

WITCHES, WAILERS, AND WELFARE:
The Religious Economy of Funerary Culture
and Witchcraft in Latin America

R. Andrew Chesnut
University of Houston

HALL OF MIRRORS: POWER, WITCHCRAFT, AND CASTE IN COLONIAL MEXICO. By Laura A. Lewis. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. Pp. 262. \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)

DEATH IS A FESTIVAL: FUNERAL RITES AND REBELLION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRAZIL. By João José Reis. Translated by H. Sabrina Gledhill. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003. Pp. 386. \$59.95 cloth, \$27.50 paper.)

WITCHCRAFT AND WELFARE: SPIRITUAL CAPITAL AND THE BUSINESS OF MAGIC IN MODERN PUERTO RICO. By Raquel Romberg. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. Pp. 315. \$50.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.)

A new generation of scholarship on religion and society in Latin America emerging over the past decade and half has propelled the study of supernatural beliefs and practices from the margins to a more comfortable position closer to the core of Latin American studies. Until the late 1980s, the field was dominated by institutional studies of church and state. Scholars such as Mecham, Bruneau, and Mainwaring made important contributions to the field through their studies of the relations between Latin American states and national Catholic churches. What was often missing, however, from the focus on the ecclesiastical and political elite was consideration of the quotidian beliefs and practices of the masses of Latin American faithful.¹

The confluence of the growth of religious pluralism in the region and the ascent of subaltern studies has led a new generation of social scientists to focus on the religiosity of the popular classes. Brusco, Mariz, Burdick, Drogus, Ireland and others examined the beliefs and practices

1. Notable exceptions in which everyday popular religion and its practitioners were the focus of research include Leacock and Leacock, Lalive D'Epinay, Landes, Flora, and Cabrera.

of grassroots Catholics, Pentecostals, and African-Brazilian groups as they played out in their everyday lives on the urban periphery. While analysis of church and state did not disappear from the new research, it was eclipsed by the intersection of popular religion and matters of social class, gender, and race. Why, many of the new generation asked, is Pentecostalism particularly appealing to poor Latin American women of color?

In addition to the trend of examining popular religion at its quotidian and personal practice, the most recent development in the field has been to apply the tools of microeconomics to the analysis of religious pluralism. Recent research by Gill and Guerra employs the theoretical paradigm of religious economy as developed by U.S. sociologists of religion, such as Berger, Stark, and Finke to analyze individual and institutional behavior in Latin America's new free market of faith. Just as commercial firms compete for market share, religious enterprises in Latin America vie with each other for spiritual consumers.

The three books under consideration represent the best of the new scholarship on religion and society in Latin America and will be of interest not only to those in the field but also to a broader audience interested in issues of gender, race, class, colonialism, and subalternity. The three authors skillfully examine religion and witchcraft in dialectical form, demonstrating how the sacred and secular mutually influence each other in nineteenth-century Brazil, colonial Mexico, and modern Puerto Rico. While Romberg's *Witchcraft and Welfare* and Lewis's *Hall of Mirrors* are kindred spirits in their analyses of the dynamics of witchcraft, power, and the state, Reis's *Death Is a Festival* shares sufficient common themes to make for a coherent discussion of the three works. Among the salient ideas are the existence of a spiritual economy in which the main producers and vendors are subaltern, the instrumentality of popular religion, and subaltern religion as a reproducer of hegemony rather than a source of resistance to the dominant classes.

One of the main unifying threads is the idea of a spiritual economy in which magic and religious goods and services are bought and sold in a free market. This is most explicit in *Witchcraft and Welfare* where Romberg posits, "brujería has taken full advantage of a free material and religious market. Entering a new propitious unorthodox spiritual laissez-faire space, brujería has also commodified its practices in the last twenty years . . ." (2). Throughout the book, Puerto Rican "witch-healers" (as Romberg calls them) are portrayed as savvy spiritual entrepreneurs who compete with each other for the power, prestige, and cash that a sizeable clientele can generate.

Also explicit on the existence of a spiritual economy but more narrowly focused, the award-winning *Death Is a Festival* focuses on a specific segment of the religious marketplace, the funerary economy of early

nineteenth-century Salvador. In vivid detail, Reis describes the business of death in which thousands of Bahians engage in the production, sale and purchase of caskets, *bangués* (litters for the transport of deceased indigents and slaves), shrouds, masses, and even the cemetery plots in the new private cemetery, the inauguration of which provoked a furious popular rebellion in 1836 known as the *Cemiterada*. Of such importance was the city's funerary economy that hundreds if not thousands of poor were able to supplement their incomes by renting themselves out as mourners at the large, sumptuous funeral processions of Bahian elites.

Interestingly, as was the case for colonial Mexico and throughout Ibero-America, the larger religious economy of early independence Brazil was monopolistic. In contrast to the competitive Bahian funerary market, which (for the right price) offered choice to consumers, the Brazilian religious macroeconomy was a legal monopoly in which the Roman Catholic Church was the sole licit provider of spiritual goods and services. Viewed as witchcraft and sorcery by Brazilian church and state, African diasporan religions were outlawed and repressed.

