

Introduction



Religion is one of the most important elements of Caribbean culture that links Afro-Caribbean people to their African past. Scattered over the three-thousand-mile-long rainbow-shaped archipelago and nestled near the American mainland bordering the beautiful Caribbean Sea are living spiritual memories and traditions of the African diaspora. A family of religions (big and small, long-standing and recently arrived, defunct and vigorous, ancestral and spiritual) and their peoples dot the unique Caribbean map. J. Lorand Matory puts it succinctly: “The Atlantic perimeter hosts a range of groups profoundly influenced by western African conceptions of personhood and of the divine. Their religions include Candomble, Umbanda, Xango, and Batique in Brazil, as well as Vodou in Haiti and ‘Santeria,’ or Ocha, and Palo Mayombe in Cuba.”¹ These diverse religious traditions share several commonalities: They show strong African connections and harbor African cultural memory; they are religions of the people, by and for the people; they are nontraditional and creole faiths shaped by cultures; they are an integral part of the Caribbean colonial legacy; and they continue to generate international interest and inspire a huge body of literature worthy of academic study.

The robust African religious traditions in the region have muted the voice of academic skeptics who have questioned the ability to prove for certain that African religions survived oppressive conditions of colonialism in the Americas. “A persistent white view had been that Africa had little particular culture to begin with, and that the slaves had lost touch with that as well.”² The provocative Frazier-Herskovits debate, which has raged since the early 1940s, about how much of African religion and culture survived among African Americans epitomizes the ripening of the controversy that is almost a century old. Most scholars

who have participated in the debate agree that the Caribbean is a clear exception to the “defunct religions” thesis, providing undeniable evidence of the vitality of African religions and cultures³ in peoples’ lives. Well documented⁴ is the fact that, during colonialism and slavery, Africans brought to the Americas preserved cultures that represented many ethnic groups and affiliations. The numerical strength of some of these groups quite naturally exerted greater influence on African cultures in the diaspora than others. Originating mainly from West Central Africa, these groups owe their existence in the region to the interaction among several historical, economic, and political forces that have influenced and shaped Caribbean peoples.

A renewed interest in Afro-Caribbean religions helps form part of a wider cultural and academic phenomenon. The last half century ignited a global explosion of religious-cultural exchange and movements that continue to wrest attention from diverse academic disciplines, fields, and institutions. As part of this global phenomenon, a plethora of new religious groups has emerged, tiny sects have mushroomed into larger movements, religious traditions are being invented and reinvented, and various aspects of faiths are being borrowed and reconfigured into new ones.⁵ Indeed, cultural trends have brought the study of nontraditional and marginal religions and cultures of the Americas to Main Street. The rise of the Ogun sect in the United States as a new movement, for example, parallels the Orisha phenomenon in the Caribbean region and interest in the Yoruba religion in general. The popular Ifa divination system—common among the Yoruba, Fon Ewe (Dahomey), Ebo, Igbo, and other peoples of West Africa—is not only alive in Cuba, Brazil, and Trinidad,⁶ it is an academic and cultural pursuit both inside and outside the region.

Reason, Scope, and Method

Since the 1930s, scholars in different fields of the humanities have published important works providing a rich study of the Afro-Caribbean religious culture. So why another book? The modern interest in the Caribbean, the wealth of literary works that Caribbean studies generate, the fact that in the last few decades Afro-Caribbean culture has been and continues to be popularized in film, the media, pop music, and other areas of the arts, make this book as exciting as it can be valuable. I seek to complement the ethnographic studies of well-known researchers of the different religions.⁷ My interest in writing this monograph is both personal and academic. I am a child of the Caribbean seeking new ways to tell the story of my creole peoples and their religious cultures in the region. Born five generations removed (over one hundred years) from my Nigerian Yoruba ancestry, my umbilical chord was cut in Grenada where my great, great grandfather landed as an indentured worker in the late 1840s (Grandpa was born in 1884). My study of Caribbean history and politics at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad, stimulated my interest in this field. I made frequent visits to Haiti, Puerto Rico, and the eastern Caribbean states, and I studied,

worked, and got married in Jamaica after college. Academic pursuits have given me a distaste for accepted popular portraits of African peoples' cultures, one that encouraged me to echo another voice on Caribbean religions.

