, to Ernesto Pichado, an important Cuban orieté in Miami who successfully fought for the right to sacrifice animals during rituals at the Supreme Court in Washington. <35> Though orieté are also usually men, there were important female orieté during the early history of Orisha who have been crucial for the establishment of the religion in Cuba <36>, and their number is today again on the increase.

So far I have focused only on the divination technique based on Ifá and shells but there is another means of communication between human beings and Orishas that has an even stronger impact on gender: possession. While Ifá-priests regard the oracle divination as the main form of communication, ordinary devotees prefer the physical interaction with the Orisha, the possession, ‘the state of being entranced and dominated by another being’. <37> This practice is open to everyone. Sexual orientation and anatomic sex of the person are not important. In order to fully understand the significance of this statement, I need to explain the practice of possession in the Cuban religion.

The experience is quite ambiguous. At the beginning, participants appear resistant to it, a resistance often visible in erratic or compulsive gestures. Sometimes it happens very fast and people seem to surrender without struggle. Afterwards, people usually claim not to remember anything that happened during the possession. <38> They say that they do not remember what they did or said, how their movements changed, and how they behaved in a very unusual – perhaps aggressive, seductive or even vulgar - manner. There seem to be, however, different kinds of possession and different levels of trance. I noticed, for instance, how a priestess ordered the members of her temple around and told them, for instance, to bring more chairs for visitors, to sing louder or to take care of the children while being possessed. It seems that sometimes only part of the mind is controlled by a supernatural entity, sometimes the control is more obviously all-consuming. <39>

Nonetheless, people initiated into the religion seem to have no problem identifying who is speaking, who is in control. They tolerate strange behaviour without complaint because the human actor is not responsible for their unconventional gestures or manners, it is the Orisha who is responsible. When the ritual ends, people behave as if they have awoken from a sleep but have not fully recovered, often sweaty and physically exhausted. Despite

this, the experience is generally described as liberating. Suppressed emotions can be expressed without social pressure, everything is allowed because someone or something else is responsible. No legal action can be taken against them, as I.M. Lewis described in a similar context. <40> The ritual empowers people to allow their secret emotions and dreams to become visible.

While this explanation of the therapeutic functions of spirit possession seems to indicate that a person is indeed conscious during possession, other scholars such as Clark argue that the self of the possessed person is absent. The person has not only no recollection of the manifestation, he or she cannot speak or move. The body acts or speaks only according to the wishes of the Orisha. Hence, the possessed person cannot speak or communicate with the Orisha who is manifested in their body. Only other people can ask a question or a favour. In a combination of Lewis' two categories 'trance' (temporary absence of the soul) and possession (invasion of the person by a spirit) Clark defines the moment as 'possession trance', 'wherein an alien spirit fills the space left empty by trance'. <41> Clark argues, therefore, that the possession occurs for the benefit of the community because the possessed person is entranced and, by channelling the Orisha, is able to respond to the community's needs. <42> But this interpretation ignores an important aspect, the connection between Orisha and human, stressing the individuality of the experience and highlighting how possession does not only benefit the community but the possessed person as well. The Orisha represents an aspect of the personality of the human being. Some devotees say that it is possible to tell whose ritual child a person was even after his or her death; for instance, Gonzalez Wippler writes that Beethoven was a son of Ogún while Chopin was a child of Oshún, his claims based solely on the music they composed. <43> The combination of Orisha and individual seems to be unique in every case, not only because of the human element but also because of the Orisha. Every Orisha consists of many variations or characteristics, similar to the Virgin Mary in Christianity who can represent motherhood (with baby Jesus in her arms), sorrow (weeping over the dead body of Jesus), joy (over the announcement of the birth of her son), and many more aspects. People usually prefer one aspect over others, portrayed by an artist in a painting or statue. When praying in front of such an artistic representation of the Virgin Mary, people may well address one particular aspect of her. For instance, when a woman has problems conceiving, she will pray in front of Our Lady of Conception (Immaculate Conception); when someone has a troubled child, the person will probably prefer Our Lady of Sorrows who understands grief and sorrow or the Madonna of Consolation. In a similar way, Oshún also has various different characteristics such as love, beauty, sex, but also healing and cooling passion. During the incorporation in a human body one aspect usually dominates. Oshún can appear as femme fatale, as I have observed in the Bronx, but also as a compassionate healer whose touch relieves and heals. It seems at first glance that the choice is random, that it is not possible to predict which aspect of Oshún will dominate during the possession. But it can be that the medium, the person who will be possessed, attracts certain aspects of Oshún, that there is an interaction (perhaps subconsciously) between aspects of Oshún's personality and aspects of the human personality. Consequently, some aspects of the person dominate during possession, perhaps aspects of his or her personality that are usually suppressed. The possessed person may therefore benefit from the experience even