In a similar vein, Catholic monopoly in colonial Mexico led to the demonization and prohibition of both African and Indigenous religious traditions, but more importantly the latter due to the size of the population. Lewis shows how church and state repression drove Indian religious practices to the margins of Spanish colonial society. But marginalization did not mean annihilation. To the contrary, on the colonial cultural periphery, Indians developed a thriving black market in the sale of magical herbs, potions and *curandero* (faith healing) services. Diverse clientele of all castes, from free Blacks to Spanish priests, clandestinely purchased supernatural goods and services from Indian vendors. While *Hall of Mirrors* does not explicitly employ the paradigm of religious economy, Lewis makes it clear enough that strong demand for alternative sources of supernatural healing, harm, and magic on the part of Spaniards, and their colonial intermediaries, mestizos and mulattoes, resulted in an abundant Indian supply.

Within the spiritual economies of modern Puerto Rico and colonial Mexico, as presented by both Romberg and Lewis, the primary producers and vendors of what both authors denominate "witchcraft" are subaltern groups that occupy the lowest rungs of their societies due to some combination of their race, ethnicity, and gender.² Lewis shows how the Spaniards' religious ignorance and intolerance led them to perceive in-

2. Romberg defines witchcraft as "a form of vernacular culture emerging out of the sum of strategic, individual defiant moves made through time in response to imposed official religious laws and symbols" (6). More specifically Puerto Rican *brujería* is described as a syncretic blending of popular Catholicism, African magic and healing, Karedcean Spiritism and even popular Protestantism. Lewis, in contrast, offers neither a specific definition of witchcraft nor magic.

digenous religious practices as demonic sorcery; regardless of the fact that many believed in its efficacy. The author underscores the important sociological principle that those who live on the farthest edge of the social and geographical periphery are the most potent sorcerers. "But Spaniards and others attributed the most powerful forms of witchcraft to Chichimecs, who were at the greatest geographical and cultural distance from Spanish colonization and thus from Spanish control" (108).

Puerto Rico's Chichimecs, in terms of their distance from the economic, political and cultural centers of power, would be women of color, more specifically those of predominantly African descent. It is no coincidence that Haydee, the "bruja" who is the protagonist of Romberg's ethnography, is a popular class African-Puerto Rican. In a mirror image of colonial Mexico, Puerto Ricans from the middle and upper classes produce and consume official, established religion in the island's Catholic and Protestant churches while those at the bottom of the social pyramid offer magical goods and services of sorcery in a non-institutional setting, frequently within the confines of their own homes, as is the case with Haydee. Like the Spaniards of colonial Mexico who surreptitiously availed themselves of Indian witchcraft, not just a few well-heeled Puerto Ricans frequent the homes of Haydee and other "witch-healers" in search of healing or harm toward rivals and enemies. Well-heeled or not, Haydee's clients, as consumers of *brujería* across the board, seek solutions to mundane problems—matters of romance, health, family, and money are what impel clients to consult with a "bruja." One of Haydee's clients, for example, sought her help with a family dispute over land. Those seeking assistance for more metaphysical concerns typically do not seek out "witch-healers."

The instrumentality of popular religion and magic is another major theme uniting the three books. In Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Brazil (and throughout Latin America) the products and services offered in the popular religious marketplace are extremely practical. Potions and herbs to attract the opposite sex, incense to render a cheating spouse impotent, and offerings of food and drink to saints and spirits that both heal and cause illness appeal to those consumers whose earthly concerns and afflictions are immediate and often overwhelming. And as Romberg and Lewis demonstrate, in Puerto Rico and Mexico even individuals of relative power and prestige will enter the popular religious marketplace when their own secular and sacred institutions have failed them. *Brujería* is of particular appeal because its lack of institutions, dogma, and priests makes for more direct and immediate contact with the supernatural forces that can harm and heal.

The utilitarian nature of the Bahian funerary economy is not as readily apparent as the instrumentality of Mexican and Puerto Rican

witchcraft, but Reis's rich detail reveals its worldly orientation. In the world of baroque Brazilian Catholicism, funeral rites were essential for incorporating the deceased into the community of the dead. As a fully integrated member of the otherworld, the souls of the deceased could even intercede with saints on behalf of the living. Contrariwise, a "bad death" without proper funeral rites could result in "tormented souls" or ghosts who might haunt the living (66–67). Thus the living had a strong incentive to facilitate a "good death" for family members, friends, and co-workers belonging to their social network. Since funeral rites involved significant expenditures, the Bahian masses, including slaves and freepersons, were often at risk of suffering a "bad death." In response, one of the main objectives of the Catholic brotherhoods among "men of color" was to afford their members decent burials (47).

