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# Creole Religions of the Caribbean

*An Introduction from Vodou and  
Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*

SECOND EDITION

Margarite Fernández Olmos and  
Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert

FOREWORD BY

Joseph M. Murphy



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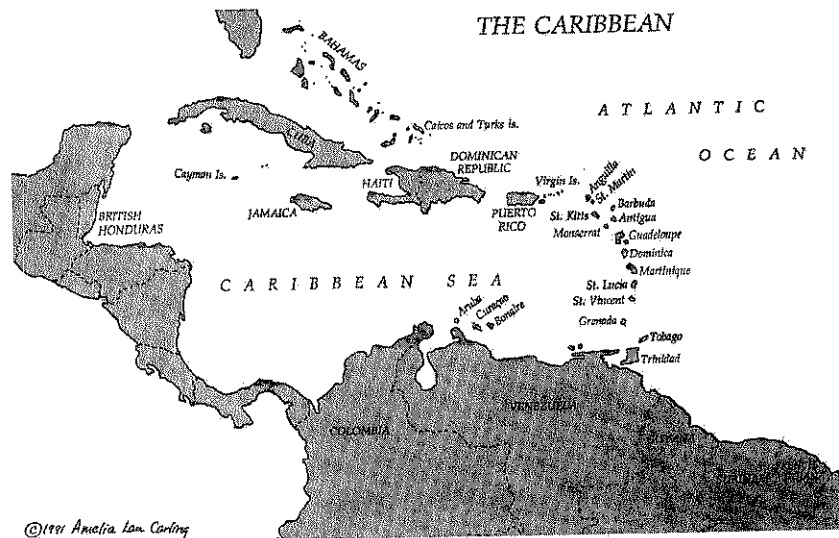
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## Introduction

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What piece of our soil was not saturated with secret African influences?

—Lydia Cabrera, *Yemayá y Ochún*



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Caribbean map. With permission of Amelia Lau Carling © 1991.

Luis is a young man who works in the stockroom of a tourist café in Havana. An inventory reveals five boxes of missing supplies and, despite his claims of innocence, the police consider him a suspect. In his distress, he seeks out Marín, his spiritual godfather or padrino, a lifelong friend whose spiritual work in Santería, Regla de Palo, and Espiritismo follows the practices of his African ancestors. Marín summons the spirit of Ma Pancha, an African slave with whom he has communicated on previous occasions. Marín sits before a home altar that contains, among other things, the statues of the Catholic saints San Juan Bosco and Santa Bárbara, and a glass of water. Uncorking a bottle of strong cane liquor, he pours a drink into a dry gourd, lights a homemade cigar, and chants a verse, calling upon Ma Pancha's spirit to respond "in the name of Jesus Christ and of Papá Changó." At this point Ma Pancha greets them in broken Spanish through Marín's voice with "Good morning, how are my children here on this earth?" and is informed of the problem. Stating that Luis's boss is responsible for the theft, Ma Pancha counsels the men to gather the bark of certain types of trees "to open the eyes of the police" and suggests that Marín prepare a *macuto* or magical pouch, and dedicate it to Ochosi, the deity of forests and herbs, patron of those with problems involving the law, to protect Luis and convince the authorities of his innocence. The *macuto* is assembled with the name of the guilty party placed inside and set at the base of a *nganga* or spiritual cauldron.

Paulette, a middle-aged Haitian woman living in Coral Gables, Miami, has been married to a lawyer and former politician for many years. When she discovers that her husband is having an affair with his young secretary, a friend suggests that she speak with Denizé, a houngan, or Vodou priest who does spiritual readings using cards for divination. During the reading Pau-

lette discovers that her tutelary *lwa* (spirit) is Erzulie, spirit of femininity and sensuality, and Denizé advises her to make efforts to become more attractive to her husband. He recommends a purifying bath of white flowers, powdered egg shells, and perfume, during which Paulette would be released from all negativity. Afterwards, she is to leave the flowers at a crossroads. He instructs Paulette to cleanse her house with water composed of the same ingredients as the bath, adding a bit of honey. She is to make an offering to Erzulie of sweet fruit and honey to be placed on her home altar. After the reading, Denizé prepares a small bottle of perfume for Paulette to bring her *chans*, or luck. In it he inserts a small plant (*wont*) believed to have the power to open paths for the achievement of goals.

