

# Iyalorisha and Deacons, women and priesthood in the Caribbean

In Trinidad and Tobago, *Molly Ahye*, a 62 year old mother of three and grandmother of ten, was installed as the new high priestess of the *Opa Orisha (Shango)* of Trinidad and Tobago, at an historic ceremony on June 8. Her official title is *Iyalorisha*. Orisha is a Yoruba religious culture in which different divinities, or powers called Orisha, are worshipped. A researcher of African traditions, *Ahye* holds a Master of Arts degree in the performing arts from the American University, Washington, D.C. and is now a doctoral candidate at New York University, in dance in higher education.

Barbados' Anglican community embraced a new era in its 170 year old history with the ordination of the country's first female deacons on July 25 1994. Witnessed by a congregation of several hundred, *Sonia Hinds*, 34, and *Beverley Sealey*, 31, solemnly accepted the charge of deacons.

The investiture which took place during a two and a half hour ceremony at St. Michael's Cathedral, was attended by *Governor General Dame Nita Barrow* and other dignitaries. Close friends from Codrington College, England, where they both earned degrees in theology, *Sonia* and *Beverley* decided to seek ordination together.

Barbados voted for female ordination in 1980. Despite this, the Province of the West Indies, of which the island is a member, moved only a few years ago to sanction ordination to the diaconate but has fallen short of the two-thirds majority required for admission to the priesthood. Jamaica is the only other Caribbean country to ordain women as deacons.

Just three weeks earlier, the Church of England announced the loss of 139 clergymen since the ordination of women priests this year.

Source: CAFRA News, Vol. 8 No. 3, July-September 1994.

*pacific view*

## Pacific Women : Asserting Spirituality

by *Lisa Meo*

*Lisa Meo* is the Coordinator of Weavers a sub group of the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools (SPATS) which promotes theological education for women. Amongst other qualifications, *Lisa* has a Master's of Theology degree from the Pacific Theological College in Suva, Fiji. Her thesis focused on the role of the church in the plight of the exploited garment workers in Fiji, she is a member and leader in the Methodist church in Fiji. She wrote the following article for the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) Women's Consultation, held in Costa Rica in early December 1994, the meeting was a North/South Dialogue on violence and women's spirituality, we have excerpted some sections from her paper.

**'As Pacific women, we are at a birthing process and beginning to feel our way....'**

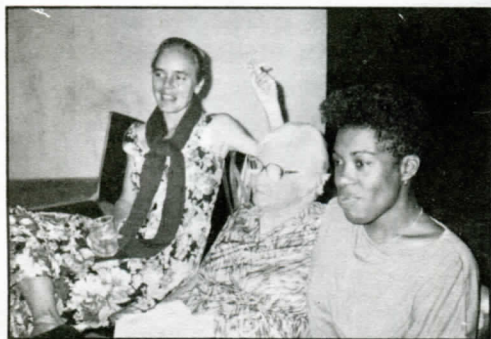
### Pacific Women's Theology

I want to begin this section with the following quotation:

*'All human beings are created in God's image and deserve mutual respect and protection. God intends that all human*

*beings enjoy a full life free from abuse and injustice. Sexual and physical harassment, abuse and exploitation are sinful, violating both persons and mutuality within community. They arise from unequal power relationships, usually based on age, gender, and/or position of authority (The United Church of Canada, 1993).*





Isis

The South Pacific Association of Theological Schools [SPATS] adopted the word 'Weavers' as the name of a new committee mandated to focus on promoting theological education for women. 'Weaving' is a Pacific women's activity but it also involves the whole community. Beginning with the selection of leaves of a plant and ending when the last strand is tied away. So the journey towards theological education for women is a weaving process.

Weavers, the Pacific women 'doing theology', attempts to enlighten both men and women to assert their equal responsibility and partnership as God's people, and to promote justice, peace, freedom and equality. Through numerous efforts of awareness training and empowerment, both women and men will recognise each other's gifts and partnership to enrich life in God's world. As Pacific women, we are at a birthing process and beginning to feel our way and survey the world around us [Kanongata'a, 1992].

Weavers are beginning to explore contextually relevant themes, women are encouraged to share their own stories, songs and dances in relation to their faith journey. Emerging themes arising through dialogue and discussion will be formulated and developed for further theological reflection. Other themes that need immediate discussion are; women's identity, women's place in ministry, women's spirituality, gospel and culture in relation to women and so on.

The option for Pacific women is to involve or engage in theological education because theological education will enlighten women to discover their own identity as free and gifted people of God. More importantly, it is the task of the church to promote all human beings, both male and female as equal in the sight of God, discrimination of any kind and violence against women are contrary to the Gospel message. As Christians, we are challenged to seek and find ways to bring about transformation in our different island societies where everyone will live in fairness and justice.

### Pacific Women's Spirituality

The manifestation of Pacific women's spirituality is evident in their conversations, stories, songs, dances, commitment, worship and other activities they perform, God's name can be heard or mentioned in normal conversations spontaneously. Normally, a prayer is a regular item at the beginning or at the end of any gathering. Christian spirituality interweaves with the cultures of the different islands in the Pacific [Tippet, 1975]. Sometimes, one cannot differentiate between culture and Christianity. People seem to think that to acknowledge God in a form of a short devotion or a prayer in any ceremonial or cultural occasion is cultural rather than Christian.

Basically, spirituality is defined as the awareness of God's presence in one's life or in our midst....Spirituality moves, shapes and frees oneself. Christian spirituality can be described as God working in and through all things that shape and move one to take action. It is a relationship between one's inner self and the Divine that transcends the person's life. The challenge for the Island churches is to search for relevant types of spiritual formation education that will bring about transformation, especially in attitudes towards women.

### The Church

The church is the conscience of the society, and today the society needs a conscience (Kevin Barr, 1990). Unfortunately, the church does not perform it's role well as the conscience of society. Instead, it perpetuates or condones some forms of violence against women. For example, in most churches in the Pacific, decision-making is still male dominated, women's gifts and potential tend to be ignored. Recently, a few theological schools accepted women students [but] women's ordination is a controversial issue to many of the Island churches. Churches should promote human dignity, equal treatment, justice, and unity. If the society treated women differently the church should make a difference by unconditionally accepting everyone with love.



The liberating power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as proclaimed by the early missionaries to many islands in the Pacific changed the status of women and elevated them to some degree. Women's education was encouraged by those early missionaries and most abusive practices against them were discouraged. Other oppressive institutions, as earlier mentioned, remain in existence as obstacles to women's endeavors in recognizing their human rights as children of the loving God. ♀

Bibliography : Barr, Kevin, *Poverty in Fiji*, Suva: Fiji Forum for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, 1990. Kanongata'a, Keiti Ann, 'A Pacific Women's Theology of Birthing and Liberation'. *Pacific Journal of Theology* 11, No. 7 (1992):3-11.