

Preface

After doing preliminary literature research for my first visit to Trinidad in the summer of 1985, I felt confident that I had a fairly good grasp of the beliefs and practices of the Orisha religion in Trinidad. My research topic was spirit possession; my focus was the possessing agents and the belief system of which they were a part. The first handful of shrines I visited seemed to be typical of those described in the literature: there were flags planted for African gods, and statuettes and iconography of Catholic saints in the *chapelle* (a small, enclosed sanctuary).

Then I met Aldwin Scott. His shrine contains the typical flags and "stools" (small shrines) for the *orisha* and saints, but it also displays flags and paraphernalia for Hindu deities (one of whom, I was told, was "on the African side"), an African "power" (not technically one of the *orisha*, which are primarily spirits derived from the religion of the Nigerian Yoruba), and personal spirits. His compound also holds a Spiritual Baptist church. I soon realized that this religion was much more complex than I had thought — and more complexity was to come.

During the last week of my first visit I interviewed Elder Jeffrey Biddeau at his shrine in northeastern Trinidad. When Jeffrey had to leave on business, he allowed me to remain behind and take photographs. As I walked around the compound, I found a small room attached to the back of his house (but not part of the family's living quarters) full of religious paraphernalia that I could not identify. When I asked Jeffrey's wife, Lydia, about the room, she advised me to wait and talk to Jeffrey about it. Later, when I did so, he introduced me to the Kabbalah, a European-derived, esoteric, and diabolical belief system.¹ The room was the focal point of Elder Biddeau's Kabbalistic worship.

By the time I left Trinidad after my first visit, my perception of the Orisha religion had changed dramatically. I saw that worshipers

had combined the religious elements of not just two but five traditions — African, Catholic, Hindu, Protestant, and Kabbalah — to form an “Afro-American religious complex,” a network of religious activities. When I returned to the States, I decided to conduct a thorough and extended examination of the Orisha religion.

Orisha is an old, established form of worship in Nigeria and its environs, which has been transplanted to the New World. As a religion, it stands on its own to meet the needs of its devotees. Some worshipers in Trinidad, the Orisha “purists,” minimize the integration of extraneous elements so common to New World African-derived religions, proclaiming with pride that this African religion is as sophisticated and complex as any other. Borrowing is nevertheless a primary and important characteristic. That is why, although my primary topic is the Orisha religion, I sometimes use the terms “Afro-American religious complex” and “Orisha religious system.” The Orisha religion is not technically a syncretism of all five religious traditions mentioned above; in fact, worshipers have syncretized only Catholic and, in a small number of cases, Hindu elements with the original Nigerian Yoruba beliefs and practices. Protestantism (here in the form of the Spiritual Baptist religion), the Kabbalah, and Hinduism are, for the most part, practiced side by side in a pluralistic fashion with the Orisha religion. It is significant, however, that the same individuals, most of whom are African, practice more than one and, in some cases, all of these various forms of religious worship.

The Orisha religion, arguably the most purely African cultural practice left on the island, is the one common thread that binds together all the worshipers of the Afro-American religious complex. A large majority of those who affiliate in some way with that complex participate in Orisha activities. I chose the Orisha religion as the focus of my inquiry because all the various aspects of the more general Afro-American religious complex, whether ideological, ritualistic, or demographic, are found in it. My primary objective was to explore the dynamics of this eclectic religion, to examine the form and structure of the interrelationship of the five traditions it encompasses.

I visited the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago four times between 1985 and 1992. In 1985 I made many of my initial contacts and formed several friendships. I returned to Trinidad in October 1988 and remained for one year. My final two visits took place during the summers of 1990 and 1992.

The research samples I refer to in the text were generally opportunistic, but I took special care to avoid obvious biases. I collected many of my data during weekly visits to Orisha feasts around the island. Given the large number of shrines on the island and a feast season usually limited to some thirty-five weeks, there was often more than one feast being held at the same time; I sometimes attended as many as four in the same week. The fact that each feast drew large numbers of worshipers for a continuous four-day period allowed me to conduct a number of interviews and to distribute questionnaires. I also recorded detailed information regarding the age of the shrine, the person in charge of it (the "shrine head"), the physical layout, and the spirits and powers enshrined there.