Desmond and Earl, young Jamaicans living in Toronto, have engaged in a series of robberies involving small suburban banks. They are assiduous clients of an Obeahman, from whom they seek the ritual cleansings and massages they believe will protect them from arrest and punishment. When they kill a young woman during a robbery, their Obeahman alerts the police to their possible involvement. Surveillance equipment is installed in his consultation room, and when his clients return—this time seeking protection that will allow them to return to Jamaica, where the woman's *duppy* or spirit will not follow them to do them harm—their sessions are recorded and the evidence leads to their arrest. The case against them centers on the admissibility of the evidence, an issue that itself revolves around the confidentiality—or sacredness—of the communications, or “confessions,” between the Obeahman and his client. The sanctity of their interactions is rejected by the courts on the basis of Obeah being a healing practice and not a religion, and the two are convicted of robbery and murder.

These tales—based on the actual experiences of people living in the Caribbean and its Diaspora—speak to the continuing power of the Afro-Caribbean spiritual traditions that have sustained the peoples of the region and beyond for centuries. *Creole Religions of the Caribbean* is intended as a comprehensive introduction to the creolized, African-based religions that developed in the Caribbean in the wake of European colonization. It shows how Caribbean peoples fashioned a heterogeneous system of belief out of the cacophony of practices and traditions that came forcibly together in colonial society: the various religious and healing traditions represented by the extensive slave population brought to the New World through the Middle Passage; Spanish, French, and Portuguese variants of Catholicism; the myriad strands of Protestantism brought to the English and Dutch colonies; and remnants of Amerindian animistic practices.

Creolized religious systems, developed in secrecy, were frequently outlawed by the colonizers because they posed a challenge to official Christian practices and were believed to be associated with magic and sorcery. They nonetheless allowed the most oppressed sectors of colonial Caribbean societies to manifest their spirituality, express cultural and political practices suppressed by colonial force, and protect the health of the community. These complex systems developed in symbiotic relationships to the social, linguistic, religious, and natural environments of the various islands of the Caribbean, taking their form and characteristics from the subtle blends and clashes between different cultural, political, and spiritual practices. This book traces the historical-cultural origins of the major Creole religions and spiritual practices of the region—Vodou, Santería, Obeah, Espiritismo—and describes their current-day expression in the Caribbean and its Diaspora.<sup>1</sup>

Caribbean Creole religions developed as the result of cultural contact. The complex dynamics of encounters, adaptations, assimilation, and syncretism that we refer to as creolization are emblematic of the vibrant nature of Diaspora cultures. They led to the development of a complex system of religious and healing practices that allowed enslaved African communities that had already suffered devastating cultural loss to preserve a sense of group and personal identity. Having lost the connection between the spirits and Africa during the Middle Passage, they strove to adapt their spiritual environment to suit their new Caribbean space. The flexibility, eclecticism, and malleability of African religions allowed practitioners to adapt to their new environments, drawing spiritual power from wherever it originated. More than simply a strategy for survival, this dynamic, conscious, syncretic process demonstrates an appreciation for the intrinsic value of creativity, growth, and change as well as for the spiritual potential of other belief systems.

*Transculturation*, a term coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz to describe the ceaseless creation of new cultures, was intended to counterbalance the notion of acculturation, the term in vogue among anthropologists during the 1940s. Ortiz understood the notion of acculturation as one that interpreted the development of Caribbean cultures as the one-way imposition of the culture of the dominant or conquering nation on the conquered societies, an imposition that devalued and eventually supplanted the conquered cultures. Believing that colonization had initiated instead a creative, ongoing process of appropriation, revision, and survival leading to the mutual transformation of two or more pre-existing cultures into a new one, Ortiz posited the notion of transculturation as a more accurate rendering of the processes that produced contemporary Caribbean cultures.

