

# The Matrifocal Household: Santería religious practice and gender relations explored

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*This paper highlights gender relations within households in Cuba, with specific focus on 'matrifocality' and its intrinsic link to the Cuban religion Santería. I propose that 'matrifocality' in this case is not only a response to state controlled efforts to induce gender equality, or historical influences as derived from movements of people in space and time as previously suggested; but it is also directly influenced by Santería, which serves as the main contributor to female empowerment in Afro-Cuban households. It is important to consider the inference of Santería religious practice when discussing gender relations in Afro-Cuban households, not only because of its omnipresence in such families, but also because Santería is considered to be a female normative religion. 'Matrifocality' in anthropology has classically been described as household formations recurrent in 'poor' neighbourhoods, mainly in North American slums, that are female-headed simply because of the lack of a dominant male presence. In contrast to this view, I argue that 'matrifocality' in Afro-Cuban households can be defined as female-headed, where husbands are present and active in decision-making, yet ultimately economic and social power resides with women. This, as I will argue, is a structure that is directly linked to the everyday practices of the female-centered religion Santería.*

*Keywords: Cuba, Matrifocality, Santería, Afro-Cuban households, Gender relations.*

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'Oshún: Keeper of femininity and of the river. She is symbolic of flirtatiousness, grace and female sexuality. She always accompanies Yemayá. She lives in the river and she helps pregnant and

birthing women. She represented as a beautiful 'mulata', who is kind, a dancer, a party girl and who is eternally happy, with her bells always tinkling. She is as good at resolving things as she is

at creating fights between the Orishas and between men (Bolivar-Aróstegui 1994, 177).<sup>1</sup>

Yemayá: Mother of life, she is considered the mother of all Orishas. She is the keeper of the waters and she represents the sea – the infinite well of life (Bolivar-Aróstegui 1994, 153).<sup>2</sup>

The two deities described above are the pinnacles of femininity in Cuba, they represent ultimate female qualities and they constantly figure in symbolic representations in both public and private life. They are a part of how Santería religious practice influences and shapes daily constructions of gender relations and, as I argue, they also form a part of the reasons for the occurrence of matrifocal households and the empowerment of women. In this paper, I will explain the meaning of matrifocality in Cuba, followed by a description of Santería and gender roles in the religion. I will then be presenting how these two concepts can be used to generate an understanding of gender roles in contemporary Cuban society, and finally the importance of investigating 'the house' and household structure in order to understand gender relations in Cuba. In a time when governments are no longer investing in gender-focussed issues, it is my hope that this research emphasises the importance of understanding gender relations in different social

and political settings.

According to classic kinship theory (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown 1952), the family is the core of kinship institutions. Structuralist approaches such as that of Lévi-Strauss (1969) predicate that women's role is reproduction; to fulfil their child-bearing potential. Men must marry women to ensure this, which makes the conjugal bond the core of the notion of 'family', according to this approach. 'Matrifocal' families, however, have a tendency to be based on the enduring bond between the mother and children of the household. This, as Blackwood (2005) argues, is what constitutes the basis for 'heteronormative' thinking in anthropological writings of kinship and family, which is what ultimately has led to the discussions revolving 'matrifocality' having a distinctive male bias; 'matrifocality' has been discussed by policy makers as a problem that needs to be solved, rather than a distinct family structure. "The consequence of masculine heterosexuality is that marriage, by definition, becomes the prerogative of men", Blackwood argues (2005, 6), leading to the conclusion that "the dominant heterosexual man became the central trope of kinship theory. It was the Patriarchal Man who was envisaged as activating and controlling kinship and family. It is his shadow that continues to trouble debates about kinship and marriage" (ibid.). The aim of my research is to draw from the critique

set out by Blackwood and find a nuanced way of thinking about and analysing ‘matrifocal households’ in Cuba.