I attended various Spiritual Baptist ceremonies and Kabbalah banquets as well. In fact, I was able to observe all the basic rites and ceremonies of the Orisha religion, the Spiritual Baptist religion, and the Kabbalah, with the exception of the Kabbalah initiation. I was also present at a number of Hindu ceremonies, including prayers in both personal and public temples, Sunday services of the Kali-Mai sect, and public weddings.

Many of my interviews were conducted with individuals who did not want their identity disclosed. Others, especially those with whom I worked closely for an extended period of time, are identified with their permission. In discussing conflicts, spiritual warfare, and unusual goings-on at ceremonies, I do not provide the names of the individuals involved unless I was given permission to do so.

Some explanation of terminology may be helpful. I have chosen to drop the term "Shango cult," traditionally used to identify what I refer to as the "Orisha religion," because the worshipers themselves find it distasteful and disparaging. First, Shango is merely one (albeit an important one) of many *orisha*. Second, identifying the group as a cult implies that its system of beliefs and practices has not yet attained the stature of a full-blown religion. All the *orisha* worshipers I spoke with approved of this change in terminology. Consequently, when referring to the religion itself, I use the proper noun or proper adjective form, Orisha; when referring to the gods of the religion, I use *orisha* in italic lowercase letters. Similarly, I use "Spiritual Baptist" to refer to that religion and "Spiritual Baptists" to refer to its worshipers.

My use of "Afro-American" to describe or identify cultural practices that are at least somewhat African in derivation and form may

strike some readers as anachronistic, given the current popularity of and general support for the term "African American" (see Houk 1993b). The latter, however, is not an appropriate ethnic or racial designation outside the United States and, perhaps, Canada. As far as I know, the peoples of Brazil and the Caribbean, the core area of African-derived culture in the New World, do not use the term. Trinidadians refer to dark-complexioned people of African derivation as "Africans," and I continue that usage here.

It is certainly the right of dark-complexioned people of African descent in the United States to call themselves "African Americans" (a linguistic analogue to "Italian Americans," "Japanese Americans," "Mexican Americans," and so on), and indeed, in that context I do consistently use that term. But I believe there is still a place for the culturally descriptive "Afro-American." The term has a long and rich legacy in cultural anthropology, where it has been used to identify events, practices, attitudes, beliefs, and material culture that are African-derived to some degree, with no regard to the phenotypes of those in question. Thus, peoples of European and Asian extraction can (and do) embrace or practice some form of Afro-American culture; for example, thousands of relatively light-complexioned people are, like me, initiates and devotees of New World African-derived religions. On this model, I use the term "Afro-American" to identify cultural behavior or practices found anywhere in the New World that are at least somewhat African-derived.

This work comprises four parts. Part I (Chapters One, Two, and Three) provides background information to familiarize the reader with the history, religion, and peoples of Trinidad and with the research project itself. Part II (Chapters Four through Seven) concerns the five religious traditions that make up the Afro-American religious complex. Part III (Chapters Eight through Eleven) provides ethnographic information on Orisha rites and ceremonies, the Orisha pantheon, and the social organization of the religion. Part IV (Chapters Twelve through Fifteen) is explanatory and interpretive, addressing those processes that have combined to transform the religion through time.

ONE

Orisha Experiences

Seventy to eighty people crammed themselves into a small church in Barataria in northwest Trinidad on a warm and muggy June night, and another fifty or so stood outside peering in the doors and windows. Almost everyone was African, although a few East Indians could be seen scattered here and there in the crowd. Also in attendance was a white foreigner doing his damndest to conduct himself in a manner befitting an anthropologist. The crowd engulfed and carried me as it swayed back and forth to the spiritual rhythms of an ancient religion. The clapping, singing, joy, and enthusiasm were contagious, and I could hardly restrain myself from joining in. It was a little after 1:00 A.M., and the singing and drumming had brought down a few of the *orisha*¹ (primarily African-derived gods and spirits, although the term could technically refer to any ancestor) on the heads of some of the worshipers. Those so possessed, mere adumbrations of their usual selves, ran around the church embracing startled onlookers. Using a small cassette recorder and pen and paper, I had surreptitiously managed to preserve many of the sights and sounds around me, and I was beginning to feel comfortable in these somewhat bizarre surroundings.

Sitting sideways with my back against the right wall of the church near a window, I had a good view of the activities. I was struck particularly by a young, attractive, and well-dressed woman sitting in the row behind mine. Like a debutante at a cockfight, she seemed to be indulging her curiosity, showing just enough poise and civility to hide her natural inclination toward condescension and making an obvious effort at "distancing" herself from the activities around her.

