

THE CANARIAN INDIGENOUS WOMAN IN THE RITUALS OF PASSAGE: LIFE AND DEATH THROUGH DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

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Abstract. An analysis of the role of women in different rituals of life and death of the canarian indigenous society is carried out through written sources in addition to some archaeological records.

We establish as a hypothesis, that it is a social sector with little mention in these written sources, where the definition of po-

litical action, the power structure and the public sphere is much more relevant than the domestic world, the “day by day” or the aspect of mentalities. We understand that with a more comprehensive and contrasted study of different variables, we can reach a broader analysis perspective in each of the islands.

Keywords. Woman. Ethnohistorical sources. Canary Islands Culture. Life. Death.

I. INTRODUCTION

Presenting this poster in a Congress related to the subject of death and funeral rituals, some of the roles played by women in the Guanche Culture, has been our intention in the demonstrations linked to the transit rituals that involve changes for individuals, affected by this ritual and for the social group to which they belong. Archaeology, sometimes, use to reveal only some of the behaviours associated with these rituals, with serious difficulties to observe gender aspects, either because it has not been chosen a theoretical point of view to make visible the feminine role, or for inability to use appropriate methodological tools. The ancient Canarian cultures have a set of written sources, records of the chroniclers or first historians of the post-conquest Castilian stage, which provide some news about it, although always thought with the “other point of view”, who does not understand the complexity of what is recorded and that sifts the information, trying to explain from an ideology far from the observed reality. We synthesize the main features about the feminine roles in these rituals, conditioned by the scarce space granted to us.

2. FROM BIRTH TO CHILDHOOD

2.1. Ritual wash, baptism and kinship

The complete washing of the neonatal blood represented a vital moment, apparently symbolic. Then, Abreu (1602: 294) has pointed out that,

Cuando parían las mujeres, acostumbraban lavar las criaturas desde la cabeza hasta los pies; y para esto tenían una mujer o más diputadas, que no entendían en otro oficio; y con esta mujer no era lícito tratar deshonestamente, ni se podían casar con ella.¹

It has been showed the taboo that affected the sexual life and full integration of the woman involved in this role, as a handler of impurities and by direct contact with the blood, isolation also present in the butcher's task, in Gran Canaria, or in that of the one that shrouds death bodies. However, Espinosa (1594: 35) insists that this role strengthens a bond of kinship between the woman who helps in

¹ When women gave birth, they used to wash the creatures from head to toe; and for this, they had a woman or more, who had no other task; and this woman could not marry anyone or have dishonest treatment by anyone. Abreu (1602: 294).

childbirth and the parents of the new-born, a link of spiritual and practical consanguinity that the written sources understood as a baptism ceremony. Gomes Scudero (XVII: 438) attributes in Gran Canaria the performance of this activity to the *harimaguadas*, good women and virgins, among them the *old ones* according to Marín (1694: 258), or Torriani (1592: 179) for Tenerife as *venerable woman*.

Regarding the place of these practices, Bethencourt (1880: 267-278) collects the oral tradition and toponymy as sources or pools of the baptistery, and in one of them (Barranco del Boxo, Tenerife) three children were located buried inside three potteries, indicating the idea that transit rituals were performed in these pools.

2.2. Infanticide ♀, demographic control vs. “tofet”

Some written sources talk about the practice of infanticide in Gran Canaria and La Palma, linked to the genre ♀ in the first one, except Torriani (1592: 115) which indicates affects all children, as does Gomes de Sintra (1474: 77) for La Palma. This sacrifice is justified as control over the demographic increase and difficulties in maintaining the population. Among those referring to Gran Canaria:

(...) acordaron y hicieron un estatuto que se matasen todas las hembras que de allí adelante naciesen, con tal que no fuesen los primeros partos que las mujeres (Abreu 1602: 169).

(...) tubieron lei de matar todas las niñas que tuviesen, como no fuera ésta primera en el primer parto, por haver venido a número de catorce mil familias i ser años estériles muchos antes de la conquista. (Gomes Scudero XVII: 440).²

In Gran Canaria, the Cendro necropolis (Telde) (Fig. 1), with children's burials in pottery urns, is interpreted by its excavators as a reception space for these female infanticides, although no sex determination has been made, and would show the effective demographic control (Cuenca et al. 1996).