Traditionally, matrifocality has been discussed as a form of household that arose due to a lack of presence of men; for example where men have moved away due to labour migration or war, and as a common family structure in poor areas (See Stack 1975, Ekern 1987). The ‘traditional’ view of the reasons behind matrifocality usually includes an idea of the matrifocal family structure being the result of a situation where men are unstable and fluctuating in the household. Drawing on research in the Anglophone Caribbean, Raymond T. Smith argued that matrifocality is “intended to convey that it is women *in their role as mothers* who come to be the *focus* of relationships, rather than head of the household as such” (1996, 42 – italics in original). Smith argues that the matrifocal complex consists of three basic elements: domestic relations (men are excluded from domestic chores), familial relations (women have multiple relations with men to assure survival and mother-child relations are prevalent) and lastly stratification and economic factors (poverty, racism and status are all stated as ‘reasons’ for the development of matrifocal families) (1996, 54-56; see also Smith 1956, 1957, 1963). Cuba provides an important counterpoint, in part because it is em-

blematic of a pattern distinctive to the Hispanic Caribbean. However, in regards to households in contemporary Cuba, I suggest that *both* men and women have active roles within the household; men are present and participate in daily activities, but women are key decision makers, which provides an alternative perspective on Cuban ‘matrifocality’. As argued by early anthropologists such as Herskovits (1958), matrifocality stems from the legacy of Spanish colonialism and African slavery (see also Ortiz [1916] 1987). One of the aspects of colonialism traced specifically to Hispanic culture, is the patriarchal dichotomy of *casa/calle* [house/street also commonly referred to as private/public] (e.g. Rosaldo 1974, Piña-Cabral 1986, Collier and Yanagisako 1987: 18, Rosendahl 1997, 169), which dictates the role of women as intrinsically linked to the household, i.e. not taking part in any public activities or the labour force, which was the case in Cuba prior to the revolution (See Stoner 1991 and Safa 1995, 49 and 2009, 43). The influx of African slaves during the Spanish colonisation also had (and still has) its impact upon social organization, especially in terms of family structure, as many African households were matrifocal, and the tradition of matrifocality has remained until modern day Cuba.

Prior to the revolution, Afro-Cuban matrifocal households were said to be a response to high rates

of marriage dissolution and the unreliability of a stable male breadwinner (de la Fuente 1995). Today, however, matrifocality is a family form that should not be described in terms of 'missing men' (a debate initiated by Blackwood in 2005). Even though this could be the case, it is not necessarily the principal reason for matrifocality. As Helen Safa explains, "matrifocality is spread along a continuum in which the degree of female economic autonomy and male marginalisation varies. Men may be resident in the matrifocal household, but become economically marginalized as women are required to assume more economic autonomy" (2005, 315). In other words, the familial relations are not completely straightforward, but rather work as a continuum where men and women have varying responsibilities, yet the head of the household, as such, is the mother.

Stener Ekern (1987) did an ethnographic study on Nicaraguan neighbourhoods, which serves as a useful parallel to my research. Nicaragua's revolution also served to emancipate women in its society and, in fact, Fidel Castro encouraged Cuban women to see Nicaraguan women as an example of progress since the results of their revolution – in terms of women's rights – were quicker, seeing more than half of the workforce made up by women (Stone 1981, 29). In other words, this aspect of ideological change is similar to the aims of the

Cuban revolution in terms of gender equality. Ekern also discusses the centrality of mothers in Nicaraguan households, noting that, "even though the father is supposed to be the head of a family, the supreme head of the household tends to be the oldest mother living there, even when grandfather is alive and well. People will always refer to a house as 'that of *la señora* N.N', even in the few cases where the man is the actual owner" (1987, 64; see also p. 97).<sup>3</sup> This is certainly the case in Cuba as well. Furthermore, Ekern discusses the fleeting nature of men in the households, in accordance with earlier theories of matrifocality and 'missing men', as well as men's association with the street and women with the house. The definition of matrifocality that he works from is that of Hannerz (1969, 76): "[Matrifocality] ... may be loosely defined as a de facto leadership by the woman (or women) in the household, with the man taking a more marginal role in domestic activities, eventually absenting himself altogether", although Ekern explains that in Nicaragua, majority of couples pool resources, which is a deviation from this definition. Nevertheless, he sticks to the core of the argument by maintaining that the zones of responsibility for men and women are those of the productive and reproductive sphere respectively (aligning himself neatly with the Structuralist feminist approach of the seventies).