without any memory of it and without the opportunity to ask questions of the Orisha. It is, however, impossible to predict whether a possession will take place during a ceremony. The organisers of the bembé that I described above could only try to encourage the possession by inviting certain individuals who had already proven their ability to incorporate Oshún and other major Orisha. Nonetheless, the success of the bembé was not guaranteed. This unpredictability creates a problem for the organisers whose religious duty it is to hold once a year a ceremony in honour of the Orisha they worship. While a large temple in Cuba usually has enough members to secure a successful ceremony, this is not the case outside Cuba. Only a few communities in New York City (and none so far in Europe) are large enough, hence a successful ceremony needs the support of members of other temples. Only when the major Orisha ‘participate’ by incorporating human bodies are the religious duties fulfilled. However, the sexual orientation and anatomic sex of an individual have no influence on whether the possession takes place or not.

THE ORISHA RELIGION AS FEMALE-BASED RELIGION?

As explained above, the gender of a person who becomes possessed has no significance for the possession, at least according to the internally held doctrine of Orisha religion. We might expect, therefore, the number of male and female devotees to be roughly equal. Nonetheless, Clark defines Orisha as a female-based religion with a strong participation of women and homosexuals (30-50%) who find the ‘fluidity of roles liberating and empowering’. <44> She explains her statement with reference to possession practice and states, for instance, that all mediums are gendered female, whether they are female or male. <45> The Cuban religion is not the only one whose literature is dominated by accounts of possessed women. Mary Keller writes that women predominate in the accounts of ‘religious traditions in which people are possessed’ and that such an arrangement has ‘existed throughout recorded history and continue[s] to exist on all continents of the globe’. <46> The conclusion seems to be that women in general are more attracted to possession than men. Lewis even sees spirit possession as a widespread strategy ‘emplaced by women to achieve ends which they cannot readily obtain more directly’. <47> When, on the other hand, men enter into trance, they represent authority and morality. Lewis’ interpretation could be seen as supporting the dominance of regla de ifá over regla de ocha but, as already mentioned, this misrepresents the tradition as we have it. Women have even begun to infiltrate regla de ifá, at first only in the US but now also in Cuba. For a long time Cuban priests did not accept any initiation of women in Ifá even when it was conducted by Yoruba babalawos in Nigeria. In 1998 I was told that any ‘proper’ babalawo would leave the room if a woman who was initiated into Ifá by a Nigerian babalawo were to enter. Nonetheless, the number of female Orisha devotees from the US travelling to Nigeria has steadily increased over the last twenty years. This development now influences Cuba, where recent observations indicate that Cuban babalawos have discussed the possibility of offering women (restricted) access to Ifá. <48> This development could lead to a feminisation of the religion that might change the perception of the Orisha religion, a trend that is arguably already happening, as reflected in another recent development: the withdrawal of men from the public ritual practice of Orisha.