The individuals on whom the *orisha* manifest themselves will often move from person to person, rubbing their faces, legs, or arms with olive oil. Such contact is considered to be a general gesture of good will

toward the worshiper, although sometimes the intent may be to heal a specific part of the body or to assuage pain. I have always dreaded these attentions, since they leave one uncomfortably wet and unctuous; nevertheless, I take my medicine politely out of respect for the *orisha*. The young woman behind me, however, did her best to avoid the touch of possessed worshipers as they made their rounds. When she was unable to avoid contact, she would quickly wipe off the oil, fix her hair, and adjust her dress.

I was soon distracted from her prim behavior by the possession of another worshiper, a woman about fifty years of age whose chaotic behavior seemed more in the style of Spiritual Baptist than Orisha possessions. (This particular Orisha ceremony was being held in a Spiritual Baptist church, which partially accounts for the Baptist form of some of the possessions; see Chapter Four.) For the first couple of hours, all the possessions had been fairly routine, or about as routine as such events could be. Suddenly, I heard a bloodcurdling scream and turned just in time to see the demure woman behind me spring out of her seat into the center aisle of the church. She began to writhe on the floor like a snake in the throes of death, tearing at her clothes, her eyes as big as silver dollars. She ripped the front of her dress, exposing herself for a few seconds before the female worshipers at her side could tend to her. She continued to scream and groan and roll around on the floor for what was only five to ten minutes but seemed like an eternity to me, as I stretched time in my attempt to incorporate this incredible experience into my personal belief system. No matter how I tried, however, I could not reconcile the scholarly or "scientific" explanations of ritual dissociation with what I was witnessing. Certain aspects of spirit possession are, perhaps, simply ineffable and must be personally experienced before they can be grasped.

The *orisha* eventually "settled" on the young woman's head, and she began the ritualistic dance of Osain (or Osanyin), the man of the bush whose domain is the healing herbs, roots, and leaves of the forest. Other *orisha* would come and go throughout the night, but the episode involving the young woman remained in my memory.

The stocky "slayer" walked past me in a very businesslike manner holding the cutlass he would use to dispatch the various animals to be offered to the *orisha*. Worshipers were parading goats and chickens

inside the *palais* (a covered but open-sided rectangular structure) where drums were being beaten and songs sung for the *orisha* who would receive the sacrificial offerings on this night. The presence of the tightly packed crowd, the strong odor of the goats, and the nearly deafening sound of drums, clapping, and singing combined to make me feel light-headed and ebullient.

First one, then two *orisha* mounted their "horses" (the term used for those of whom the spirits take possession) as the sacrificial animals were ritualistically cleansed in an herbal bath. It was as if the spirits had come to see that the worshipers were carrying out the work of the gods to their satisfaction. The procession moved to the shrine of Papa Ogun (the Yoruba god of war and metal), where a goat was readied for the sacrifice. Tethered on a four-foot rope, the animal was allowed to wander a bit until it moved into a position to the slayer's liking; then he swung the cutlass and took off its head with one powerful stroke. The carcass was held in such a way as to direct the flow of blood from the stub of the neck onto Ogun's shrine. The slayer placed the goat's head, eyes and ears still twitching, on a white plate, which was paraded around the shrine atop a worshiper's head. An *orisha* (probably Ogun) suddenly seized a woman standing near Ogun's shrine and threw her down in the blood and remains of the dead animal. She screamed and fought as if caught by an invisible web. Finally, she stood and danced the mythology that had been danced a million times before, her face wearing an expression that seemed to be devoid of humanity, her clothes dripping with the blood of earth, offered to a spirit of heaven.

I arrived at the shrine compound to find that the man in charge was still "down the road." The woman of the house, in typical "Trini" fashion, fixed me a plate of food and a cool glass of juice. After an hour or so of waiting I was getting restless, so I began to poke around the compound on my own; the woman did not seem to mind. I first walked up to the *perogun* (an open-air, three-sided structure inside which a number of *orisha* are enshrined) to see the small shrines ("stools") and the colorful flags that marked them. Arranged around the bases of the flagstaffs were hollowed-out turtle shells, goat horns, feathers from a variety of fowl, candles, goblets of water, rum bottles, olive oil, and various other items. This area was obviously a focal point of worship. A number of Hindu flags and paraphernalia were located just past the

perogun. Although I had been in Trinidad only a few weeks, I could easily identify the symbols and materials of Hinduism, since they are found all over the island, but I was puzzled at their presence in an African shrine.