Religious practices were at the very center of the processes of transculturation. “Throughout the diaspora, African religions provided important cultural resources for not only reconstructing ethnic ties and social relations that had been disrupted by slavery, but also for forging new collective identities, institutions and belief systems which partook of the cultures of diverse African peoples to meet the daunting challenges of new and oppressive social contexts” (Gregory 1999: 12). The metaphor for the process of transculturation used by Fernando Ortiz is the *ajiaco*, a delicious soup made with very diverse ingredients, in which the broth that stays at the bottom represents an integrated nationality, the product of synthesis. This metaphor has found an echo throughout the Caribbean region, finding its counterpart in the Dominican *sancocho* and the West Indian *callaloo*. However, although rich in metaphoric power, neither the *ajiaco* nor the *callaloo* are ideal formulas. They have been challenged by Caribbean scholars and critics for failing to do full justice to the “undissolved ingredients” represented by the magical, life-affirming elements of Afro-Caribbean religions. Cuban art critic Gerardo Mosquera, for example, has argued that “beside the broth of synthesis, there are bones, gristle, and hard seeds that never fully dissolve, even after they have contributed their substance to the broth. These undissolved ingredients are the survivals and recreations of African traditions within religious-cultural complexes” (1992: 30).

### Creolization

Creolization—that is, the malleability and mutability of various beliefs and practices as they adapt to new understandings of class, race, gender, power, labor, and sexuality—is one of the most significant phenomena in Caribbean religious history. Given the subtle negotiations necessary for the survival of the cultural practices of the enslaved and colonized in the highly hierarchical colonial societies of the Caribbean, the resulting religious systems are fundamentally complex, pluralistic, and integrationist. In our approach to the creolized religious systems that developed in the region in the wake of colonization, we seek to avoid essentialist definitions of religious experience, opting instead for a practice- or experience-based presentation and analysis, rooted in particular historical circumstances. Although the Creole religions vary in their origins, beliefs, and rituals, all of them demonstrate the complexities and the creative resourcefulness of the creolization process.

The term *creole* was first used in the Americas to refer to native-born persons of European ancestry and evolved from a geographical to an ethnic

label: New World enslaved Africans were distinguished from African-born contemporaries by the label *criollos*. Hoetink notes the multiple contemporary nuances of the term.<sup>2</sup>

I take the word *creole* to mean the opposite of foreign. Thus *creole culture* refers to those aspects of culture that evolved or were adapted in the Western Hemisphere and became part of a New World society’s distinctive heritage. In Latin America, the term *criollo*, when used in reference to people, was originally reserved for native whites. In the Hispanic Caribbean nowadays, it often includes all those born and bred in a particular society. Elsewhere, as in Suriname, the term may be used to denote long-established population groups, such as the Afro-Americans, as opposed to more recent immigration groups. (1985: 82)

Melville Herskovits challenged prevailing assumptions regarding the survival of African influences in the New World in his *Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), demonstrating in great detail that African culture has survived and indeed thrived. In the 1970s, Edward Kamau Brathwaite in his essay, “The African Presence in Caribbean Literature” and in *Folk Cultures of the Slaves in Jamaica*, claimed that the Middle Passage “was not, as is popularly assumed, a traumatic, destructive experience, separating the blacks from Africa, disconnecting their sense of history and tradition, but a pathway or channel between this tradition and what is being evolved, on new soil, in the Caribbean” (Brathwaite 1974: 5).

Creolization thus describes the ongoing and ever-changing process (not the static result) of new forms born or developed from the interaction of peoples and forces due to “adaptive pressures omnipresent and irresistible” in the Americas (Buisseret 2000, “Introduction”: 7). The concept of Creole and creolization has been extended to other “transplanted” categories of interchange: from linguistic speech variations (*Créole*, for example, refers to the national language of Haiti, developed as a result of Old and New World contact) and literary styles to a wide range of cultural contexts—religious, musical, curative, and culinary (Mintz and Price 1985: 6–7). “There is, then, a vast range of examples of the Creolizing process, even without taking into account such areas of human activity as art, law, material culture, military organization, politics, or social structures” (Buisseret 2000, “Introduction”: 12).

Anthropologists, historians, and literary and social critics continue to expand the linguistic application of the term creolization to that of metaphor for a wide and diverse cross-cultural and transnational phenomena.