This book also originated from a practical concern: providing a classroom-friendly book that introduces students to all the African-derived religions of the Caribbean under one cover. I have taught Caribbean religions since 1990 but, up to when I began research on this book in 2000, no one book treated all of the religions. Apart from Simpson's *Black Religions in the New World* (1978), most books on this subject offer a study of aspects of one or a few Caribbean religions. For example, in 1980 Brian Gates edited *Afro-Caribbean Religions*, which offers only a few topical essays. Guyanese historian Dale Bisnauth's *A History of Religions in the Caribbean* (1989) provides a survey of Hinduism, Islam, and Roman Catholic Christianity in the region, with only a cursory chapter on "Africanism" in the Caribbean. Many books (too numerous to mention here) focus on one religion⁸ and several recent monographs treat some Afro-Caribbean religions⁹ in ways I found invaluable to this study. My book is an extension of the vision of these works, with a trajectory treating all Afro-Caribbean religions under one cover.

Historically, Afro-Caribbean religions were treated as backward pagan practices on the margins of Caribbean society, more appropriate for study in African folk culture than in the history of religions. I contend, however, that African cultural and religious expressions among Caribbean peoples must be treated as a field of study *sui generis*—after its unique kind, and with its own set of categories. Caribbean studies runs amok if they assume, however tacitly, that these religions should not be studied on their own terms.¹⁰ As a *religionsgeschichte* (history of religions), my book is largely descriptive; it investigates African-based religions within their historical, social, cultural, and political settings. I hold the view that Afro-Caribbean religions developed from known African Traditional Religions (ATRs) to their present creole form, but I do not advocate the theory that the religions evolved from animism to their modern state.¹¹ I am not committed to a functional analysis of religion, as are trained social scientists. Where I parallel Melville Herskovits, Roger Bastide, George Simpson, Rene Rebeiro, and others, I do so to show how the cogwheels of the African religions meshed so that they could survive and flourish in a colonial Caribbean context. As an insider to the culture, I study Afro-Caribbean religions with empathy for our peoples' myths, rituals, and traditions. At the same time, the focus and content of this book are not Afrocentric in methodology; I do not attempt to analyze the data through African lenses or with a predetermined African point of view. While this book is, of necessity, critical of the European legacy in the Caribbean and its attempted destruction of African spirituality, the idea that African peoples and cultures are primary, superior, or more important than other ethnic groups in the study of religions and cultures does not orient my thinking.

I also do not promise an exhaustive study that offers everything one wants know about Caribbean religions and cultures. The label "Afro-Caribbean"

imposes ethnographic restrictions on the scope of the book, which is not defined exclusively by regional geography. The Caribbean Sea washes many shores not always regarded as part of the archipelago—for example, Brazil, Guyana, Surinam, Venezuela, Panama, and Belize. Also, Caribbean history, economics, culture, and religion have been tied to countries on the mainland of South and Central America almost as strongly as the region is linked by soccer and cricket. Mainland Guyana and Suriname function as Caribbean islands¹² but, because of linguistic and cultural ties to Europe, Martinique and Guadeloupe—located in the center of the island chain—have had more communication, commerce, and cultural exchange with France than with their Caribbean neighbors. Brazil, on the other hand, lies outside of the archipelago, but since the 1500s has had stronger economic, religious, and cultural ties to the rest of the Caribbean islands than the two French Islands.

My less-than-logical juggling act that includes Brazil in this study is based partly on the fact that it has the largest African population in the world outside of Africa, and also because of its strategic ties to the Caribbean historically, culturally, and economically. As religion historian Rachel Harding says, “In the *engenhos* of the Brazilian northeast captaincies, a model of sugar production and plantation agriculture was established and perfected that by the mid seventeenth century would be adopted throughout the colonial island economies of the Caribbean, at great human cost to Africa and great financial reward to Europe.”¹³ Many Africans were rerouted and distributed to the Caribbean after their initial “breaking in” in Brazil. Others were smuggled in through Bahia after 1807, when Britain began policing the Caribbean to stop the African trade in human cargo. In modern times, Caribbean peoples continue to forge strong cultural bonds with Brazil. Trinidad’s Carnival inspired groups that emerged from the Candomble houses in the early 1970s; and Afro-Jamaican culture has such a noticeable presence in Brazil through Rastafari and reggae music that Pelourinho and Bahia are referred to colloquially as “the second Jamaica.”¹⁴ More important is the fact that African creole religions have a uniquely strong presence in Brazil; African religions in the region of Bahia are much stronger than in many Caribbean islands.