In the historical overview above I described how the public acceptance of the Orisha religion in Cuba and beyond has improved since the 1990s. Nonetheless, when I visited the Museo de los Orichas in Havana, I noticed that while women became possessed during the ceremonies, the museum was run by men. Hence, I became aware of a growing separation between financial leadership and religious experience. While the first is dominated by men, the latter has become dominated by women. It seems that while the religion has gained public recognition, male participants have withdrawn either to the only cult restricted to men (Ifá) or to the financial sector of the religious communities. Some scholars, such as Andrés Pérez y Mena, suggest that men are ‘ashamed’ to be seen as recipients of a dominate force <49>, and hence to be in a situation that most cultures associate with female identity. Though I could not confirm this attitude during my research in Puerto Rico and New York, it may become more important in the immediate future because of the increasing public recognition of Orisha. As long as the access to the ceremonies was restricted, it did not matter whether possession was regarded as female. But today, when more and more non-Cubans join the communities and participate in ceremonies, issues of public image influence the devotees. However, by withdrawing themselves, male devotees open the space to women and other groups ‘who might find themselves blocked from participation in other religious systems or in other portions of their lives because of their anatomy or sexual orientation.’ <50> Hence, though sexual orientation and anatomical sex do not limit ritual participation per se, women are now more drawn to the Orisha religion than men because of the freedom of roles within religious practice. Despite these changes, I am still reluctant to define the Orisha religion as a female-centred religion, as Clark does; <51> indeed, I see the current focus on women as a temporary development that may change in the future.

Clark’s argument is based on the emic understanding that a possessed person, whether male or female, is considered to be the ‘wife’ of the Orisha. <52> Hence, the main ritual practice is described in terms of a female role. During my research in New York City I noticed that not only possession but the general relationship between Orisha and human beings was described in terms of ‘wife’ and ‘husband’. I was told, for instance, that an altar has to be hidden in closed closets in a one-bedroom flat because the Orisha would become jealous should the person who is considered to be the ‘wife’ of the Orisha have an intimate relationship with somebody else. The person who offered me this explanation was male and in a stable heterosexual relationship. The usage of the term ‘wife’ for describing the role of a possessed person can be misleading. It is a metaphor used to describe the relationship between human being and Orisha but without the limitation to one specific anatomical sex. Oyèrónké Oyêwùmí even states that the Yoruba language is gender-free and lacks many of the linguistic categories we are used to in the West. <53> Her research is on Nigerian Yoruba and not the Cuban religion but her insight into the language has some implications for our understanding of the Orisha religion. Based on her explanation the label ‘wife’ could be seen as a metaphor that became used due to the limitation of European languages, without any intended reference to a female body. <54>

By way of conclusion, I want to offer another way of looking at the practice of possession in the Orisha religion. Academic interpretations of possession often overlook

the importance of mystical experience. In the Orisha religion, devotees aim to become one with God <55> and possession is the means to achieving this goal. But a person does not only incorporate an Orisha into the body, he or she transforms into the Orisha. Possession is often described in terms such as ‘vehicle’, ‘horse’ or ‘means of communication’. While these terms help the reader to understand what happens with the body during a possession, they are also misleading. The physical body that is used by the Orisha during the possession represents only one part of the human being. An individual also consists of a ‘mind’, a ‘spirit’ or a ‘soul’. While the physical body is used (as a ‘vehicle’), the person transforms into God in the form of the Orisha. <56> Even without having conscious memory afterwards, the devotees aim towards this mystical transformation. Here lies also the difference between an initiate in the Orisha religion and an initiate in many other religious traditions. For instance, to take a Christian example, the consecration of a new nun in a convent signifies that the woman becomes Jesus’ bride. The term ‘bride’ is used to describe her new role, not entirely dissimilar from how the term ‘wife’ is used for a new iyawo (male and female) in the Orisha religion. But, in contrast to the iyawo, a new nun does not aim to become Jesus, only his bride. An Orisha devotee, on the other hand, aims to transform into God. Hence, I would argue that in order to understand possession within this tradition one needs to overcome the Cartesian mind-body dualism. <57> Further research will hopefully lead to a better understanding of possession in the Orisha religion by addressing this conceptual problem.