Behind the house where the shrine head and his wife lived was a church. Inside, there were pews and an altar on which were laid Bibles, rosaries, and hymnals. At first glance it looked like a hundred churches I had seen in the States. As I walked around inside, however, I noticed paraphernalia and symbols that seemed out of place for a Christian church. For example, there were mysterious chalk drawings in the four corners and on the left and right walls; a large doubleheaded axe — the traditional symbol for Shango, the Yoruba god of fire, thunder, and lightning — was propped up against a shepherd's crook in the front right corner behind the altar; turtle shells like those found outside in the *perogun* were lying on the ground to the left of the altar; and posters of Hindu deities joined the lithographs of saints adorning the walls on all sides.

Outside, toward the back of the compound, I stumbled upon a separate one-room structure full of ornate paraphernalia and surrounded by esoteric "seals" on the walls and floor. I had done some reading on the magical arts of the Middle Ages, and much of what I saw before me seemed to be drawn from that tradition. The whole area had a sort of diabolical flavor, as if dedicated to something spiritually powerful yet potentially harmful.

I left the mysterious little room, said goodbye to the woman (her husband had not returned), and made my way back to my quarters. My haphazard tour of the shrine compound had left me confused. I considered myself reasonably well read in the African-derived religions of the New World, especially those of Trinidad, but I was not prepared for the religious complexity that I had just observed. There seemed to be at least five religious traditions present in some form in the compound. The religions of Old World and New, of good and evil, of Europeans, Africans, and East Indians had been somehow blended to form what had to be one of the world's most complex religions.

During my first visit to Trinidad in the summer of 1985 I observed a number of "textbook" possessions, in which dissociation commenced rather unceremoniously and the "horses" danced out the ritualized

routines associated with the more prominent *orisha*. On the basis of these experiences, it was easy for me to attribute the religious claims of the insiders to their metaphysical and generally transcendent biases. Soon, however, my own biases were seriously challenged. In some of the wilder and seemingly uncontrollable possessions I witnessed, the worshipers appeared to leave behind their own complex of attitudes, phobias, and emotions to become someone (or something?) entirely different. In some instances their physical motions transcended the everyday repertoire of human behavior. The highly animated and apparently genuine behavior of the possessed worshipers I observed cast doubt on many of the standard biochemical, psychological, and sociopolitical explanations of spirit possession. In short, the reality far surpassed the various explanations of possession with which I was familiar. The range of my personal experiences and the resulting ideology I had developed over time had not sufficiently prepared me for such an intense expression of culture-specific ideology.

According to George Devereux's notion of "countertransference" (1967, 41-46), when an individual comes into contact with an event or activity that falls outside the range of experiences constituting his or her personal consciousness (the realm of the Freudian ego), anxiety results. The traumatic event serves to trigger repressed notions and desires. The resultant anxiety level can be low when an individual encounters an event that falls just outside the boundaries of what he or she considers acceptable cultural behavior, or it can be high if the event activates deeply repressed experiences. In my case, a belief system that I had never considered to be anything more than mythology and cultural metaphor was confirming itself before my eyes. My materialistic ideology was being challenged empirically — a most serious challenge, given the nature of my personal convictions.

I had always looked at possession as a ritually sanctioned mechanism whereby individuals may express hidden desires, draw attention to themselves for whatever reason, or climb the socioreligious ladder by claiming to be a receptacle for the gods; my mind-set was admittedly positivistic and materialistic. Even though I had always championed sensitivity to the beliefs of others, I had never considered that spirit possession could substantiate religious claims regarding gods, spirits, and demons. But the intensity of the behavior and the dramatic and radical personality shifts I was observing seemed, disconcertingly, to confirm the reality of the possession; the behavior was quite obviously

not feigned. And now, ten years later, after witnessing hundreds of ritual possessions, I find the occurrence as enigmatic as ever. Though I am still inclined to invoke Occam's razor to explain paranormal phenomena by first exhausting known or natural mechanisms, my experiences in Trinidad have caused me to be more respectful of the sentiments of the worshipers themselves.