Creole Phenomena

The vast majority of Caribbean peoples are hyphenated; our forebears are foreigners and their identity is the product of their prolonged encounter with other cultures. In the Caribbean, this involved an interfacing of Africans, Europeans, East Indians, Chinese,¹⁵ Middle Easterners, and native peoples. We are creole because we are the product of “a process of ‘this and that *too*’ in the creation of new forms through creative recombination of the old.”¹⁶ Our hyphenated religions are Afro-Caribbean because after they exited their homeland Africa, they too became creole; like a baby severed from its mother’s placenta and fed new foods in its new environs, the religions outgrew their exit point and “could not

go home again.” In colonial times, European pedigree and power separated the white rulers from the black slaves, but today our peoples are separated by geography, language, economics, politics, and religion; ours is a stratified society of the small, ruling, educated class and the less-educated poor masses, with shades of gray in between. Haitians seized their independence from France, in a bloodbath, at the end of the 1700s, but in British territories the granting of universal adult suffrage came about 150 years later, allowing the people to vote, own property, and seek upward mobility. As a result, a growing black, educated, middle class labeled “Afro-Saxon,” whose education or training has elevated them in society, gives leadership to fledgling former British colonies and acts as a buffer between the haves and the have nots, thus lessening the possibility for Haitian-type revolts by the suffering and disenchanting poor masses.

Occasionally, as in the case of Fidel Castro’s Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the Grenada Revolution of 1979 (that my late contemporary and countryman Maurice Bishop led), corruption in the Caribbean drives the masses or the proletariat to lead violent overthrows of greedy and decrepit dictators, some of whom acted as pawns of the U.S. government while stashing away millions of the poor’s taxpayers dollars in their personal accounts in foreign banks. Extremely high unemployment and lack of advancement opportunities for the young, aspiring, educated class contribute to a large northern migration tradition and what is called the Caribbean brain drain, which I represent. As a result of this migration phenomenon, Afro-Caribbean religions and cultures have enriched the cultures of the United States, Canada, and Europe. In return, we Caribbean-Americans provide a steady and vital stream of financial support to our extended families and, thereby, help keep some fragile Caribbean economies from total collapse.

Outside of the Caribbean, ideas and stereotypes of the region, our people, and their religion run amok. When Europeans began writing about our ancestors in the 1700s, most of their works reflected anti-African bias, ignorance of the nature and meaning of African beliefs and practices, and intolerance of non-Christian and creole-Christian ways of being religious. For this reason, Joseph Murphy cautions readers who evaluate European accounts of Afro-Caribbean religions not to forget that these religions were not only a source of disruption among the workers of European masters; “they were also a direct threat to these white authorities”¹⁷ who delighted in portraying them in the worst possible light. The Caribbean is still seen as merely an economically impoverished place where tourists spend foreign currency, snorkel, get great sun tans on magnificent beaches, pose for photos with dreadlocks, smoke ganja, and drink local brew. This comes at a time when many have abandoned churlish labels of the Caribbean as a doormat for America’s “Manifest Destiny” and a helpless “third-world country” (singular) of third-class peasants seeking U.S. handouts. Paradoxically, international pharmaceuticals, hotel chains, banks, oil companies, and other multinational corporations derive huge profits from tax shelters in the Caribbean, while depressing wages and contributing to our underdevelopment and

impoverishment by not reinvesting part of their wealth in the region. Venezuela and Trinidad and Tobago supply 15 to 17 percent of U.S. oil. At the same time, Caribbean countries are strapped by outrageously high-interest-bearing IMF (International Monetary Fund) loans that support a cycle of dependency, poverty, and political corruption that threaten the stability of the region.

