
Solimar Otero and Toyin Falola (Eds.) (2013)

**Yemoja: Gender, Sexuality and Creativity in the Latina/o and Afro-Atlantic
Diasporas**

Albany, State University of New York Press, 294 pp.

Reviewed by Natália da Silva Perez

University of Kent

Known in Brazil as queen of the seas and in Cuba as mother of waters, the Yoruba deity Yemoja (also called Yemayá and Iemanjá) is often linked to images of motherhood and femininity. The book *Yemoja: Gender, Sexuality and Creativity in the Latina/o and Afro-Atlantic Diasporas* explores her literary, artistic, and ritualistic representations in different social contexts. Yemoja emerges as fluid, queer, defying all strict definitions of her femininity or motherhood and yet validating these positionalities. Both editors of the volume are established specialists in the history of the African diaspora and in African religions, having issued many publications on the subject. Folklorist Solimar Otero of Louisiana State University has published on gender, sexuality, Afro-Caribbean spirituality, and Yoruba religion; historian Toyin Falola of the University of Texas at Austin has published extensively on Nigerian and Atlantic history, diaspora, migration, religion, and culture.

The book's introduction sets up its objectives: to "[challenge] rigid constructions of sexuality, gender, and race" by studying Yemoja rituals, carefully considering "history,

religion, performance, art, and gender and their intersectionality" (xxvi). Does it succeed in these objectives? The first of the volume's two main parts deals with gender in different manifestations of Yemoja worship. Chapters 1 through 3 in particular provide careful, situated analyses of the cult of Yemoja and the potential for change that these religious practices enable.

Elizabeth Pérez's chapter "Nodoby's Mammy: Yemayá as fierce foremother in Afro-Cuban religions" gives a thorough and methodologically sound account of the complicated religious syncretism between Yoruba and Catholic beliefs, via an analysis of the relationships between Yemayá, Virgen de Regla, and Madre Agua. Pérez shows that a metonymic reduction tends to appear in theoretical readings of the Yoruba-Catholic deity which disregards the performative aspects of gender, and imposes a Western paradigm on the study of Yemayá that cannot account for the non-ontological nature of gender roles embodied by the deity.

The next two chapters, Yemayá's Duck and Yemayá y Ochún, discuss gender

performativity in the practices of Yemayá's worshippers. The first one is an ethnographic account of Yemayá's followers' practices that juxtaposes the duck (a central character in Yemayá's mythology) and the effeminate santero as forming "a dual function of abjection and attraction (...)." In arguing that their "fluidities are contingent and contextual, operating diagonally" (63) Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesus shows how Yemayá's worshippers carve out possibilities of agency for themselves as in-between subjects. She does so through a careful problematizing of pre-defined identity categories via analyses of ritual performativity and storytelling. The following chapter, *Yemayá y Ochún*, performs a similar queering of sexual and gendered identity categories, this time via an analysis of the performative effects of vernacular religious accounts.

Chapter 4, *A Different Kind of Sweetness*, has a different tone from the three previous ones: Martin Tsang, an "anthropologist and priest" (114) of the Lukumí religion, draws on his own understanding of the deity, and as a result this chapter goes against the book's established tendency of acknowledging Yemayá's cult as being accommodating of fluidity, hybridity and in-betweenness. The author fetes Yemayá's expansiveness, but still tends to universalize her manifestation. Given the previous chapters' context, this tendency seems either odd or naïve. The paucity of footnotes does not aid his case.

Chapter 5, the last of part one, is called *Yemoja: An Introduction to the Divine Mother and Water Goddess* and gives the reader a Yemoja primer. However, it is

drawn from academic scholarship instead of ethnographical material or personal experience. It is a good counterbalance to the material provided in the first three chapters, albeit less in-depth.

Part two shifts the focus to Yemoja's aesthetics. It begins with *Yemaya Blew that Wire Fence Down*, Micaela Días-Sánchez's analysis of how Gloria Anzaldúa and Juana Alicia invoke Yemayá's imaginary to carve out potentials for political engagement. Of particular interest is the section of the text that deals with Gloria Anzaldúa's engagement with African spiritualities in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. In this brilliant account of Anzaldúa's engagement with Yemayá as a vehicle for solidarity across reified identity lines, Días-Sánchez elucidates Anzaldúa's political project of enabling coalition building among those who are excluded.

Arturo Lindsay's artist statement, *Dancing Aché with Yemaya in My Life and in My Art*, is a very personal account of how Yemayá inspired him to look into the absent presences of those who perished in the Middle Passage. Though like chapter 4 it is based on personal experience, Lindsay's text acknowledges Yemayá's fluidity and does not attempt to claim his interpretation as 'correct'. She remains an icon evoking care, fierceness, and power, but he locates these characteristics in his particular engagement, rather than in a universal.

Alan West-Durán's *What the Water Brings and Takes Away* is a close reading of María Magdalena Campos Pons's engagement

with Yemayá and other Yoruba deities. It is an interesting introduction to Campos Pons's work, but lacks nuanced political considerations of the artist's particular aesthetics apart from basic remarks on the deity as an icon of queerness and powerful motherhood.

In Chapter 9 Teresa N. Washington also uses close readings as her analytical mode, but does so more profoundly than the previous chapter. By looking into a plethora of films, novels, short stories and other artistic manifestations that engage the imagery of Yemoja, Washington poetically constructs an understanding of how "Yemoja and her progeny [...] heal, reunite, and reconnect a lost and seeking people to the divinity and immortality bequeathed to them."(259) Washington is mainly concerned with 'remembering', the varied ways in which descendants of the African Diaspora rely on imaginations of the water goddess to heal the wounds of the Middle Passage, without forgetting them.

Chapter 10 is a Sonic Portrait with Photos of Salvador's Iemanjá Festival: a nice little interlude that is itself more of an aesthetic engagement with Iemanjá manifestations than an academic analysis. The text is accompanied by a website containing sounds and photos from the Iemanjá Festival in Salvador, Brazil. As a work of art in itself, this chapter provides a pleasant snapshot of Salvador and its people's engagement with Iemanjá. It is a pity, though, that this is the only chapter of the volume that engages with the particularities of the Iemanjá cult in Brazil. This holds especially true for a book

that celebrates the hybridity and fluidity of Yemoja.

To end the book on a beautiful diasporic note, we encounter Erin Dean Colcord's account Yemayá Offering a Pearl of Wisdom: An artist statement. This text helps dismantle any possible remaining understanding of the cult of Yemoja as being limited to communities that are ethnically linked to the Yoruba diaspora. Colcord is a living example of the relevance of Gloria Anzaldúa's political project of tracing alliances across identity lines, and of opening up diverse imaginary spaces for action. With no claims to objectivity, Colcord's text closes the book with an invitation to accept the pearl of wisdom that Yemoja might be able to offer us, if we take the time to listen to her waves.

A collection of accounts about the water Orisha, the book *Yemoja: Gender, Sexuality and Creativity in the Latina/o and Afro-Atlantic Diasporas* not only contains, but also embodies, the diverse influence of the Yoruba culture in the Americas. As such, it is a valuable addition to scholarship on Cultural Studies about the African Diaspora, especially within the trans-American context.