

# Knowledge is Power : Discussions of Women's Authority in Candomblé

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## *Abstract*

This essay explores concepts of tradition, power, and privilege. The role of women in Brazilian Candomblé as leaders and as esteemed members of society will be explored. Analysis is done using Ruth Landes's *The City of Women* as an ethnographic source, which is later compared to various perspectives of modern cultural anthropologists.

Vibrant traditions and complex histories characterize many diasporic religions of the Atlantic, as well as the traces of Africa which flow like blood through their veins. Interpolated in the steamy and dark nights of Bahia, Brazil are the myths of a poetic religion: Candomblé. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Candomblé rose through collective slave memories in Bahian *terreiros*, which served as alternate spaces of blackness for freed slaves. This narrative may seem familiar among other religious histories in the New World which draw their origins back to the Yoruba and Bantu peoples. What distinguishes Candomblé from the others are its strict, intricately gendered dimensions of practice and hierarchy. Candomblé communities have historically been recognized as spheres of women's privilege in Brazilian society (Harding 2006, 13). Candomblé pulses in the hands of the women, who channel the verve of folk in Bahia (Landes 1947, 216). As with questions of historical purity, such as *pureza Nagô* in contention with Bantu, scholars have initiated a debate about the importance of women in Candomblé. In recent years, the traditional notions of women as authoritative figures have been challenged to an extent in order to argue measurements of male dominance, exceptions of male leaders, and the transformation of such

female-centered standards as Candomblé. However, does this dilute the achievements of women in any way? Does it delegitimize the works of early 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists? All of these issues and questions will be explored through analysis of accounts, ethnographies and scholarly writings spanning the last eighty years of diasporic Brazilian discourse.

My ethnographic basis is a unique example in Brazilian anthropological research. Ruth Landes wrote *The City of Women* after an extended trip to Brazil on behalf of Columbia University. Despite her status as a bona fide anthropologist, the book was initially marketed as a travel narrative, thought to lack ethnographic legitimacy. Reading like a novel at times, these literary elements do not diminish the significance of her findings in a sector of research that was in its infancy.

The time during which Landes toured Bahia is important to note as it can create many gaps, which are necessary to identify in analyzing the text. Landes, alongside Edison Carneiro, conducted her research in 1938, while Candomblé was still considered a cult and was illegal; she recounts many police scares and raids in her book (1947, 34). Due to its illegality, Candomblé remained a secret to many, and had been scarcely written about in fear of revealing the religion to “whites.” As we see later, the idea of secrets in this manner is very important to the understanding of Candomblé and the preservation of its traditions. Another slightly complicating feature is that signs of racism are prevalent, as is expected for the late 1930s. Although this does not present itself in Landes’s written voice, many of the people she interacts with have very strong opinions about race and its place in the social landscape of the United States and Brazil. The terms Negro and Negroid are used rampantly, but one has to acknowledge this as the norm of describing Afro-Brazilian culture in the ‘30s. Additionally, Landes points out the uniqueness of her experience in Bahia as a very light-skinned African-American, saying that the Brazilians

almost treated her as a specimen of amazement. Nonetheless, her writing does not seem to be overwhelmingly biased, although it is a first-person account.

Her honest and genuine curiosity is what adds a brilliant light to *The City of Women*. Afro-Brazilian society and Candomblé were entirely new to Landes, and there is value in the fact that she had no experience with it before. The result is a pure reaction that evokes less of an anthropological sense but more that of a curious child. Although a temporal gap exists, Landes's superbly detailed experience is very useful in evaluating the gendered hierarchy in Bahian Candomblé.

A car ride with her companion, Edison, sparks Landes's interest in the topic. She asks, "Isn't it unusual for a woman to be so recognized in Brazil?" Edison replies with arguably the best line in the book, which has been quoted frequently in scholarly evaluations of Landes's research, "Not in Bahia, not in the world of Candomblé. The shoe is on the other foot here. It is almost as difficult for a man to become great in Candomblé as it is for him to have a baby. And for the same reason: it is believed to be against his nature," (1947, 36). This simple yet effective statement is the basis for Landes's argument. Through her encounters with Candomblé women, she continues to show the privilege that comes with being a woman of authority, and opposes this with her preconceived notions that men would reign as religious authorities in most cultures and religions we encounter.