The people of Trinidad are generally hospitable and gregarious; virtually everywhere I went I was greeted with a plate of food or a drink of rum or juice. But, not surprisingly, the *orisha* worshipers were suspicious of me and my work, at least initially. Their religion suffered during colonial times from repressive laws that prohibited the practice of Afro-American religion; today, many members of an unsympathetic public, both African and Indian, consider *orisha* worship to be demonic or primitive. Eventually, however, as I became a fixture at feasts and various other ceremonies, I established contacts and made friends all over the island.

During my first visit the Smith family, who lived in the southern part of the island, was kind enough to provide me with lodging. Because I was having trouble establishing contacts in the Orisha religion, Mrs. Smith took me to meet an old friend, Aldwin Scott, who was one of the island's most prominent Orisha *mongba* (priests) and Spiritual Baptist leaders.² Even before she had finished the introduction, however, Leader Scott, as he is popularly known, launched into a harangue against "arrogant" anthropologists and a particular French scholar who had come to Trinidad to disparage and belittle the "Shango cult."³ Both Mrs. Smith and I were ill at ease and embarrassed, and eventually she left me alone with him, as I had asked her to do before we arrived.

When Leader Scott finally let me get a few words in, I apologized for showing up without an appointment, explained that I knew nothing of the Frenchman or any other researchers, and asked for a few minutes of his time. Much to my relief, once the topic came around to his religion, he and his wife, Mother Joan, invited me inside to continue our discussion. This was the most auspicious meeting I had during my early fieldwork, for this renowned Orisha priest and Spiritual Baptist leader and his wife became close friends and patient sources of much of the information I collected in Trinidad during my four stays.

Another friend is Jeffrey Biddeau, whom I met at a feast in Claxton

Bay, on the west coast of the island, in June 1985. Elder Biddeau is very knowledgeable in the affairs of the Orisha religion and is regarded as one of its ranking elders in Trinidad. He is also strong-minded and has an immense amount of personal pride, finding it difficult to compromise. The religion has no written liturgy, no official priesthood, and a variable complex of beliefs and practices drawn from a number of traditions. Many of its heads and elders exploit that eclecticism to their advantage and are willing to change or compromise their personal ideology to accommodate any number of sentiments. Elder Biddeau, however, was initiated into the Orisha priesthood in Nigeria and practices one of the purest forms of *orisha* worship on the island. He insists on the correctness of his own tenets and demands the respect due him as a ranking elder.

Our relationship deteriorated during my year-long stay in 1988–89. During his feast in September 1989, annoyed with his negative assessment of my behavior in the *palais*, I walked out of his compound, an action that I have regretted ever since. During my last visit to Trinidad in the summer of 1992, however, I traveled out to visit Elder Biddeau, and we settled our differences. I am happy to say that he is assisting in my research again, and we remain friends.

It is not uncommon for anthropologists in the field to develop close friendships with their contacts, as I did with Aaron Jones and his wife Rhonda. Over a five-year period I watched Aaron move from a small Port of Spain tenement to a full-blown Orisha compound. He is now an accomplished priest with a number of followers.

I first met Aaron in Woodford Square in Port of Spain on November 29, 1988, where he was one of the major disputants in an informal public debate. The nature of the working and personal relationship that Aaron and I gradually developed was greatly influenced by that first meeting. Discussions at the “University of Woodford Square,” as it is called, are taken seriously; participants include some of the most famous Trini scholars and personalities—for example, historian and former prime minister Eric Williams. Although the debates are informal, they are guided by a number of unspoken rules for both the audience and the speakers. The two primary disputants and, at times, a moderator carry on their discussion in the “court,” surrounded by a small crowd. Only the two debaters are allowed to speak; if they begin to talk over each other, the moderator will attempt to restore order. Participation from persons outside the “court” is discouraged, and

any such comments — however relevant — are usually shouted down by others. Also, participants must never strike or physically threaten a fellow debater, must not use foul or abusive language, and must avoid ad hominem tactics. In sum, debaters must generally conduct themselves in a dignified manner. On one occasion, when a disputant farted loudly and seemingly without embarrassment, although the audience responded with laughter and caustic remarks, one listener chastised him for showing so little respect for the "court."

