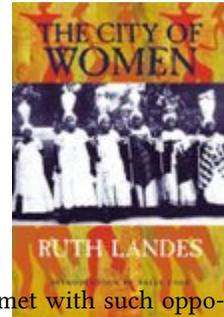


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ruth Landes. *The City of Women*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994. xxxvi + 251 pp. \$17.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-1555-7; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8263-1556-4.

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Published on H-LatAm (April, 1996)



The City of Women by Ruth Landes was first published by Macmillan Press in 1947 and reissued with an introduction by anthropologist Sally Cole in 1994 by the University of New Mexico Press. The book works on many levels: it is a study of candomble, the Afro-Brazilian religion of Bahia, of the role of women in candomble, and of race relations in Brazil, but it is also much more. *The City of Women* has much to offer anyone interested in Brazilian history, comparative race and gender relations, the history of anthropology, and the relationships between researcher and subject in anthropology and oral history. Sally Cole's excellent introduction, "Ruth Landes in Brazil: Writing, Race, and Gender in 1930s American Anthropology," places Landes and her work in the context of the history of anthropology, outlines Landes's biography and the responses to her book, and helps to draw out some of Landes's most important points.

According to Cole, *The City of Women* and its author have never received the attention they deserved. At the time the book was published, influential anthropologists raised questions about Landes's arguments on gender roles in candomble, on the origins of Afro-Brazilian religions, and about her "methods and personal comportment in the field" (Cole in Landes, 1992: xxi). Roger Bastide, one of her few supporters, wrote that *The City of Women* was "one of only two books that give an adequate idea of [the] dense, teeming, vitality" of candomble, but that Landes presented "a feminine view of the candombles which is in keeping with the aggressive self-affirmation of North American women" (Bastide, 1978: 221). It was hardly an overwhelming endorsement. Recent research on candomble largely supports Landes's findings that women were central to the candomble hierarchy and that men who allowed themselves to be possessed by the spirits were often homosexuals (Cole in

Landes, 1992: xxii). But her ideas met with such opposition during most of her career that she did not obtain a permanent academic position until 1965, thirty years after she received her Ph.D. (Cole in Landes, 1992: xxviii).

Ironically, the same characteristics that made Landes and *The City of Women* controversial in the past make her work particularly interesting today. The questions that she explored about race and gender, about the relationship between researcher and research subject, and about the role of history in the formation of cultures have emerged as important ones in both history and anthropology. And the same methodology which got her into trouble when the book was published—openly discussing her own experiences in the field—enable us to see why she made the arguments about race and gender that she did and keep the text fresh almost fifty years after it was first published.

Landes's ideas about candomble do not appear controversial now, but they were when she published her book. She argued that candomble was a complex, organized, and structured set of beliefs and practices that provided emotional, cultural, and economic support to impoverished Afro-Brazilians, that Bahia's traditional candombles were matriarchies organized by and for women, and that gender and race intersected in complex ways in Brazil (Landes, 1992:248). Because of the importance of women in traditional candomble, this Afro-Brazilian religion was incompatible with patriarchy (Landes, 1992:148). Possession by the gods, the central component of the religious practice, was the domain of women: men supported the candomble temples financially, but did not run them (Landes, 1992:37). Consensual unions were more common than formal marriages and sexual relations were what many Brazilians and

Americans would have considered promiscuous (Landes, 1992:147-48). Landes believed that *candomble* gave Afro-Brazilian women power and status not granted to their white sisters and that these powerful women were among Brazil's most important social resources (Landes, 1992:248).

Landes also showed that Brazil's Afro-Brazilian religions were not seamless, unchanging, cultural legacies of an African past, but dynamic, living expressions of Brazil's past and its present. To support her arguments she not only discussed the history of *candomble* and slavery in Brazil, but showed that *candomble* was in the process of change in the 1930s when a new group of Afro-Brazilian cults, called "caboclo cults," was developing. These groups, according to Landes, were radically new because they allowed men, usually homosexuals, to be possessed by spirits—a role traditionally restricted to women. Traditional practitioners of *candomble* considered these caboclo cults "upstarts."

Landes's arguments about race relations were less controversial at the time. She argued that notions of race in Brazil were very different from those in the United States and in Germany. She maintained that class not race was the basis of discrimination in Brazil, showing herself to be influenced by Gilberto Freyre and others who believed Brazil to be a racial democracy. Arguments about Brazilian racial democracy have been contested since the 1960s (da Costa, 1985). But Landes's work demonstrates clearly why Brazilian and foreign scholars alike could have believed that Brazilians did not discriminate against each other along racial lines, because she contrasts what the Brazilians she met thought with what she thought, with what many Americans thought, and with what Nazis thought.

