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Social and cultural anthropology
Standard level
Paper 1

Wednesday 27 October 2021 (afternoon)

1 hour

Instructions to candidates

- Do not open this examination paper until instructed to do so.
- Read the passage and answer questions 1 **and** 2. Answer **either** question 3 **or** 4.
- The maximum mark for this examination paper is **[20 marks]**.

Read the passage.

Passage adapted from Canals, R., 2018. Studying multi-modal religions: migration and mediation in the cult of Maria Lionza (Venezuela, Barcelona, Internet). *Visual Anthropology Review*, 34(2), pp.124–135.

The goal of this research, based on fieldwork in Venezuela and my native city of Barcelona, was to study the cult¹ of Maria Lionza, an Afro-Latin American religion from Venezuela, which I also practice. I conducted online research, using a range of visual research methods (film, online interviews, photo-elicitation²), to explore how new followers and spirits use social networks.

5 The research resulted in a film, an interactive website, an exhibition, and publications.

Maria Lionza expresses a strong sense of Venezuelan nationalism. She is a spirit or goddess represented in different ways – as Indian, white, *mestiza* [mixed-race Spanish/indigenous], or black, as seductress or virgin. Popular representations include a white or *mestiza* woman with a crown, called The Queen, and an indigenous woman riding naked on an animal, called The Indian. The cult of Maria Lionza involves a set of healing, divination, and initiation rituals, in which spirit possession plays a role.

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The cult's historical origins are unclear, but seem to stem from beliefs and ceremonies of pre-colonial indigenous female nature deities. These beliefs blended with Catholicism and African rituals. Although principally Venezuelan, the cult has spread to other countries and now has a significant internet presence, with believers using smart phones and social networks.

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In Barcelona, followers and other agents, such as spirits, increasingly use different media to communicate with each other. Some of these media are “traditional” (altars, photographs, prayers, spirit possession) while others are contemporary (websites, social networks, and smartphones). I realized that the best way to capture, understand and convey these media practices, which were reshaping the way the cult unfolds, was using research methods that *also* involve image, text, sound, and objects. For example, I designed a collaborative website and held an exhibition with the participation of other followers in Barcelona.

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The cult relies on agency, where any decision or action involves the active participation of many independent agents – including spirits, who intervene in how they are portrayed. This agency plays a crucial role in the processes of visual creativity.

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The film I made was about Maria Lionza's religious altars, which use objects from different sources, including Catholic saints, African deities, indigenous elements, and photos of deceased relatives. These objects represent a worldview; for example, images of Indians recall the resistance of “aboriginal peoples” killed by the Spaniards during the Conquest, whereas images of *malandros* (delinquents) point to the violence of police or of drug gangs in contemporary Venezuela. These images create material narratives that suggest historical discourses about oppression. Altar images are also used to transform reality through rituals.

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My project also included a participatory website enabling the exchange of material and knowledge about Maria Lionza, as well as the sharing of research findings. Believers increasingly take images during ceremonies, usually with smartphones. Artists and designers working on the reinvention of Maria Lionza's image display their creations online. The website provided a sense of the multiplicity of agents who take part in the constant process of reinvention of this religious practice.

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40 The website is also a device for ethnographic research. For example, one follower insisted on the “correct” practice of the cult, claiming that the “true” practice had been lost and that the introduction of “foreign” elements, such as the use of certain chemicals in ritual, is a betrayal of “traditional” forms of worship. The website was seen as a political platform through which he could spread his message.

45 Another follower posted an image of a *velación* (a collective purification ritual). These are difficult to witness, as they take place in private or remote places, and gaining access to them takes time and effort. This shows a change in the status of digital images in the cult: digital devices are increasingly used to record rituals and spirits often ask to be filmed when they descend. Many followers film and stream ceremonies online, making them available to followers abroad. Increased sharing of such images on social networks blurs the distinction between
50 public and private. This rise in new imaging practices and online sharing contrasts with a loss of presence of the cult in Venezuelan public space, where its practice is threatened by other religious movements and by state control.

¹ cult: the term used by followers and academics; it is not pejorative

² photo-elicitation: a visual research method that uses visual images to invite comments

Answer question 1 **and** question 2.

1. Define the term **agency** and describe how it can be understood and applied in the context of the passage. [4]
2. Analyse the ethnographic data presented in the passage using the concept of **materiality**. [6]

Answer **either** question 3 **or** question 4.

3. Compare and contrast the way in which the key concept of **change** or **culture** is evident in this passage with how it is evident in **one** other ethnographic example you have studied. [10]

OR

4. Compare and contrast the approaches to research adopted by the anthropologist in this passage to the approaches to research used by **one** other anthropologist you have studied. Make reference to concepts and ethnographic material in your answer. [10]

References:

Canals, Roger, 2018. Studying multi-modal religions: migration and mediation in the cult of Maria Lionza from *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol.34 Issue 2. <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/var.12169> © John Wiley and Sons.

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