The form and structure of public disputation in Woodford Square is, in many ways, a microcosm of public encounters in Trinidad. Trinians usually avoid public displays of anger; they are generally stoic and reticent even when taken advantage of. For example, one hot morning I waited in a long line for about an hour for a bus out of Port of Spain. Some of those in the line were traveling with small children, and many were carrying bags and boxes of goods purchased in town. The press of the crowd and the heat made the queue uncomfortable, and when the bus finally pulled into the loading gate, a number of people from the end of the line pushed forward to board. Although many of the passengers at the front of the line were understandably annoyed, and a few were cursing under their breath, no one complained or confronted those breaking the queue. I, on the other hand, was angry at having lost my seat on the bus, and I let the guilty parties know it. Much to my chagrin, the only verbal support I got from the other passengers came from one elderly gentleman who excused my behavior by saying that I was a foreigner and that the people of Europe and America, being "more civilized," were not accustomed to such unruliness.

Experiences like this one help explain the form and structure of the Woodford Square discussions. Any Trini who is willing to argue publicly for a particular point of view is taking a risk; ordinarily, only vagrants, the inebriated, or the otherwise socially marginal would transgress the important social rule that frowns on doing so. Heated discussions and confrontation, including those in Woodford Square, constitute a violation of the norm. But in Woodford Square the "violators" are protected by a code of behavior that permits free and lively discussion in which they can assert themselves with impunity. The highly structured and rule-governed form of these debates allow the individual to vent his anger (the disputants are almost exclusively male) or state his opinions, whatever they may be, on a variety of topics without fear of social disapprobation.

At any rate, one morning I arrived at the square to find a somewhat overbearing and distinguished-looking man engaged in a debate with a feisty Rastafarian — Aaron. The central topic was the existence and nature of God. Both were making good points (not really hard to do, considering the indeterminate nature of the subject matter), but Aaron's opponent seemed to be gaining favor with the audience for reasons that had more to do with his style and delivery, I suspect, than with the substance of what he was saying. I had already decided that I did not like the arrogant philosopher's condescending tone and his attempt to bully Aaron and the audience into agreeing with him, so at one point I could not resist the temptation to jump into the fray. Being a Woodford Square neophyte and having little knowledge of proper debate decorum, I was immediately shouted down by those around me. Aaron, however, seemed to respect the fact that I had been willing to violate important behavioral norms to make what he thought was a good point. In fact, I eventually worked my way into the "court" and was able to hold my own against the imperious philosopher, much to Aaron's delight.

It took me a while to convince Aaron of my sincerity and my desire to learn about the Orisha religion, but he eventually agreed to work with me. His assistance was especially helpful in my search for shrine houses throughout Trinidad, a large island by Caribbean standards.

Relationships with most of my contacts began simply as an exchange of money, goods, or services for information and assistance. Eventually, however, as I became more involved in the religion, the line separating me and my contacts became blurred. My interest in Orisha and my eagerness to participate in the various rituals and ceremonies no doubt facilitated my assimilation into the group. One particular instance comes to mind.

In November 1988 I attended a feast in the sparsely populated northeastern part of the island near the town of Sangre Grande. The shrine head had only recently moved there from the extreme southwest, and this fact, as well as the area's meager population, probably contributed to the small turnout of about ten worshipers. Normally, a small attendance is not a problem as long as there is someone to direct the feast, three people to play the drums (one of whom can be the person directing the feast), and enough others to support the singing

and praying and to handle such chores as sacrificing, preparing, and cooking animals, tending to visitors, and cleaning worship areas. On this particular night, Michael Corridan, a young *mongba*, directed the feast and played the *bemba*, the lead or middle-range drum; and a male member of the shrine played the *congo*, the lower-range or "bass" drum. But no one could be found to play the upper-range drum, the *oumalay* (three drummers are not absolutely necessary, but such an arrangement is deeply traditional and customary). A few of the worshipers tried, but they were unable to effect the quick and steady rhythm that the Orisha songs call for. During the first "intermission" (everyone takes a break from time to time, since a typical feast night lasts from 10:00 P.M. to about 6:00 A.M.), as Michael continued to play his drum, I picked up the *oumalay* and began to play along with him. His response was favorable, and he asked me to play the rest of the night. I gradually became quite proficient with the small drum, and Michael, Aaron, and I became a team of sorts as the primary drummers at two ceremonies before I left in 1989.