Landes began her research at a time when American society was highly segregated, when lynching was not uncommon, and when studies of race relations in the United States and U.S. /Brazilian studies were in early stages. Gilberto Freyre's work was new: at Columbia, where Landes had studied, anthropologists were excited by the possibility that there was a place where the "large Negro population lived with ease and freedom among the general population" (Landes, 1992:1). To prepare her for life and work in Brazil, her supervisors at Columbia sent Landes to Fisk University, a historically black college in Tennessee, to "teach, to study the [library] collection and to 'get used to Negroes'" (Landes, 1992:2). At Fisk she came to know African Americans who, although highly educated and erudite, suffered discrimination be-

cause of their race and saw the world divided into blacks and whites (Landes, 1992:4). Arriving in Brazil she also met Americans from the south who were vocal in their racism and she encountered Germans who were outspoken in their support for Nazism. She found Brazilian ideas about race much more fluid, and thus came to believe that Brazilians did not discriminate on the basis of race.

The strategy Landes used to present her evidence was one of the controversial elements of her work—but it is also what has kept her work fresh. The study placed the author, her friends, and her contacts squarely in the middle of the research, and brought the reader along through the research process. She shared her experiences with the reader as she traveled from New York to Nashville to Rio de Janeiro to Salvador Bahia, from universities and mansions to the streets and shacks and *candombles* of Salvador's poor black neighborhoods in the 1930s. In the process she showed us how the people she studied viewed their world, each other, and the foreigner who was studying them, as well as how others viewed them. But she also showed us how she viewed her research, how she made contact with her subjects, and how the experience changed her.

The methodology is deceptive: it appears at first that the book is very simple, but a look at the way she constructed her argument on comparative race relations shows that it is, rather, very complex. Landes used several kinds of evidence to support her ideas on comparative race relations. She admitted that most anthropologists in the United States at that time knew absolutely nothing about African American populations or Brazil. She discussed the work of the few scholars who were informed, either African Americans teaching at Fisk University or Brazilians like Gilberto Freyre and Edison Carneiro. She introduced conversations with Afro-Brazilians, with African Americans, with members of the American community in Bahia, and with the Nazis whom she meets (Landes, 1992:13-14). She shows that the practitioners of *candomble* and the scholars who studied them were persecuted as communists under Getulio Vargas's *Estado Novo*. And she used her own experiences as a woman in Brazil to show that "respectable" white women had less freedom than did any other group of people with whom she came in contact. She emphasized that "respectable" women did not travel alone, did not live alone, did not dine alone, and did not study *candombles* at all (Landes, 1992:12-13). She admitted that she needed a man to serve as her escort in Salvador and that it was not until Edison Carneiro began to fulfill that role that

she was free to visit the candombles and interview the people involved in them. By the close of the book it is very clear why she came to the conclusions she did, and she is quite persuasive.

All of this should not be taken to mean that Landes's work is without its shortcomings—it is not. While some aspects of the work are refreshingly new, others are disturbingly dated. Her terminology of race is marked by terms prevalent in 1930s America; consequently she discusses Negroes even though she mentions that Afro-Bahian or African were the terms in most use in Bahia at the time. More importantly, she ignores clear evidence of racial prejudice among Brazilians: in New York, Rio de Janeiro, and Bahia she met Brazilians whose attitudes toward Bahia and Afro-Brazilians were distinctly hostile. Her descriptions of successful people of African descent, like Edison Carneiro, make it clear that there was a relationship between skin color and social mobility—elites appear to have been of mixed racial background while the poor seemed to be completely African. While notions about race in Brazil were different than they were in the United States at the time, racial prejudice did exist—she largely ignores the evidence of racism and its implica-

tions.

Despite this criticism *The City of Women* stands the test of time. And methodologically it is very instructive: for Landes makes it abundantly clear that her scholarly arguments are the result of a combination of training, research, and personal experience. For these reasons *The City of Women* ought to be on the “must read” list of anyone preparing to do field research, especially in ethnography or oral history, in a culture different from his or her own.

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Citation: Mary Ann Mahony. Review of Landes, Ruth, *The City of Women*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. April, 1996.

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