Aisha Khan's essay in *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory* describes our conception of the term as defined above and throughout this book as a "means of revealing the successful and creative agency of subaltern or deterritorialized peoples, and the subversiveness inhering in creolization, which contradicts earlier notions of cultural dissolution and disorganization" and considers it among several definitions used in creolist scholarship.<sup>3</sup> The editor of *Creolization*, Charles Stewart, acknowledges that the term "creole" has itself creolized, which is what happens to all productive words with long histories."<sup>4</sup>

[T]he concept of creolization is at once fascinating, fertile and potentially confusing. Those who approach it from one or another of the disciplinary approaches or literary currents . . . or with the normative meaning from a particular historical period in mind, are in for some surprises should they encounter it outside their own familiar territory. (2007: 3)

According to Silvio Torres-Saillant in *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean*, in the late 1980s the focus on postcolonial cultural studies and globalizing theoretical approaches in European and North American intellectual circles elicited globalized paradigms from Caribbeanists: "Perhaps sensing that the focus of Third World thought production had shifted away from their region, Caribbeanists gradually came to give in to the new academic world order. Thus marginalized, they began to assert the relevance of their studies by highlighting their link to the larger, grander, and more 'theoretical' postcolonial field" (2006: 43). The manner in which they secured their intellectual legitimacy, however, is problematic for Torres-Saillant: Caribbeanists relied on the pillars of Western tradition as they did prior to the rise of anticolonialism in the region, reaffirming the "centrality of Western critical theory" (44).<sup>5</sup> One example he cites among many is that of Antonio Benítez Rojo, who examined the notion of creolization utilizing the Western scientific branch of physics known as Chaos Theory in his influential work, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (1996), which describes creolization by means of three fundamental principles: plantation, rhythm, and performance.

[C]reolization is not merely a process (a word that implies forward movement) but a discontinuous series of recurrences, of happenings, whose sole law is change. Where does this instability come from? It is the product of the plantation (the big bang of the Caribbean universe), whose slow explo-

sion throughout modern history threw out billions and billions of cultural fragments in all directions—fragments of diverse kinds that, in their endless voyage, come together in an instant to form a dance step, a linguistic trope, the line of a poem, and afterward repel each other to re-form and pull apart once more, and so on. (1996: 55)<sup>6</sup>

Cultural *bricolage*, from the French, meaning to improvise with whatever is at hand—a concept introduced by French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (1966) to describe a form of being in the world—is another Western model used to describe the creolization process. "Creolization can be seen enacted through bricolage as the art of the disparate and fragmentary; the art of adopting and adapting multiple concrete fragments or artifacts as well as elements of imaginative, ideological, cultural, social or religious practices, experiences, and beliefs" (Knepper 2006: 73). Wendy Knepper notes, however, that while Lévi-Strauss's use of the term bricolage may be politically neutral, the application of the word to describe the creolization process in the Caribbean is evasive; there, cultural bricolage was an uneven process, highly politicized, involving "selective, coerced, forced, and violent intermixtures in addition to spontaneous meldings, subversive appropriations, and processes of adaptation. The creolist appropriation of this structuralist term could be seen as instituting a kind of white-washing of bricolage rather than consciously embracing the ambivalent cultural and sociopolitical etymology of bricolage within the Caribbean" (73).

The concept of creolization has thus expanded to become synonymous with hybridity, syncretism, multiculturalism, *créolité*, *métissage*, *mestizaje*, postcolonialism, and diaspora.<sup>7</sup> In an age of mass migrations and globalization, creolization is employed to reframe notions of past and present transnational and diasporan cultures and communities. In the French West Indies, for example, the concept of *créolité* was formulated by authors Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant in their *Eloge de la créolité* (*In Praise of Creoleness*, 1989) wherein creole identity is based on a multiethnic and multilingual Caribbean culture; it is also a response to the African-identified model of *négritude* and its defiant affirmation of black anticolonial identity.

Martinican author Edouard Glissant contributes to the discourse on cultural creolization by expanding the multiple metaphors of the creolization process and the language of Creole cultural identity. Responding to the notion of *créolité*, Glissant presented his influential concept of *antillanité* (Caribbeanness) creating a postcolonial "Archipelagic" view: a Creole identity

which is highly flexible and adaptable and “traces the path from an ontological model of being to an historically and geographically situated, hence changeable, existence” (Schwieger Hiepkö 2003: 244). Indeed, Glissant speaks of the “archipelagoization” of the Caribbean in its interaction with Africa and the United States, and of the world.