CONCLUSION

The Orisha religion offers a diversity of roles. Everyone who wants to participate can find his or her own role within the community. Each contribution is equally valued, whether it is cooking, drumming, sacrificing animals, or leading a possession. This openness and flexibility is liberating and more attractive than ever to women and members of other social groups that are still denied an equal place in society. Though the Orisha religion offers a space for everyone, it has more to offer to members of social groups that are looking for new roles and a new way of expressing religious commitment and belonging. Currently these groups seem to be predominately female but this may change in the future. Women are not by definition marginal to society and their religious practice is not necessarily ‘abnormal’ or less powerful. As the examples above illustrate, marginality does not always lead inexorably to disempowerment. The possessed individuals I encountered during my research dominated the ceremonies as well as the communities beyond the ritual practice. The division of the sexes has unexpectedly marginalized men from the public face of the Orisha tradition, but as J. Lorand Matory’s case study shows, such traditions can change very rapidly. For example, Matory describes a striking increase in male participation in the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé, which is also based on the Yoruba Orisha tradition. <58> The developments in Brazil and Cuba reflect the openness and variety of spirit possession and its gendered embodiment within the Orisha traditions in North America.

NOTES:

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- <1> Mary Ann Clark, *Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), p. 74.
- <2> Beatriz Morales, *Afro-Cuban religious transformation: a comparative study of Lucumi religion and the tradition of spirit belief* (PhD thesis, City University of New York, 1990), p. 25; 70.
- <3> Clark 'Where Men are', p. 143.
- <4> George E. Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World: the dead sell memories*, (Bloomington/ Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1993), p. 114ff.
- <5> David H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion*, (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 149.
- <6> Bettina E. Schmidt, *Caribbean Diaspora in USA: Diversity of Caribbean Religions in New York City*, (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), p. 70.
- <7> Brandon 'Santería', p. 4.
- <8> Brandon 'Santería', p. 5.
- <9> Brandon 'Santería', p. 5. Spiritism is a French system of belief in spirits based on the teaching of Allan Kardec, which spread among Cubans during the nineteenth century.
- <10> Brandon 'Santería', p. 81.
- <11> Brandon 'Santería', p. 85.
- <12> See, e.g. Fernando Ortiz, *Los negros brujos*, (Miami: Ed. Universal, 1973 [1906]).
- <13> Brandon 'Santería', p. 90.
- <14> Brandon 'Santería', p. 101.
- <15> Brandon 'Santería', p. 6. See also Mary Curry, *Making the Gods in New York. The Yoruba Religion in the Black Community* (Ph.D. thesis, City University of New York, 1991), p. 8.
- <16> Stephan Palmié, 'Los blancos se meten en todo: Anmerkungen zum Problem der Transkulturation in afro-amerikanischen Kulturen am Beispiel afro-kubanischer Religiosität', in Karl Kohut (ed.), *Rasse, Klasse und Kultur in der Karibik*, (Frankfurt: Vervuert, 1989), pp. 183-195, here p. 189.
- <17> Juan Jorge Sosa, *La Santería, a way of looking at reality* (Master thesis, Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida, 1981), p. 107-108.

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- <18> Palmié 'Los blancos', p. 186.
- <19> Stephan Palmié, *Das Exil der Götter: Geschichte und Vorstellungswelt einer afrokubanischen Religion*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1991), pp. 201-202.
- <20> Marta Moreno Vega, 'The Yoruba Orisha tradition comes to New York City', *African American Review* Vol. 29, 2, 1995, pp. 202; Robert A. Friedman, *Making an abstract world concret: knowledge, competence, and structural dimensions of performance among Bata drummers in Santería* (Ph. D. thesis, Indiana University, 1982), p. 54-55; Steven Gregory, *Santería in New York City: a study in cultural resistance* (Ph.D. thesis, New School for Social research, 1986), p. 55.
- <21> Steven Harry Cornelius, *The convergence of power: an investigation into the music liturgy of Santería in New York City* (Ph.D., Univ. of California, Los Angeles, 1989), p. 53.
- <22> Clark 'Where Men are', p. 149.
- <23> Schmidt 'Caribbean Diaspora', p. 76.
- <24> Bettina E. Schmidt, *Von Geistern, Orichas und den Puertoricanern: zur Verbindung von Religion und Ethnizität*, (Marburg: Curupira, 1995), p. 264.
- <25> Morales 'Afro-Cuban religious transformation', p. 25; 70.
- <26> Brown 'Santeria Enthroned', p. 149.
- <27> Claudia Rauhut, 'Santeria in Kuba und ihre translokale Anhängerschaft – Strategien der grenzüberschreitenden Vernetzung', in: Lioba Rossbach de Olmos / Heike Drotbohn (eds.), *Afroamerikanische Kontroversen*, (Marburg: Curupira, 2007), pp. 21-38.
- <28> Julio A. Sánchez Cárdenas, *La religión de los orichas. Creencias y ceremonias de un culto afro-caribeño*, (Hato Rey: Ramallo BROS, 1978).
- <29> Brown 'Santeria Enthroned', p. 149.
- <30> Rosalind Shaw blames Christian missionaries for the characterization of Yoruba babalawos as high priests because they have favoured Ifá diviners over possession priests due to similarities between Ifá and Christianity (quoted in Clark 'Where Men are', p. 65). Clark also refers to early researchers who were predominantly men and who would have preferred male practitioners as interviewees.