What challenged these notions most was her first experience with Candomblé ritual, during which she was a spectator from afar. She traveled to Engenho Velho, a revered temple whose name translates roughly to "ancient ingenuity," in order to view the celebration of Father Oxalá, father of African gods. The temple itself, describes Landes, is a disappointment in comparison to the grandiose Catholic churches of Bahia, but the experience was like no other

(1947, 41). The style of the temple is in direct connection with the pasts of their slave ancestors, an homage to the creators of Candomblé. Three women, Luzía, Eugenia, and Antônia, *mãe-de-Santos*, directed this temple and began the service. Drummers, a role specifically assigned to men, began with intricate rhythms which serve to enchant the gods and coax them to earth (1947, 48). The mothers and their daughters danced in a designated space, opening their bodies to the gods. They try to bring their patron gods down to earth so they can see and hear them. The women are the pathway that bridges the mortal and supernatural realms. This responsibility is most sensational for the women of the temple, and the gods descend into their heads to “ride” them (1947, 37). Through their bodies, the gods dance and talk, against the women’s will. She and He become one. This spectacle continues, as Candomblé practitioners watch, some enviously, until the gods calm themselves (1947, 54).

As practitioners leave, the ritual is still not finished, and may continue for another two days, according to Landes. The *mães* must literally act as mothers because the spirits, in a fit of reluctance, begin to act as children. This is mirrored in the speech and actions of the possessed women, who beg for food and drink from the mothers in a childlike manner. The mothers attempt to persuade the spirits out of the bodies by marking their necks and arms, important spaces of embodied practice, with purified water (1947, 55,60). After hours or days, the gods finally leave and the women can finally assume control of their bodies once again.

In addition to ritual practices, Landes comments throughout *City* on other duties of the mothers. On a daily basis they lead services and counsel the community on various issues. Yet most importantly, as leaders of temples, they make the executive decisions and serve as the faces for their *terreiros*. This contributes to intense competition between *terreiros* in Bahia as women want to have their temple recognized as the best or most authentic. *Mãe Cleoza* described her

services, “We are genuine, they know that everything under my direction comes straight from the old Africans as taught to me by mother Pulcheria,” (1947, 80). This declaration is entangled with so many loaded motifs such as authenticity, purity, and connections to the homeland. However what it shows that is of paramount importance in Candomblé is the passage of information through women to their daughters.

From Landes’s work, conclusions can be made about women’s roles as *mães e filhas*. Clearly women are revered as the connection not only to the life beyond but also to the past, the past of slaves and of Africa. Preserving ties to Africa was a crucial dynamic in the origins of Candomblé, and the responsibility which lies in the hands, feet, and bodies of the women. Candomblé has always been centered on hard labor, and such physical aspects are observable in several facets of the religion. To start simply, motherhood is venerated in Candomblé; a practitioner in *City* exclaims, “It is a calamity to have no mother! A mother is gold! She carries you in her body, she delivers you with pain,” (1947, 230). Birth and pregnancy, in Landes’s book, is respected as a symbolically significant rite. Additionally, motherhood is so important that orphaned children or men who have lost their way are expected to live under the care of the *mãe-de-Santos*, who, although they might not be actual mothers, are anticipated to serve as collective mothers to the community. She writes, “For the men, the temple’s a home, an easy and affectionate place with many mothers who give and take love,” (1947, 146). Women are often portrayed carrying the community, and the specific image of a hunched woman with nearly unbearable weight comes to mind in reading the various literature on the topic.

Rachel Harding writes of the physical burden of the resonances of the religion in women’s bodies specifically through dance (D: 18). As seen in the prior ritual description, dance is of central relevance in Candomblé. Bastide claims that all religion is a tradition and that such