Europe is being “archipelagoized” in its turn and is splitting into regions. Florida is in the process of changing completely in response to its Cuban and Caribbean populations. It seems to me that these new dimensions of existence escape national realities which are trying to resist the forces of archipelagoization. . . . We must accustom our minds to these new world structures, in which the relationship between the center and the periphery will be completely different. Everything will be central and everything will be peripheral. (Glissant 2000)

Creolization as a concept can never be neutral; its very semantic origins force us to confront issues of power, race, and history. Stephan Palmié questions the “proliferating mangroves of metaphors” of Caribbean/creolization rhetoric beyond linguistic applications to other “kinds of discourses on ‘culture,’ local or global,” creating a transglobal identity that may be empirically and theoretically ill advised (2006: 434, 443). Although scholars and critics are always eager for new analytical and descriptive tropes, more specificity in the construction of indigenously Caribbean analytical and political projects could avoid an imaginary reinvention of the region: “It is difficult to understand how—other than by retrospectively constructing a ‘Caribbean’ of the (nonregionalist) anthropological imagination—we could ever have regarded the region as a ‘prototype’ (in both temporal and evolutionary senses) of an allegedly global postmodern condition” (443). Palmié offers the example of Ulf Hannerz’s 1987 article, “The World in Creolisation,” regarded by Palmié as an essay that establishes a “creolization paradigm” in which Hannerz claims “we are all being creolised,” yet does not refer to a “single intellectual (or social scientist) from the Caribbean” (443). The expediency of using creolization as a conceptual tool will undoubtedly continue to be controversial and problematic. For Torres-Saillant, such authors as Glissant and Benítez-Rojo, while contributing impressive organizing metaphors that capture the complexity of Caribbean history and culture at a discursive level, fail, in his estimation, to take into account the region’s extratextual reality and the “trauma of our catastrophic history . . . postcolonial studies have seldom shed meaningful new light on historical, cultural, or political dynamics in the region” (2006: 238).

## Syncretism

In current theories of globalization, Creole and creolization are often mentioned as synonyms of hybridity and syncretism. “All these terms, currently used in positive senses to describe the resilience, creativity, and inevitability of cultural mixture, had extremely pejorative meanings in the past. In the cases of syncretism and hybridity, various writers have examined these pasts and reappropriated the terms through a positive reevaluation of the political significance of mixture” (Stewart 2007: 4). The strategies of religious syncretism—the active transformation through renegotiation, reorganization, and redefinition of clashing belief systems—are consistent with the creolization process.

In *African Civilizations in the New World*, Roger Bastide differentiated between various categories of religious syncretism in the Caribbean, among them morphological or mosaic syncretism based on the juxtaposition and coexistence of African-derived elements and Catholic symbols—the Vodou *pé*, or altars, with stones, wax candles, crosses, the statues of saints, and pots containing souls of the dead, for example—and institutional syncretism, which combines prescribed religious observances by reconciling Christian and African liturgical calendars (1971: 154–156). The most common, however, is syncretism by correspondence, or what Leslie Desmangles calls a “symbiosis by identity,” through which an African deity and a Catholic saint became one on the basis of mythical or symbolic similarities.<sup>8</sup>

Syncretism has been a polemical term for centuries. In the seventeenth century it was used to defend “true” religion against heresy and referred to the “illegitimate reconciliation of opposing theological views” (Droogers 1989: 9). The term was later applied by scholars to the early forms of Christianity that were perceived to be syncretic as well, and was later broadened to apply to all religions when a review of religious history revealed syncretic elements at the foundation of all major religions. However, syncretism is not a value-free concept. The identification of Creole religions as “syncretic” is problematical and disparaging: a Eurocentric bias limits the definition to non-European religions, negating their full legitimacy. Creole religions are frequently identified with and “legitimized” by accentuating their Roman Catholic elements, for example, but are not always afforded an equivalent status.