Most people in the Caribbean region regard themselves as Christians, Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists; this is so even in Haiti, where Vodou is the religion of many, and Cuba, where Santería is most popular. Until more recent times, elite creole sons and daughters of the colonists were taught to despise the African heritage that the mass of peasant folks have kept alive and made the core of their culture. Since the 1960s, however, Afro-Caribbean peoples have prided themselves in their African origin.¹⁸ Some practice their “despised religion” in secret, while others celebrate it publicly and parade it as a folk tradition during cultural festivals. Like their ancestral ATRs, Afro-Caribbean religions are oral; they are written in the hearts and minds of the people who passed them down to new generations. Unlike ATRs, which some African scholars characterize as singular,¹⁹ Afro-Caribbean religions are pluralistic and share varied historical experiences. These religions did not all survive with the same vigor in the Americas. Some germinated and spread while others faded in memory and became extinct. Some early arrivals survived, others arrived late and disappeared. Some survived in physical isolation, others thrived in symbiosis with larger groups and Christianity. The persistent traditions spread and continued to thrive, after the conditions that bore them disappeared.²⁰ These are seen in the dominant creole religions, as well as in those showing greater adaptations and change, as in religions in Jamaica, Grenada, St. Lucia, and among the Black Caribs in Belize.

The migration features of enslaved Africans influenced the spread and survival of their cultural traditions in the Americas. “Where the volume and duration of the slave trade were heavy and protracted, African-based ethnomedicine and religion not only survived, but in some cases came to predominate.”²¹ One, however, should not overlocalize the peculiar phenomenon of these traditions, or limit them to one country on the basis of the Atlantic slave trade. Cross-cultural defusion occurred across various countries and island states and among ethnic groups as a result of the intercolonial slave trade and the movement of slaves from one colony to another and from plantation to plantation. The spread of these cultures and religions in the Caribbean followed no systematic patterns, and their preservation is neither uniform throughout the region nor influenced by any one tragedy. In the cases of Vodou, Santería, and Candomblé, Africans continued practicing old traditions they knew home on the continent and augmented them with new ones.²² Practitioners of newer religions, like Orisha in Trinidad and Rastafari in Jamaica, became wary of what they saw as contradictions and double standards in established colonial religions and moved away from traditional Christianity to a faith experience that blended physical and spiritual needs with African

cultural traditions or West African Islam; these were often labeled “extra-church traditions.”²³ Caribbean peoples did not lose faith in God—although many rejected colonial European understanding of that God’s view of human relations with reference to Africans.

Religions of Africa adopted distinctly Caribbean features, as they blend African, European, and other cultures. In the context of their colonial experience, they syncretize elements of ATRs, Christianity, Amerindian religions, and to a lesser extent Islam and Hinduism. They produced *tertium quids*, different kinds of religious expressions that met the social, psychological, and spiritual needs not satisfied in established religions. Africans modified, reshaped, and adapted ideas of the sacred, ritual tendencies, liturgical practices, lyrics and musical style, drum and dance, and religious myths and symbols, which they took mainly from African religions and Catholicism, to form elements of religious traditions of their own carving. From ATRs, practitioners took names of important divinities and their peculiar characteristics, sacred paraphernalia, “musical and dance patterns, possession by spirits, initiation rites of seclusion and indoctrination, death rituals, proper types of offerings to divinities and spirits, magical charms, methods of divination, and concern for the goodwill of the ancestors.”²⁴ The nature of the modification and adaptations were determined by whether Africans were influenced by the Roman Catholic Christian tradition—as in the case of Vodou, Santeria, and Candomble—or Protestant faiths and ethics, as in the case of religions in Jamaica, in the process of forming their new religious heritage.

Some religious practitioners are uncomfortable with the category of “creole” religions, because it implies a less pristine form of African religion. Several theories related to the creolization of religion among enslaved Africans are proffered: (1) that the adoption of Catholic saints’ names and characteristic features in Santeria, Candomble, Vodou, and Orisha was an intentional strategic mechanism on the part of early Afro-Caribbean peoples to dupe their white oppressors into believing they were being Christians; (2) that the integration of Catholic hagiography into African religions was really a conversion strategy, on the part of the Church, to win converts; (3) that the phenomenon was a natural symbiosis of ATRs with Catholicism because of the church’s theology; and (4) that Africans’ familiarity with Christianity, on the continent of Africa, made it easy and natural for them to synthesize their religions with Catholic hagiography. Of course, African divinities are not the same as Catholic saints, and the fit between them is odd. As Robert Voeks shows, even if Catholicism and ATRs exhibit a shared vision related to spiritual actors, they nonetheless show cosmological distinctions among their respective divinities and their abode. Voeks states, for example, that “the Yoruba and their New World descendants have retained much of their original view of the spiritual universe and the hereafter, and it has little in common with the Christian concepts of heaven and hell. . . . The Candomble cosmos is characterized by a simple opposition [between] the realm of the spirits.”²⁵ So why did they comele?