traditions are a binary mixture of stereotyped actions and rites (Bastide 1960, 240). The idea of tradition as action that Bastide introduces is particularly useful in evaluating Candomblé dance. Tradition in Candomblé is identified by myth and knowledge of the past and as dance calls to the gods of Africa, women are simultaneously entranced in the present and past, sharing every fiber with a spirit. Candomblé myth is not necessarily shared orally because of its complexities. Rather, dance is a means of experiencing knowledge that is not otherwise transferable. Dance is a way to express a relationship to history and to ancestry from the movements of her body from “within the deepest memories of one’s own cells,” (Harding 2006, 17). The daughters of the gods are aware that their motions speak a language which recounts the journeys of *vouduns* and *orixas*. Bastide writes that myths, such as origin stories and tales of African gods, only survive as a definition of the rite, and that only by allying with the actions are the myths saved from extinction (Bastide 1960, 241). Although he acknowledges the significance of embodied practice, Bastide takes issue with rites as a transfer of historical knowledge: “Myth now survives only through its connection with ritual and in passing from one generation to the next, from mouth to mouth, it has lost its original richness of detail and been reduced to a mere explanation of certain actions,” (Bastide 1960, 241). His theory is not alone in opposing Landes and Harding in this way, which will be described thoroughly later.

Women’s embodied knowledge is not only relevant to dance but also to the propagation of Candomblé. A *Mae-do-Santo*’s role includes transmitting information from one generation to another which will subsequently be passed along to following generations (Harding 2006, 13). In the same vein, all priestesses are to emulate their predecessors (Landes 1947, 109). A Candomblé leader is supposed to know everything, *sabe tudo*, which means access to the well-kept, seemingly dangerous secrets of the religion (Johnson 2002, 30). Most Candomblé

ethnographers have been struck by the paramount function of *the* secret. It is accepted in the religion that the higher one's rank, which is expected to be a woman's position, the closer you are to the secrets. Not one person knows everything, but each leader knows a piece of the puzzle. The fear is that the secret would be revealed to whites, which would mean that the religion would be subjected to outside, non-African influences and thus dilute the authenticity of their practices (Johnson 2002, 30).

Another fear, however, is that of an uncertain future of Candomblé. Bastide, in relation to the issue of collective memory, argues that the hierarchy of the secret is dangerous as a factor in the disappearance of memories over time (Bastide 1960, 249). Additionally, a favorite *terreiro* topic is the lack of respect for age and social structure in contemporary Candomblé. Johnson touches on nostalgia amongst elders of "how things used to be" (2002: 34). Even in *The City of Women*, published fifty-five years prior to Johnson's work, an older man worries that, "The young ones don't want to know the truth. They are after show and money and noise. But the important truths are to be kept quiet and secret...The young ones blaspheme-it all shocks me," (1947, 30). I can imagine he may be speaking directly about young women who do not want to become mothers, or who are unable to manage a temple the way their predecessor did. The temporal gap between the elderly and youth only widens the spatial gap between Brazil and Africa, which endangers the authenticity of Candomblé, a chief concern which is only an additional burden to the shoulders of women.

In consideration of these surmounting burdens, how can it be claimed that women are actually maintaining authority rather than becoming victim to their unwavering devotion? The debate on the topic is fervent, as observable in anthropological literature about Candomblé. The focal point is on the polarity of male and female roles in Candomblé. Moreover, most critique is

tangent with Landes's work, but not all of it is positively related. Nonetheless, most agree that Landes remains as an exception among anthropologists (Capone 2010, 185).

The concern is that Landes argued in favor of total control on the behalf of women as prime religious authorities. Perhaps in her experience religious leaders *were* exclusively women and that the *mães* were supreme in the religious community. This is where the temporal gap becomes problematic, because many critiques are written decades after Landes's expedition. However, Rachel Harding and Paul Johnson do agree with Landes in a few areas. In Harding's experience, she did see women's dominance in ritual and leadership. Daily life in religious sects consisted of a series of private rituals and services, performed by the daughters of the gods. She also proposes that the women absorb, carry, and wrestle with the history of Candomblé, the ghosts of slavery, and survival of the religion. They are charged with sustaining an ancestral link to Africa, which remains at the heart of Candomblé (Harding 2006, 12). Although she describes it with trepidation, Harding mentions that Candomblé women are believed to be more suited to accepting gods. Through her interactions with Mãe Stella, Harding writes that the mother believes women make better Candomblé leaders because of their natural maternal qualities as well as an ability to be responsive to the *orixas* (Harding 2006, 12). Landes states that it is in the popular mind of Candomblé practitioners that women are calm, rational, logical, and in control of their emotions, which is favorable for spirit possession. She describes that men's blood is hot, as if boiling with carnal desires, which is offensive to the gods, while women are cool (Landes 1947, 38, 98). Landes's companion Edison Carneiro adds that if a man were to be possessed, he is thought to be a homosexual.

