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## Mary Ann Clark, *Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule: Santería Ritual Practices and Their Gender Implications* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005), pp. xii+185, \$59.95, hb.

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Mary Ann Clark, *Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule: Santería Ritual Practices and Their Gender Implications* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005), pp. xii + 185, \$59.95, hb.

By definition, as one of the 'isms', feminism has an ambiguous position in academic research. While by no means incompatible in principle, as any politician will state, the demands of advocacy and of comprehension can be contrasting. So if feminists – just as Marxists or liberalists or 'activists' – are used to one criticism in academic circles it is that their position is too 'ideological', allowing the motivations of political advocacy to subsume and delimit the intellectual task of comprehension. On the other hand, the habitual response to this accusation is to dispute its 'hegemonic' premise, namely that intellectual pursuits can somehow subsist in a neutral space beyond the tussles of political partisanship, as if to uphold the distinction between 'practice' and 'theory' as a theoretical axiom were not itself a political act.

These familiar debating positions appear less hackneyed when it comes to assessing the role of feminism in the study of 'non-Western' cultures, for here post-colonial sensibilities have made the moral stakes feel higher. As detractors of feminists point out, the conflict between politics and understanding becomes all the more perilous when political axes which are, like 'women's liberation', peculiar to Western modernity and are grounded in alien cultural contexts. The obvious risk here is that of cultural projection – 'ethnocentrically', as anthropologists say, reading one's own cultural preoccupations on to other people's (consider, for example, the ambivalence with which Muslim women often view some feminists' militant opposition to veiling or female circumcision). But again, feminists may respond that ethnocentrism can be the more insidious for being built into politically unreconstructed intellectual agendas. They can take much of the credit, for example, for rendering the study of gender central to the social sciences. To ignore the relevance of gender issues to all manner of social phenomena, they have long argued, makes social analysis prone to the old fallacy of assuming that society comprises first and foremost the affairs of men. Indeed, studying the different ways in which gender is organised in varied cultural contexts is a powerful tool for budging such inveterate assumptions, showing that what we take to be natural about men and women is just one among many alternative possibilities.

Mary Ann Clark's book on the role of gender in *santería*, a Cuban religious tradition with roots in West Africa, illustrates the potential of this approach, as well as some of its pitfalls. While not a polemic as such, the book proposes to use an analysis of gender in *santería* to criticise the 'normative male perspective' of Western theology, namely the assumption that the default gender position of

both deity and believer is male, so that female roles and symbolisms are downplayed in 'misogynist' fashion (p. 2). With this remit in mind, Clark offers a wide-ranging account of the practice and cosmology of *orisha* (deity) worship, so as to show systematically that devotees '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' (p. 3). Drawing upon the literature on Yoruba *orisha* worship in West Africa and in Cuban *santería*, as well as her own participation in worship among *santería* practitioners in the United States, Clark formulates a coherently 'gendered' theology for *santería*. Devoting chapters to each of the central aspects of worship (including ideas of power and destiny, divination practices, initiation, spirit possession, sacrifice and witchcraft), she is able systematically to examine the role of gender so as to develop a sustained argument to the effect that in the symbology of worship practitioners adopt predominantly feminine roles. To give just one example, Clark draws on the literature on West African kinship organisation to show that in designating neophytes as *iyawo* (a Yoruba kin-term meaning 'new wife'), even biologically male *santería* initiates conceive their relationship to the *orishas*, as well as to elder members of their ritual 'lineage' communities, in irreducibly feminine terms.

This book does a service to the scholarship of Afro-Cuban religion. Breaking with parochial tendencies in the literature, Clark shows how an analytically astute engagement with Afro-Cuban religion can have a purchase on much wider theoretical concerns, in this case the role of gender in religious experience. Most compellingly, Clark brings the detail of *santería* worship to bear not only on familiar social scientific debates about gender, but also on older theological concerns with the relationship between humanity and divinity.

Also evident in the book, however, are some of the dangers of straddling the divide between description and theory in this way. Mobilising descriptions of *orisha* worship to support her critique of Western theological assumptions, Clark tends to draw rather eclectically from historical sources on Yoruba practice, ethnographic accounts from Cuba, and her own experiences among practitioners in the United States. So in her effort to synthesise an alternative to Western theology, she effectively 'theologises' *santería* practice, pasting over much of the historical and ethnographic complexity of these evolving traditions, masterfully documented by David Brown in his recent *Santería Enthroned* (Chicago, 2003).

This at times uncomfortable relationship between description and theory pertains also to the book's feminist agenda, the dilemmas with which this review began. While the impetus of Clark's account is to show that in *santería* gender is 'fluid' (p. 22), irreducible to essentialist notions of biological sex, she also uses her findings to speak to contemporary debates within communities of practitioners in the United States about the relative prestige of male and female initiates. Presenting the increasing dominance of Ifá (the male-only diviner cult associated with *santería*) as a compromise of women's 'full equality' in Orisha religion (p. 151), Clark concludes the book by reflecting on women's prospects of achieving such equality. But the women she has in mind are to be understood straightforwardly as 'sisters' of women 'in other traditions [who] have discovered a stained-glass ceiling limiting their full participation' in worship (*ibid.*). In view of her penetrating point about the inadequacy of such ethnocentric analogies in the analysis of *santería* gender, Clark's concern for the plight of 'women' in this context seems peculiarly unreconstructed.