Other researchers (González & Del-Arco 2007) prefer to remind that the cultural features that are seen in Cendro are typical of the tofet of Semitic-Punic tra-

² (...) agreed and made a statute to kill all the females that were born from there, provided they were not the first deliveries that women had (Abreu, 1602: 169). (...) They made a law to kill all the girls they had, if it was not the first birth, because they were about fourteen thousand families and being hard years before the conquest. (Gomes Scudero XVII: 440).

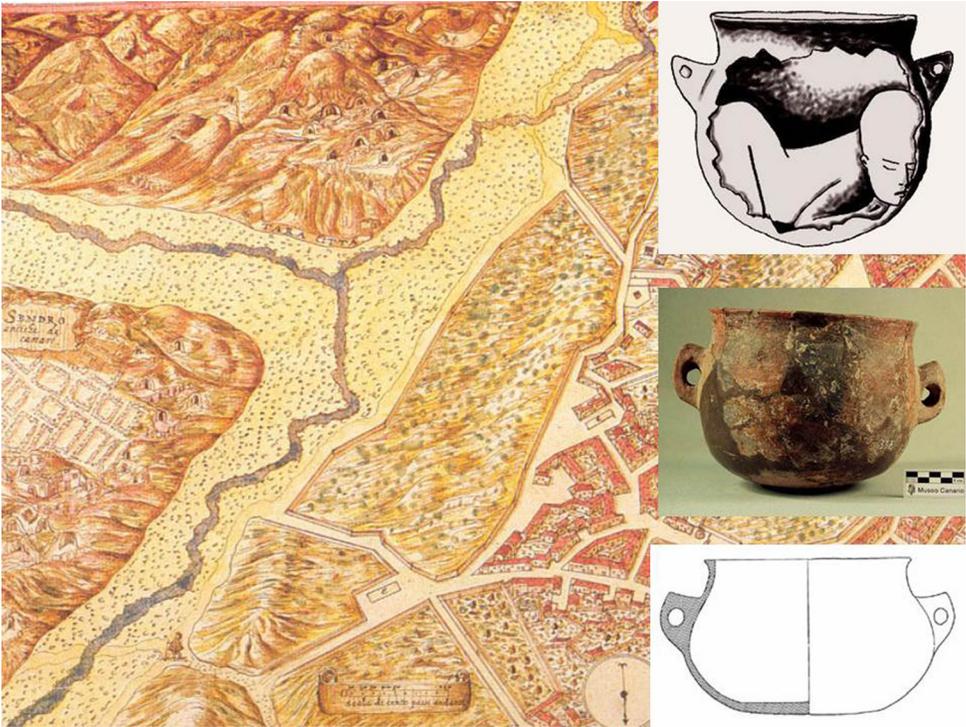


Fig. 1. Cendro and Telde according to Torriani and Ceramics of Cendro (Cuenca et al. 1996, Museo Canario).

dition in the Mediterranean, also in several Canarian records, that common cultural background could be found (González et al. 1998), as in the graves of El Boxo (Tenerife), those of Pozo de la Rosa and Huriame (Fuerteventura).

3. IN PUBERTY AND SEXUAL FULLNESS

3.1. From transit to marriage, *lus primae noctis* vs sexual Initiation as the “noche del error” (night of error)

Several chronicles referring to Gran Canaria (the first of them Zurara 1453) indicate the practice of premarital fattening of young women who will be sexually possessed by one of the members of the elite, the Guanarteme or the nobleman to whom he delegates. Two aspects, fattening and loss of virginity, which have been

interpreted (Pérez 1997: 130) to enhance fertility by favoring the advancement of the first menstruation for the first phenomenon and the *lus primae noctis* for the leadership. However, it is interesting to note that this procedure seeks to regenerate the genetic potential of the elite, subject to strong inbreeding, by incorporating into it the descendants born of that premarital exchange.

Through these chronicles it is not observed that it is an early, collective sexual initiation and in defined spaces for blind sexual exchanges, in the so-called “noche del error”, ritual in which some caves are related, with engravings in Gran Canaria (Cuenca & Rivero 1984).