Ekern's study informs my research, by asserting the prominence of the household to all social and political life; "The distinctive feature of Nicaragua lies in the importance of the household sphere which seems to be the only institution that provides the country with an enduring structure" (1987, 100 bold in original). For me, this quotation encapsulates that we ought to consider the household in Cuba as a pinnacle for social and economic life, which is reflected or reflects the country as a whole. Ekern illustrates his point with the nation's most important socio-religious event, 'la Purisma', in which ritual exchange takes place between households, with the Mother as giver of food (and symbolically the giver of life). This not only locates the mother (or women) at the centre of the household, but also "...epitomizes how life in Nicaragua's barrios revolves around this institution [...], the household is where the stream of life starts, is sustained and eventually also ends" (1987, 103). This ritual celebration is honouring the Catholic Virgin Mary, who is the most important symbolic national figure. Thus, in Ekern's study, religion does have an impact upon gender roles and, what is more, it centralizes 'Mother' as a vital and omnipresent figure in Nicaraguan society, where the core of social activity lies in the household. I will argue that this also reflects the situation in Cuba.

This leads me to the critical point in this paper; that the Cuban religion Santería, which is a syncretism of Yoruba religion and Catholicism resulting directly from the slave/master relations of colonialism, has a major impact on the ways in which gender roles play themselves out in daily life in Cuba. As Santería has been seen as a female-normative religious system (Clark 2005), it inevitably influences both external and internal processes and narratives of quotidian life. The impact upon daily gender relations of a female-centred religion, practiced entirely within the house, is an aspect that to my knowledge has not been highlighted in any previous analyses of matrifocality in Cuba.

The house is a space that can combine both public and private, in particular with regards to religious activities, when a house converts from 'profane' to 'sacred' (Waterson 1990, 71-72). This is the case in Afro-Cuban houses where Santería is practiced entirely within the houses of its followers, due to the lack of presence of a formal church. It is therefore crucial to note that people's houses are the only regulatory units that can control individual practitioners within a Santería religious kinship system, as this is where all religious activity occurs, unlike religions where there are churches or other exterior places of worship (see Velez 2000, Brandon 2002, Brown 2003). Keep in mind also, that Cuban houses are mostly re-

ferred to as belonging to the oldest woman in the household. It could be of interest to further investigate the meaning of a woman essentially being the perceived 'owner' of a space where sacred rituals take place.

The most prominent work regarding gender in Santería is Clark's book, named 'Where Men are Wives and Women Rule' (2005). Clark proposes that in most philosophical thinking, gods and humans are implied or presumed to be male, unless stated otherwise, which in other words makes such thinking 'male-normative'. She backs this statement up by quoting Rita M. Gross, who along the same lines argued that it is "probably due in part to religious symbol systems that contain deeply misogynist elements and personify the most valued and ultimate symbols as masculine" (Gross 2003 quoted in Clark 2005, 2). In Santería, however, the female forms take precedence in religious symbolism, which in essence makes it female-normative;

My analysis of the beliefs and practices of the devotees of the Orisha suggest that, unlike the mainstream religions Gross alludes to, they exist within a female-normative system in which all practitioners, regardless of their own understandings of their sex or gender or sexual orientation, are expected to take up female gender roles in the practice of the religion (Clark 2005, 3).

To summarize the argument, Clark puts forward that "our analysis of initiation, possession, and Santería religious practices will finally lead us to the suggestion that just as the 'manly woman' formed the ideal of Christian female saintliness, qualities associated with being female form the ideal of Santería religious practice for both men and women" (ibid, 22). In agreement with Clark, I would argue that not only does the female form appear to be preferred or idealised in Santería practice, women are constantly celebrated precisely for their very feminine aspects. For example, during a ritual or in even in daily mundane situations where the *Orishas* are talked about, *Ochún* (mentioned in the extract at the beginning of this paper) will be celebrated for her feminine characteristics and is depicted as forming the 'ideal woman'. Although there may be female characters in the so-called male normative religions, these females do not appear to 'empower' women or celebrate femininity and the female form to the extent that Santería does.