In contrast to earlier subaltern studies that tended to find acts of everyday resistance at every Latin American street corner, the three books under consideration present popular religious economies that affirm and support more than they resist the political, economic, and social status quo of their respective societies. Given the instrumentality of popular religion, and especially "brujería," this is not surprising. Popular religious consumers seek spiritual and material rewards that will grant them prosperity, power, and prestige, which are the measures of success in their respective societies. This is most obvious in Romberg's work where she characterizes witchcraft as "spiritualized materialism" and avers that

rather than contest the state or the social order, brujería practices help to reproduce it, not only through holistic and individualized types of intervention, but also by endorsing mainstream social values in redirecting their clients' actions. Further, brujería might even be helping to prevent social discontent, deviance, and unrest and be working as an off-the-record branch of the welfare system (11).

Likewise, Lewis in *Hall of Mirrors* concludes that Indian witchcraft "was not a revolutionary language of resistance as much as it was an affirmation of hegemony. In the end, it not only developed out of colonialism, it also upheld the allure of the wealth, mobility, and power controlled by elites" (13). The sale of their herbs, potions, and powders, as well as their ritual services of healing and harm, provided an important source of income for Mexican Indians forced to survive in the cash-oriented economy imposed by the Spaniards (123). In her nuanced examination, Lewis recognizes the "unsanctioned power" that indigenous "brujos" derived from their craft, but ultimately views it as being exercised in a manner that reproduced Spanish colonial hegemony.

At the other end of Latin America, Reis implicitly portrays the participation of the Bahian masses in the local funerary economy and even the Cemiterada rebellion as more of an affirmation of elite hegemony

than resistance. While African-born slaves had distinct beliefs about death and the afterlife, they and Brazilian-born Blacks assimilated to the prevailing Iberian funerary model imposed by the Catholic Church. Again, evidence of this is found in the operation of the city's Catholic "brotherhoods of color" whose major objective of mutual aid was to provide a decent burial for their members. Thus, Reis reveals that brotherhood members and other Bahians who, to the shouts of "death to the cemetery," destroyed the new private cemetery that had been granted a thirty-year monopoly on interments in the city did so in defense of a traditional view of death. Members of the "brotherhoods of color" feared that they would no longer be able to be buried next to each other in Campo Santo, the new cemetery, while other poor people resented the loss of income that would result from the replacement of corteges with funeral cars. Poor women of color, in particular, feared the loss of income as *rezadeiras* (prayer leaders) and *carpideiras* (wailing mourners) (303–304).

If women of color (Black, mulatta, mestiza, and indigenous) have become the focus of much new scholarship on religion and society it is thanks to scholars such as Reis, Romberg, and Lewis who have identified them as the primary producers and consumers of popular religion. Far removed from the official spiritual marketplace where highly educated and often foreign priests offer elite religious goods and services, the mothers-of-saints of Umbanda, Puerto Rican "brujas," and Indian curanderas offer products of healing and harm at popular prices to millions of Latin Americans in search of health, wealth, and love. Both individually and collectively Reis, Romberg, and Lewis have made a great contribution to the study of religion and society in Latin America.

REFERENCES

- Berger, Peter
1969 *The Sacred Canopy*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Bruneau, Thomas
1982 *The Church in Brazil*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
1974 *The Political Transformation of the Brazilian Catholic Church*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Brusco, Elizabeth
1995 *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Burdick, John
1993 *Looking for God in Brazil*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cabrera, Lydia
1975 *El Monte*. Miami: Ediciones Universal.
- Chesnut, R. Andrew
2003 *Competitive Spirits: Latin America's New Religious Economy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
1997 *Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

- D'Epinay, Christian Lalive
1969 *Haven of the Masses*. London: Lutterworth.
- Drogus, Carol Ann
1997 *Women, Religion and Change in Brazil's Popular Church*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Finke, Roger, and Rodney Stark
1992 *The Churching of America, 1776–1990*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Flora, Cornelia Butler
1976 *Pentecostalism in Colombia: Baptism by Fire and Spirit*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses.
- Gill, Anthony
1998 *Rendering unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Guerra, Lemuel Dourado
2003 *Mercado Religioso no Brasil: Competição, Demanda e a Dinâmica da Esfera da Religião*. João Pessoa, Brazil: Editora Ideia.
- Ireland, Rowan
1991 *Kingdoms Come: Religion and Politics in Brazil*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Landes, Ruth
1947 *The City of Women*. New York: Macmillan Company.
- Leacock, Seth, and Ruth Leacock
1972 *Spirits of the Deep*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Natural History Press.
- Mainwaring, Scott
1986 *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil, 1916–1985*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Mariz, Cecilia
1994 *Coping with Poverty: Pentecostals and Christian Base Communities in Brazil*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Mecham, J. Lloyd
1966 *Church and State in Latin America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Stark, Rodney, and William Bainbridge
1987 *A Theory of Religion*. New York: Peter Lang.