3.2. Wives welcoming gift

Wives welcoming gift or transfer of the wife to an individual outside the family nucleus for a certain period, usually one night, can be traced on several islands. In Lanzarote, there is the legend of Ico (Abreu 1602: 62), daughter of Queen Fayna and a navigator who arrives on the island, which supports the definition of this practice considered as a hospitality formula for the outsider visitor who accesses an isolated society, and that hides the same solution previously proposed as a strategy against inbreeding but here by the female line elite, since Fayna-Ico were in the genealogy of the ruling lineage. It is a practice that is identified in Gran Canaria, since Guanarteme has that privilege when it is housed in the house of the Canaries, assuming the recognition of the offspring and their integration into the nobility (Marín 1694: 261).

In La Gomera, against that elitist profile, the woman's offering was made to any outsider, without apparent social distinction.

3.3. The sea bath, purification

We observe in Gran Canaria this practice, in which only women would participate, because it has been considered (Pérez 1977: 146) a fertility ritual, as purifying baths in menstrual periods related to the blood taboo, reason why the exclusion of men would be granted, for whom the violation of the norm, even entailed the capital punishment (Cedeño XVII: 377). On the other hand, the written sources refer to contexts in which the mixed bath was accepted with acceptance and even with festivities, after banquets or during fishing:

Tenían los dichos Guadartemes casas de recreación y pasatiempo, donde se juntaban onbres y mujeres a cantar y a bailar, y acabados sus cantos y bailes, ordenaban sus

banquetes y comidas [...] y acabadas sus comidas y banquetes se yban a la mar a nadar ellos y ellas, que nadaban como peses [...] (Ovetense 1525: 161).³

4. PRIESTHOOD AND OFFICIANTS, THE RITE

4.1. Intermediation and interpretation

In Fuerteventura, the written records refer to two women, mother and daughter, *Tibiabin* and *Tamonante*, who play an essential role in mediation and divination. Torriani (1592: 75-81) and Abreu (1602: 59) review that mediation in the political conflicts that put the social order at risk, even helping to integrate the island during its conquest,

Cuentan antiguos naturales de esta isla de Fuerteventura, que haberse ganado tan fácilmente esta isla fue por las amonestaciones de estas dos mujeres, Tamonante y Tibiabin, (...) que decían lo que les había de suceder, y aconsejaban y persuadían tuviesen paz y quietud [...] (Abreu 1602: 68).⁴

The roles of these two women would also include divination, intermediation with the devil and officiating ceremonies; Abreu (1602: 59-60) pointed out that the former was a counsellor and mediated tensions and the latter was responsible for ceremonies. Nevertheless, Marín (1694: 152) indicates that all these roles were practiced by each one, but in different territories, *Guise* and *Ayose*, the two demarcations in which the island was divided. It is possible to consider that these two women show the weight of a female lineage with responsibility in maintaining the social order; perhaps manifesting a possible matrilineal organization, which has been discussed as a model in the islands.

4.2. Rituals and auspicious processions, the role of the *maguadas*

It is in Gran Canaria where there is a special reference to the participation of women in the auspicious rituals of rain, in short, of fertility. In this registry it

³ The said Guanartemes had leisure and hobby houses, where men and women gathered to sing and dance, and finished their songs and dances, ordered their banquets and meals [...] and finished their meals and banquets they went to the sea to swim together and they swam like fish [...] (Ovetense 1525: 161).

⁴ Former inhabitants of this island of Fuerteventura have it, that if this island was so easily won, it was because of the interventions of these two women, *Tamonante* and *Tibiabin*, (...) that they said what would happen to them and advised persuading for peace and calm [...] (Abreu 1602: 68).

is mentioned that the young women who live in isolated collectively, the *magadas*, *maguas* or *harimaguadas*, participate with offerings of milk and butter in mountainous areas, in certain cliffs that have symbolic value, and descend in procession from them to the sea, waving bouquets in the hands, with music and songs.

Cuando faltaban los temporales, iban en procesión, con varas en las manos, y las magadas con vasos de leche y manteca y ramos de palmas. Iban a estas montañas y allí derramaban la manteca y leche, y hacían danzas y bailes y cantaban endechas en torno de un peñasco; y de allí iban a la mar y daban con las varas en la mar, en el agua, dando todos juntos una gran grito. (Abreu 1602: 156-157).⁵

Other texts, however, configure for these rituals a broader participation of all people.