It is instructive that African religious entities were in symbiosis with Roman Catholic Christianity in Cuba, Saint Domingue, Brazil, and Trinidad, but not in smaller Roman Catholic Martinique and Guadeloupe. Others—which mixed with Protestant Belize, Jamaica, Barbados, Grenada, Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, or the Protestant-Hindu-Muslim Guyana—were not dominant in the larger islands.²⁶ Neither the eastern Caribbean islands nor Jamaica preserved Vodou, Santeria, or Candomble. While under French Catholic control, Vodou survived in Saint-Domingue and helped the country become independent Haiti. The strong French presence among Trinidadian planters from Saint Domingue and their slaves, between 1783 and 1807, brought African-Haitian religion into the larger entity of Columbus's "Trinity," but the religious elements resurfaced as Orisha/Shango, not Vodou. Cuba and Puerto Rico remained under Spanish Catholic control until the Spanish-Cuban-American War in 1898. Jamaica and the other English-speaking territories, however, retained African traditions from Fanti-Ashanti, Kongo, and Fon, and made them creole with Protestantism, for reasons that are not transparent.

Although Brazil and, to a much lesser extent, Cuba and Saint Domingue have a much larger land mass than the British territories in the Caribbean region, size is clearly not an important factor in the religious fusion in these countries. For example, Vodou did not have a significant presence in the United States before the Haitian Revolution and the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, which doubled the size of the country and brought large numbers of French Catholics into the Union. On the other hand, French Catholic Martinique and Guadeloupe retained elements of African culture,²⁷ but not in the form of Vodou. So the dominance of French and Spanish cultures in the region also cannot take full credit for the preponderance of Vodou and Santeria in French and Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries.

Could the fact that some African religions survived in Spanish territories and not in British ones be because British policy did not aim at, or encourage, assimilation of foreigners and their cultures in the Caribbean as did the Spanish? The British upheld this policy in Yorubaland and, as H. Hoetink contends, the "Church of England," both at home and overseas, preached that the descendants or posterity of Abraham keep to themselves and not unite the races. The "Spanish Catholic concept of the all-embracing faith, which includes racial assimilation," made Catholicism more appealing to Africans and thus allowed them to practice their ATRs, which blended with Roman Catholic hagiography.²⁸ While this theory of the embrace of the Catholic faith may have been true of Candomble, in Bahia, and Santeria, in Cuba, it certainly was not the case with Haitian Vodou. French Catholics viciously persecuted and, for over a hundred years, attempted in vain to stamp out Vodou in Haiti. Later in the mid-1900s, the Church adopted the policy toward Vodou devotees that "if you can't beat them, join them," in an attempt to incorporate them into itself.

Among other things, these observations suggest that diverse African religious traditions in the Caribbean are parts of a complex reality influenced, to

some degree, by the preponderance of Kongo and Yoruba adherents in historically Catholic-dominated countries. But the variables in this peculiarity are many: the country of origin of the enslaved and free African immigrants, migration features of slavery itself, the retention ability of the African slaves themselves, their contact with others who knew ATRs, the official policies of the state church and slave masters on African religions, the presence of Protestantism in a country, and the specific character of the local Catholic hagiology where the slaves lived and worked. For example, Bahians transformed the Orisha Ogun, the “Yoruba orixa of the river,” into the goddess of the sea who guides the fate of fishermen in Brazil. Oxumare, one of the important orixas in Brazil, who alternates between male and female, is a Benin-Yoruba deity. As Voeks notes, leading ethnic groups in Bahia reconstituted their native beliefs and practices in a religious framework aided by the Yoruba. “The Yoruba provided the central structural text within which various ethnic and cultural messages could be retained. Candomble is represented by a variety of religious types, each founded with a unique set of cultural elements, and each following its own individual trajectory.”²⁹ Notwithstanding many variables affecting African religions in the Caribbean, Catholic hagiography, or the mediator system of sainthood, and the strong mystical elements in the church’s rituals have had a great attraction for people of African origin and their religions.