It was undergoing initiation, perhaps more than any other action on my part, that led to my eventual acceptance by the group. Elder Biddeau encouraged me to affiliate formally with the Orisha religion early in 1988. I was against the idea initially; I felt that my agnosticism would prevent me from according the ceremony the dignity that it deserved. In time, however, as I became more active in the daily affairs of the religion and as my circle of friends continued to grow, I got used to the idea. Finally I sat down with Leader Scott and Mother Joan and told them of my apprehensions; they already knew about my skepticism, but they were also aware that I had a great deal of respect for them and the Orisha religion, and advised me to go through with the ceremony. After further discussions with Elder Biddeau and Henry White, a close friend and accomplished *mongba* and Kabbalah practitioner with whom I was working at the time, I agreed.

My particular initiation was to involve both the baptismal ceremony of the Spiritual Baptist religion and the head washing and incising of the Orisha religion. It was important to me that Leader Scott, Elder Biddeau, and Henry all be involved in one way or another. We decided that Leader Scott would direct the water baptism at his shrine, and Elder Biddeau would conduct the head washing and incising at his

shrine, with Henry assisting in both locations. Unfortunately, some time before my initiation, while attending Elder Biddeau's Kabbalah banquet, Henry conducted himself in a way that Elder Biddeau found inappropriate, and the two had a temporary parting of ways. As a result, Henry decided not to assist at my head washing and incising rites, and as it turned out, a prior engagement prevented his attendance at my baptism as well.

The baptism began on Saturday evening, May 27, 1989, and lasted about ten hours. The ceremony consisted of two basic parts: praying, singing, and praising in the church; and immersion in the sea. I was "banded" during the first part. ("Banding" involves wrapping the entire head with various colored cloths upon which special "seals" or religious symbols have been drawn. This procedure generally renders the initiate totally blind, but depending on who does the banding and how securely the cloths are fastened, the difference between light and dark may be perceptible.) The ceremony began at 8:00 P.M. By 3:00 A.M. or so I was exhausted and irritable, mostly from lack of sleep but also from other factors: I was made to kneel on the dirt floor while the others were praying, and from time to time I was spun around. (This is done to facilitate possession or to induce an altered state of consciousness.) Also, during the entire ceremony inside the church, I was encouraged to move my arms and, when not kneeling, my legs as if marching. (This movement is considered to be symbolic of the initiate's march toward a higher state of spiritual enlightenment.)

Sometime around 4:00 A.M. I had what could loosely be called visions. These were more like daydreaming and imaginal thought (*à la* the "mind's eye") than hallucinations; nevertheless, I was greatly impressed by the intensity of the experience. Although I am not at liberty to divulge the content of my visions, given the sacred context in which they occurred, their underlying theme involved my drawing closer to the other worshipers spiritually as well as on the level of everyday life. I was immersed in the sea later that morning and then returned to the church, where the ceremony was brought to a close. A final brief ritual that concluded the baptismal rites took place on the following Wednesday.

The second part of my initiation, the head washing and incising, occurred one week later. These rites were more trying and difficult for several reasons. Before they took place I underwent two and a half days of semi-fasting (I was given only crackers, tea, and rice) and semi-

isolation (Elder Biddeau would stop by from time to time to instruct me on various aspects of the religion), beginning the night of Sunday, June 4, 1989. I spent most of this time lying on the dirt floor in the *chappelle* (generally a small enclosed sanctuary, although Elder Biddeau's *chappelle* was much larger than the norm). Since my head was banded, my only visual sensation was a small amount of light during the day-time hours. Early in the morning of the third day, Wednesday, my banding cloths were removed, prayers were said, drums were beaten, and songs were sung for Ogun, my patron *orisha*. A cock was sacrificed over my head to Ogun at about 7:00 A.M.

My head was washed and incised a few hours later. The incising of the top of the head and the forehead is, perhaps, the most significant initiation rite. Using a razor blade, Elder Biddeau made small incisions, into which he then rubbed various oils and herbs. The washing and incising signify the "seating of the head" for a particular *orisha*, in my case Ogun. I could now, at least theoretically, be possessed by Ogun. Although one need not necessarily go through the initiation ceremony in order to be possessed, anyone who wants to be a *bounsis* (a formal "horse" or medium) for a particular *orisha* is expected to undergo the washing and incising rites.