Originally, the various Afro-Cuban syncretic religions were practiced in *cabildos* [councils] in Cuba, where each *cabildo* worshipped its own separate Orisha. In the *cabildos*, women held powerful positions as *matronas* [matrons], with religious and ceremonial responsibilities (Howard 1998). However, at the onset of the revolution in 1959, the socialist government discouraged



religious practice and removed religious education from schools, as it was considered counterproductive to the socialist agenda in terms of ideological change (Castro & Bretto 1985, 208-215). This resulted in a decrease of religious practitioners from about 80% of the population to a mere 30%, according to official figures (Sigler 2005, 207). The Afro-Cuban religions' followers stopped practicing their beliefs in *cabildos*, and any type of religious practice became a reserved activity behind closed doors. Although this policy was changed in the 1990's after the Soviet Union collapse - when people sought more spiritual support to cope in the 'Special Period' - Santería practices are still kept within the walls of one's home.

Despite the fact that most religious practice today occurs within the houses of worshippers, Santería today is far from marginalized. In fact, it is very widespread on the island (it is estimated that the religion comprises 70% of the population), and openly talked about in daily life. Even the government has started using Santería as a way of strengthening Cuban 'culture', referring to it as important roots of Cuba's legacy (Sigler 2005, 212; Holbraad 2008, 646). The omnipresence of Santería and other similar religious practice deriving from the African legacy has a direct impact upon what one would refer to as 'Cuban culture', as the whole population, including the non-believers of these traditions, is

constantly surrounded by religious symbolism, in all types of media and quotidian practices in general.

In Cuba, Santería permeates most aspects of daily living, both in the public and the private spheres. In individual houses, there are spaces that serve as constant religious spaces, such as rooms or parts of rooms with shrines dedicated to deities, glasses of water for the spirits and various other religious items, but there are also times when mundane space will be transformed into sacred space, such as during rituals or ceremonies. For example, if a spiritual consultation is to take place, a small table with a white cloth is placed at the end of the sitting room, with a candle, flowers, rum, perfume, a bowl of flowers and water and a cigar. Chairs are placed in a half-circle, facing the table. The *espiritista* (medium) will sit next to the table and the participants surrounding her, with feet firmly on the ground, as it is believed the spirits come from the ground. The space is now sacred and spiritual power can enter the room and make spiritual possession possible. In other rituals, mirrors are covered, white cloth is put on the ground to cover the floor, or various other ornaments are placed in a specific manner, in order to transform the space into a house for the gods/spirits. Another important aspect of Santería practice is performance. Each *Orisha* is represented by different types of dance and music patterns, as well

as personal traits, ways of conduct, mannerisms and specific clothing. It is common for Santería practitioners to organise *tambores* [lit. 'drums', but refers to a drum/dance party dedicated to an *Orisha*], where the religious kin-system gathers to dance and sing, aspiring to the ultimate connection with your *Orisha*, which is spirit possession. It is here that Clark's allusion that both genders are expected to take up female forms is evident. *Tambores* and performances, as any party, can take place in both public and private spaces, but usually this is kept at practitioners' houses. Taking into account that Santería comprises such a large part of daily life, it is inevitable that it will influence the construct of gender relations, and the underlying female-centred mind-set could subsequently follow suit. In other words, practicing a Santería ritual or ceremony, which has a particular focus on the female form, is likely to influence the thoughts and feelings of the participants/practitioners in the space where it takes place.

Due to the socialist stance of Cuba, the construct of practical gender relations in both the public and private sphere is under constant scrutiny. As noted in a quite recent research project conducted in Santiago de Cuba;

The decreasing value of Soviet-era wages, an overall decline in infrastructure to support women in the formal workforce, increased

possibilities of home-based income generation and the social and economic opportunities offered by emigrant remittances and transnational relationships, have converged in such a way that the household has been revived as the major basis for social and economic status among Cuban women (Pertierra 2008, 767).

In the current political and economic climate, 'the house' has become even more of a central space for Cuban social, economic and even political life – a space where arguably women have more 'power' than men. People's households are spaces within which daily life takes shape, incorporating the material and spiritual life of many 'families' or 'household units' throughout its lifetime; a space where essentially majority of quotidian life takes place. Cubans see the house as a safe and clean place, in comparison to the street, which is dirty and dangerous (Brown 2003, 174).