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- <31> Schmidt 'Von Geistern', p. 287.
- <32> Clark 'Where Men are', p. 68.
- <33> Clark even regards diloggun (the divination system with cowry shells) and not Ifá as the core ritual of the religion. Clark 'Where Men are', p. 69.
- <34> see, for instance, the newspaper article about the presence of the Cuban religion in Puerto Rico, Isabel Cintrón, 'Espiritismo y Santería', *El Mundo*, 22/10/1979.
- <35> Brown 'Santeria Enthroned', p. 156.
- <36> Clark 'Where Men are', p. 67.
- <37> Clark 'Where Men are', p. 86.
- <38> see Clark 'Where Men are', p. 89.
- <39> Clark mentions tests of the legitimacy of possession (Clark 'Where Men are', p. 87) but she does not elaborate on how this works.
- <40> I.M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: A study of shamanism and spirit possession*, (London: Routledge, 2003 [1971]), p. 66.
- <41> Clark 'Where Men are', p. 87, referring to Lewis 'Ecstatic Religion', p. 29, 46
- <42> Clark 'Where Men are', p. 91 with reference to Joseph Murphy, *Working the Spirit*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 184-185.
- <43> Migene González Wippler, *Santeria, the religion: A legacy of faith, rites, and magic*, (New York: Harmony Books, 1989), p. 228.
- <44> Clark 'Where Men are', p. 148.
- <45> Clark 'Where Men are', p. 99.
- <46> Mary Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power & Spirit Possession*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 2.
- <47> Lewis 'Ecstatic Religion', p. 85.
- <48> Rauhut 'Santeria', p. 34, footnote 32.
- <49> Andrés Isidoro Pérez y Mena, 'Cuban Santeria, Haitian Vodun, Puerto Rican Spiritualism: A multicultural inquiry into syncretism', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 37, 1, 1998, pp. 15-27, here p. 2.
- <50> Clark 'Where Men are', p. 148.
- <51> Clark 'Where Men are', p. 143.

<52> Clark 'Where Men are', p. 3.

<53> Oyèrónké Oyêwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 29.

<54> Clark disagrees with Oyêwùmí and insists that Oyêwùmí's descriptions 'seem to have ignored facts that suggest that among the Yoruba certain characteristics are attributed to women ... and that these characteristics have an important place in their understanding of traditional religion in Africa and among Orisha worshippers in the Americas.' (Clark 'Where Men are', p. 38) Clark does not distinguish between the Yoruba tradition in Nigeria (Oyêwùmí's research area) and the Orisha religion in the Americas (Clark's research area); hence she ignores the development during the last 200 years, unfortunately a very common tendency among scholars in Afro-American studies.

<55> Clark 'Where Men are', p. 95.

<56> The Orishas are regarded as representations of the divine, see also Clark 'Where Men are', p. 91.

<57> see also Geoffrey Samuel, *Mind, Body and Culture: Anthropology and the Biological Interface*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 [1990]).

<58> Matory even argues against the image of Candomblé as female-centred and views this evaluation as influenced by Western scholars, in particular Ruth Landes. See J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 190-191.