5. DEATH AND MOURNING

Few are the existing references in written sources about female participation in this transit ritual.

The clearest mention is that which refers to the job of people who shrouds, of both genders in Tenerife and Gran Canaria, appropriate to their function according to the sex of the deceased. They are attributed a life regulated by the prohibition of contact, as contaminated and unclean (Espinosa 1594: 45), when handling blood material, assuming a life in isolation, without sexual exchange abroad, although from this maintenance would come as reciprocity formula for the services provided.

This selective trade makes them experts' women who shroud about varied aspects: from a broad knowledge of human anatomy and biological mechanisms of decomposition to the properties of very different agents (inorganic and organic) to control those. Undoubtedly, tasks carried out in a regulated manner and accompanied with several expressive formulas (oral and gestures), which they had

⁵ When there were no storms, they were in procession, with sticks in their hands, and the *magadas* with pots of milk and butter and palm branches. They went to these mountains and spilled butter and milk there, and did dances, dances and sang around a rock; and from there they went to the sea and hit the sticks in the sea, in the water; all screaming (Abreu 1602: 156-157).

to acquire and transmit, also preserving the social norm in this regard, probably selectively. It is not indicated in the written sources their role, as women, with respect to the responsibility of elaborating and preserving the skins that are reserved as shroud, since this is a technology that is supposedly ascribed to the feminine role, although the appearance and deterioration that they possess the mortises (varied types, fragments, damages and repairs) seems to indicate that they come already like this, from the outside, very used and amortized for the funerary function. Another thing would be that the preservation of these skins until their definitive use was in the hands of these women.

En este tiempo tenían lugar sus parientes que llorarle y plantearle, que otras obsequias no se usaban; al cabo del cual término, lo cosían o envolvían en un cuero de algunas reses de ganado que para este efecto tenían señaladas y guardadas, y así, por la señal y pinta de la piel se conocía después el cuerpo del difunto. Estos cueros los adobaban con mucha curiosidad gamuzados y los teñían con cáscaras de pino, y con mucha sutileza los cosían con correas del mismo cuero, que casi no parecía la costura. En estas pieles adobadas cosían y envolvían el cuerpo del difunto después de mirlado, poniéndole muchos cueros destos encima, ... (Espinosa 1594: 44-45).⁶

It is not known either how the ceremony of delivery of the deceased took place and if at that point the task of these people who shroud ends, or if it reaches a greater projection by also having reserved the execution of the conditioning of the funerary spaces, the definitive deposit of the remains, the closure of the sepulchral site with the bordering elements of the field of the dead of the living (dry stone walls that seal the cave or uprising walls that mark the tumular necropolis of Gran Canaria), and if they also cover the care of collective spaces, those of access and transit to and in the necropolis.

⁶ During this time their relatives had to cry, because no other type of offering was used; and at the end of the day, they sewed it or wrapped it in a leather of cattle that for this purpose had chosen and stored; and thus, the body of the deceased was known after the shape and quality of the skin. These leathers marinated them with great care and dyed them with pine shells, and with very subtlety they sewed them with straps of the same leather, which almost did not show the seam. In these tanned skins they sewed and wrapped the body of the deceased after processing, putting many leathers on them, ... (Espinosa 1594: 44-45).

6. CONCLUSION

Our knowledge of the ritual and symbolic world of the canarian natives is strongly biased, on the one hand, by the lack of knowledge and ideological perception of the first rapporteurs and, on the other hand, by the poor or null archaeological verification of customs and beliefs of the indigenous society, nevertheless, through them it is possible to glimpse some aspects about the feminine roles. The funerary context, which combines participation in this Congress, is one of the aspects with the most lack of knowledge, even though the literature produced is broad, however; reiterative about the same content, particularly focused on physical anthropology and mummification, and where almost no contribution has been made to gender differences, both in the most tangible aspects of the funeral deposit and in the more subjective aspects that make up the mourning. Even worse, if possible, because archaeology has been more generous in this field, although always affected by the plundering of this heritage.

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