Gender roles are at the frontline of a quotidian paradox of traditional and revolutionary values in Cuba. "The traditional Spanish culture with its focus on men's superiority and women's inferiority has met a revolutionary culture where equality between the sexes and equal opportunities for men and women is underlined." (Rosendahl 1997, 185). In the post-revolution era in Cuba, the *casa/calle* (house/street) gender stratification eroded (e.g. Rosaldo 1974; Piña-Cabral 1986; Collier and



Yanagisako 1987; 18, Rosendahl 1997, 169), much due to the revolutionary efforts of agencies such as FMC (Federation of Cuban Women) and state polices such as The Family Code. "Cuba experienced radical changes in all aspects of life after the revolution in 1959. The equality of women was a core principle of the revolution, and policies to achieve this goal have eroded, although not eliminated, patriarchy" (Pahl et al. 2004, 154). The FMC also had a resource at their hands that made the ideological change more efficient, which was the element of state control over media and education. Lewis et.al. referred to this as "the great symbol-making machinery of the state" (1977, xii). 'The Family Code', which was introduced in 1975, insists that men participate in the household chores and are involved with child rearing and supporting the family, to an equal extent as women are. The previous idealistic concept of machismo, that had kept men in a powerful position over women, decreased in its vigour in the revolutionary era, resulting also in a decrease in domestic violence; a subsequent blurring of the boundaries between the private and public sphere. One could suggest that there is an aspect not only of symbols being produced and utilised by the state to induce gender equality, but also of an internalised and subconscious 'symbol-making machinery' of Santería that is even more compelling in fe-

male empowerment. Yemayá, the penultimate mother and bringer of life and Oshún, Cuba's patron saint celebrated for her femininity, play their part in symbolically positioning women in Cuban society.

To conclude, a number of factors influence, nuance, and impact how daily gender relations play themselves out in Afro-Cuban households. The socialist state's efforts towards creating gender equality historical factors that predicate matrifocal household structure, and economic factors, have served as the core for explaining women's position in Cuba. In this paper, I have tried to suggest that Santería also plays a major part in the empowerment of women, in its symbolic appearances in daily life and its constant presence in households. This in turn calls for further ethnographic research and questioning of previous concepts of the 'private/public' dichotomy and its current position in Cuba, as well as the contemporary responses to socialist ideologies and their interplay with religion in relation to actual daily life. It is important to consider Santería religious practice when discussing gender relations in Afro-Cuban households, not only because of its omnipresence in such families, but also, as Clark's research suggests, because Santería is considered to be a female normative religion. The religion is practiced almost entirely in the houses of its followers, as a result of its previous condemnation by the

Cuban socialist state, in turn inevitably influences quotidian practices. Through examining transformations in daily life, we can get a thorough understanding of the Afro-Cuban household and of gender dynamics in the broader context of Cuban culture. 'Matrifocality' in anthropology has classically been described as household formations where men are missing; where households are female-headed simply because of the lack of a dominant male presence. In contrast to this view, I argue that 'matrifocality' in the Afro-Cuban communities can be defined as female-headed households where husbands are present and active in decision-making, yet ultimately power resides with the women, be they mothers or wives. As the household is currently the most vital hub of social, political, economic and spiritual life and as women are the focus of domestic relations, it can therefore be argued that women are, significantly, influential in the workings of Cuban life.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Oshún: Dueña de la femineidad y del río. Es el símbolo de la coquetería,*

*la gracia y la sexualidad femeninas. Siempre acompaña a Yemayá. Vive en el río y asiste a las gestantes y parturientas. Se le representa como una mulata bella, simpática, buena bailadora, fiestera y eternamente alegre, con el persistente tintineo de sus campanillas. Es capaz de resolver tanto, como de provocar riñas entre orishas y hombres.*

<sup>2</sup> *Yemayá: Madre de la vida, es considerada como madre de todos los orishas. Es la dueña de las aguas y representa el mar, fuente fundamental de la vida.*

<sup>3</sup> Please take note of Ekern's own bias when stating that the father "is supposed to be the head of family"! (1987, 64)

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