Content of the Book

As an introductory study of these creole religions and their interaction with the dominant culture in the region, this book has three foci: (1) the African connection to Caribbean religions, (2) the nature and ethos of the religions, and (3) the social and cultural context in which the religions survived. Most of the chapters are four-dimensional, covering the historical cultural background, the religious cosmology and beliefs, the organizational structure and professional leadership, and the ritual practices or performance. For pedagogical reasons, some religions are presented in two chapters, each one providing sufficient reading for a single class period in a Caribbean religions course. The two chapters that constitute Part I, “African Connections: Historical Roots of Afro-Caribbean Religions,” link the African continent to the diaspora and provide a backdrop to the history, culture, and traditions of its derived religions. The diversity of issues included in the lengthy chapter discussions separates this work from most introductions to the religions and cultures of the African diaspora, which have been criticized for their perfunctory treatment of Africa. As the chapter discussions illustrate, the link between African religions and the social and political life of the peoples of Africa is essential to this book.

Part II, “Vodou: Haitian Religion,” provides a natural sequence to the African background, with a discussion of Vodou, one of the oldest and most resilient African religions in the Caribbean. This introductory-level study of Vodou as a complex, living, African-based religion explores its triumph over adversity

and rise to prominence; its many creole characteristics; its religious hierarchy; its basic belief system; and its social, cultural, and religious ethos in Haiti. Chapter 3 looks at the inseparable relationship between Haiti's history and politics and a cultural and religious heritage that is shrouded in mystery and marked by tragedy, stereotypes, and misconceptions. Chapter 4 explores Vodou mythologies, cultus, and leadership; the Vodou belief system; and the performance of Vodou rites and rituals. Following the formula set out in Part II, Part III focuses on the historical, cultural, and religious heritage of Africans in colonial Cuba and their struggle for survival, freedom, and identity in the face of oppression and prejudice. Chapters 5 and 6 showcase the life-giving force of the Lucumi/Santeria belief system (or mythologies) and cultus: the religion's divinations, ceremonies, rites and rituals, and popular festive celebrations. Chapter 7 provides a short introduction to the less well-known and less well-researched Regla de Palo Monte (Palo Monte).

Part IV, "Creole Religions of the Southern Caribbean," is included as a special feature of the book. Chapter 8, "Dancing to Orixas' Axe in Candomble," is devoted to the history of Brazil's most African religion, Candomble (its nations and their struggles, its religious myths, its practitioners, its ceremonies, and its pharmacopeia). The chapter includes an analysis of various phenomena associated with the religion, in order to underscore essential features and highlight areas that show New World adaptation or creolization. Chapter 9, "Umbanda and Its Antecedents," navigates through the diverse creole religious traditions of Brazil, some of which may barely qualify for categorization as Afro-Caribbean but all of which have a very popular multiethnic following and African connection. Chapter 10, "Orisha Powers: Creole Religion in T&T," looks at characteristics that are shared with the creole religions of Brazil. Although its following is smaller than that of Candomble, Yoruba Orisha/Shango rivals Candomble in its cross-fertilization and strong borrowing from other traditions in the Trinidad culture.

Part V, "Jamaica's Creole Religions: Culture of Resistance and Rhythms," devotes its discussion to the African religions of Jamaica. Like all other Caribbean religions that have their roots in Africa, Obeah (see Chapter 11) emerged from an oppressive colonial environment and exists as a resistance and survival movement. It finds its *Sitz im Leben* in early plantation life and Africans' struggle for freedom and dignity in the colonial Caribbean region. The Myal, Kumina, Poco, Convince, and Revival Zion religions, now largely overshadowed by the Rastafari chant, are a vital part of Jamaica's religious cultural past (see Chapters 12 and 13). Rastafari, one of the latest religious cultures to appear on the Caribbean scene (see Chapter 14), did not originate in Africa. However, the movement's cultural ethos, belief system, ritual and other practices, and reggae cultural revolution constitute the Caribbean's most vocal Afrocentric movement and one of the strongest cultural appeals to modern intergenerational pop culture fans internationally. Rastafari thus forms part of a logical bravado finale to the study of African creole religions in the Caribbean.