Johnson agrees with Landes, in that men are proving their manhood by not dancing (Johnson 2002, 45). Landes described signs posted throughout the temples reminding men that



they are forbidden from participating in the dance ritual (Landes 1947, 54). Johnson adds that this still holds true for heterosexual men of Brazil; in the old days, “*antiguamente*,” men would never dance and certainly never be in trance (Johnson 2002, 44). He then describes an encounter with a drummer who spoke of men, who wished to be priests, of being “cock up, ass down,” lying prostrate and vulnerable to the women. Easily, the man was describing a loss of manhood as the men were assuming a feminine sexual position. Johnson notes, however, that groups of effeminately gay men, known as *adés*, are known and esteemed for their flamboyant, showy style (Johnson 2002, 45). Conceivably, such homosexual priests are a rarity considering traditional Brazilian sexual ideas. On the contrary, Johnson acknowledges a rise in Candomblé communities headed by men, but it remains important to mention that Johnson’s work was published in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In tangency, he raises two vital questions: Do women experience power? Does it translate into transformations of machismo? He answers simply yes to the first and no to the second (Johnson 2002, 48).

It is not that scholars deny that women assume roles of power in Candomblé, but rather that they deny that such roles give women agency. In opposition to Landes, Bastide and Clarke argue that Candomblé is not immune from the effects of polarity between men and women in western culture. Clarke criticizes Landes for identifying women as the only spiritual passages, which he believes is a generalization of the religion (Clarke 1993, 103). Furthermore, he argues that women are actually victims during spirit possession. In possession rituals, gods are supposed to be male and mount the women who are supposed to be horses or wives (Clarke 1993, 97). As they ride the women, they take all control of their will. He mentions that not all women enjoy or desire the possession experience, as Landes made it seem to be (Clarke 1993, 101).

Clarke also argues that the intense interdependence between women and gods only further exemplifies their submission. It was explained that women are chosen as priestesses or daughters to be possessed because of their docile characteristics, yet Clarke argues that this perpetuates stereotypes of women as subservient to the dominant male figure (Clarke 1993, 109-110). He repeatedly refers to the women as devotees, and emphasizes that their lives revolve around serving their male gods through labor and domestic means. A combination of these factors serves symbolically to reinforce perceived notions of male power and domination while women remain as servants (Clarke 1993, 109). The question arises: does this delegitimize Landes's argument?

Critics of Landes, strive to incorporate male priests into the social landscape of Candomblé. Capone distinguishes that in other sects of Candomblé, such as Umbanda, men assume leadership roles, specifically heterosexual men (Capone 2010, 144). Bastide claims that Candomblé is "utilitarian, even in its ecstasies, in the plunge into the vast, dark night of trance" (Bastide 1960, 249). Such a statement would surely puzzle Landes. These changes can be connected to modernization and a simple passage of time in Candomblé. Evidence, in the time that Landes published her book, suggesting that men could be priests or participate in trance is unfounded, as little information existed about Candomblé. However, it seems more likely that as Candomblé gained popularity and publicity it transformed as it extended its roots and branched into other areas of Brazil. It could be argued that despite scholars' assertions, Candomblé remains in the hands of women.

As can be seen through the vast selection of literature, gender in Candomblé is richly complex. Although there exist tensions between men and women, especially concerning female independence in society, the unique power structure in Candomblé still exists in opposition to

most other religious hierarchies. Interpretations of power dynamics and gender relations are endless, as is the debate. To borrow Johnson's words, interpretation is "always able to be critically turned back on itself" (Johnson 2002, 46). Despite this, is there any justice being done by arguing that mothers experience suppression rather than empowerment? Is there a level of violence being done to Candomblé women through the proposition of such ideas? Even if it is that they are not as powerful as once perceived, does not success exist in the fact that they have served their gods to their best abilities, and acted as mothers to entire communities? Scholars offer no condolences, thereby unintentionally appearing to undermine Candomblé. It would be more productive if, despite new findings and modern thought, Candomblé women were left on top where they should stand proudly.

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