I had another "vision" that morning, this one much stronger. One of my close friends, Carli Rawlins, possessed by Ogun at the time, instructed me to drink a medicinal liquid from Shakpana's calabash (Photo 1). I could not determine its exact ingredients, but they seemed to include rum and various legumes. (The concoction is purported to be medicinally potent and is administered as a cure for a number of maladies.) By this time, I was exhausted from lack of rest and nauseated after ingesting olive oil, rum, raw obi seeds (obtained from the kola tree), and other things, and I really did not want to drink from the calabash. Nonetheless, I took it. As I peered down into the murky and malodorous liquid, I had an amazing and frightening vision (which, again, I cannot disclose) which seemed as real as the ground beneath my bare feet. A few hours later, after the ceremony was brought to a close, I discussed my vision with the others who were present. All denied observing what I had seen, but the worshipers did not doubt my sincerity or deny the veracity of my claims. Such "spiritual seeing," they explained, was a personal and unique occurrence experienced by an individual in an elevated state of spirituality. Apparently what had seemed so real, so empirical from my point of view, had actually taken

place not on the plane of physical reality but rather on some other plane. In other words, the event actually did occur, but its nature was highly existential or individual-specific.

Although I cannot discuss the details of my experience, I can say that the vision was highly specific in Orisha terms; that is, the content was symbolically significant in the context of worship in the Afro-American religious complex in Trinidad. The occurrence of such a vision was startling enough, but even more astonishing, at least in my mind, was the fact that the "language" or cultural syntax, so to speak, was not my own. During this exercise in cultural assimilation I had glimpsed ever so briefly the spiritual world of my contacts. My initiation into the Orisha religion served to bridge not only the social gap between my world and theirs but the conceptual gap as well. More important, the whole experience legitimized, in my eyes, the religious life of my contacts; their movements, activities, and attitudes suddenly became imbued with a substance and an honesty that I had ignored or overlooked.

As a cultural anthropologist, I had always been fascinated by indigenous and culture-specific accounts of gods, demons, shamanistic forays into the spirit world, "voodoo death," spirit possession, and the like. But try as I might, I could not overcome my gut feeling that these phenomena were nothing more than exotic and curious bits of local lore. I was comfortable with a scientific mind-set that sought validation and substantiation of claims and theories — whether religious, social, scientific, or whatever — by means of demographic data, analyses of social structure, historical documentation, environmental factors, and so on. Before my experience with the calabash, I had never considered factoring ostensibly subjective and personal data into the mix, but I do now.

I think it important to point out that my work remains empirically sound and adheres to the highest standards of sober, informed, and responsible social science research; I have by no means jumped headlong into the abyss of postmodernistic nihilism. In fact, I still believe that claims and theories can be sufficiently evaluated by assessing their "fit" to local demographic, historical, and environmental parameters. Now, however, I am willing to expand my list of relevant parameters to include factors that are important to the insiders themselves: for example, the status of their relationship with their gods, and existential concerns such as religious doubt and apprehension regarding the afterlife.

As a discipline, cultural anthropology's foremost contribution to scholarship has been its apparent success in translating local knowledge and behavior into a form that is palatable to a wider audience. Bolstered by my encounter with the calabash, I have ventured into pockets of Trinidadian culture I once viewed as being too esoteric or personal to deal with, thus greatly enlarging the purview of my research. Whether or not I have successfully translated the Afro-American religious culture of Trinidad into more general, culture-universal terms, I can say with some confidence that my broader and more intimate understanding of the religious life of my contacts has greatly decreased the cultural gap that separated us and, not surprisingly, has made my work more meaningful to the Spiritual Baptists and *orisha* worshipers themselves.

Just before I left Trinidad in September 1989, Aaron described to me the physical appearance of various *orisha* and Kabbalah entities (spirits). He explained that he had seen these gods and spirits at different religious functions around the island and that they appeared to him to be as real as anyone else there. In light of my own experiences, rather than simply listening politely to his descriptions as I might have done at one time, I took copious notes and asked him to go on. Such data are acutely subjective, it is true, but the information was related to me by a source I consider reliable and is on some level a genuine part of Trini religious life.

The subjective nature of visions and the like is particularly problematic to anthropology, a discipline that generally focuses on "culture" and "society," two concepts that imply collectivity, sharing, and some degree of conformity. An in-depth discussion of this problem would take us far beyond the scope of this book, since my primary intent here is to focus on the Orisha experience from a variety of perspectives. Nevertheless, I had to address the issue at least in a functional and pragmatic way before I could formulate a research methodology.