The term “syncretism” first appeared in Plutarch’s *Moralia* in reference to the behavior of the Cretan peoples who “mixed together,” came to agreement, or closed ranks when confronted by a mutual enemy; it was later used

to describe the integration of two or more separate beliefs into a new religion. Thus, from its origins, the term presupposes encounter and confrontation between systems: “Syncretism is in the first place *contested* religious interpenetration” (Droogers 1989: 20).<sup>9</sup> Though all definitions of syncretism are thorny, Michael Pye recognizes the term’s dynamism when he describes it as “the temporary ambiguous coexistence of elements from diverse religions and other contexts within a coherent religious pattern” and considers that the process should be understood as “a natural moving aspect of major religious traditions . . . a part of the dynamics of religion which works its way along in the ongoing transplantation of these religious traditions from one cultural context to another whether geographically or in time” (1971: 92). However, despite the existence of historical interactions, borrowings, and modifications based on contact and context that have occurred among all the major religions, the rhetorical division between so-called *pure* faiths and *illicit* or “contaminated” syncretic belief systems persists, often mentioned with the related concepts of “hybridization and creolization as a means of portraying the dynamics of global social developments” (Stewart 2007: 40). Syncretism in the Creole context is not the description of a static condition or result but of a dynamic process. Roman Catholic missionaries adopted a policy of “guided syncretism” during the conquest of the Americas and the colonial period, tolerating the existence of a polytheistic idolatry that could be identified with Catholic saints and considering it a necessary evil—a transitional state that would eventually lead the conquered peoples to the “true” faith and the elimination of such beliefs. However, the policy never fully realized its goals. The old gods refused to disappear (and still do).<sup>10</sup>

Whether to avoid further oppression in a type of “defensive syncretism”<sup>11</sup> or to gain legitimacy, the conquered peoples embraced Christian forms but with new meanings they themselves had refashioned, at times appropriating them as tools of resistance.<sup>12</sup> According to Mosquera, syncretism should designate “something that corresponds more to the concept of ‘appropriation,’ in the sense of taking over for one’s own use and on one’s own initiative the diverse and even the hegemonic or imposed elements, in contrast to assuming an attitude of passive eclecticism or synthesis,” strategies that he claims are clearer now thanks to the evolution of a “postmodern” contemporary consciousness (1996: 227). The stress on syncretism and such terms as “syncretic cults” emphasizes the “accessory syncretic elements to the detriment of the essence: the truly effective evolutions of African religions in America” (Mosquera 1992: 30).

In an interesting example of the historical revision of the definition of cultural and religious “legitimacy,” Stephen Palmié notes in “Against Syncretism: ‘Africanizing’ and ‘Cubanizing’ Discourses in North American *òrisà* Worship,” that the American Yoruba movement created in the United States in the 1960s, also known as Yoruba-Reversionism or the Oyotunji-Movement, has attempted to purge all European elements from Cuban and Cuban-American Santería/Regla de Ocha in order to regain a more “pure” form of worship and cultural “legitimacy.” The re-Africanization of “syncretistically adulterated” Cuban beliefs and practices “runs counter to an understanding of ‘tradition’ still at the very heart of North American variants of Afro-Cuban religious practices” (1995: 77). A movement to eliminate any vestiges of European religions from Santería and other Creole religions, led by so-called “African revisionists,” and return to a more “pure” and “authentic” African-centered religion has led to African-centered movements in Cuba as well where some advocate for a “religión Yoruba” to replace Regla de Ocha/Santería.

For Andrew Apter, religious syncretism is yet another form of empowerment, another modality of revision and popular resistance:

The syncretic revision of dominant discourses sought to transform the authority that these discourses upheld . . . the power and violence mobilized by slave revolts and revolution were built into the logic of New World syncretism itself. The Catholicism of Vodou, Candomblé and Santería was not an ecumenical screen, hiding the worship of African deities from official persecution. It was the religion of the masters, revised, transformed, and appropriated by slaves to harness its power within their universes of discourse. In this way the slaves took possession of Catholicism and thereby repossessed themselves as active spiritual subjects. (1991: 254)<sup>13</sup>

And, according to Laura E. Pérez in “Hybrid Spiritualities and Chicana Altar-Based Art,” U.S. Latina/o artists and intellectuals in the fields of religion and visual arts are radically redefining the understanding of religious and cultural syncretism beyond the Eurocentric notion “that vestiges of the precolonial survive as largely incoherent fragments within the engulfing colonial culture” and are replacing it with the realization that globalization has restructured religious beliefs and practices and given birth to “altogether new forms” (2008: 344–345).

## Shared Characteristics of Creole Religions

Despite notable differences among African-based Caribbean Creole practices, a general overview of the Creole religions reveals that they share a number of fundamental features.<sup>14</sup>

1. The first of these is their characteristic combination of monotheism and polytheism. At the center of all Afro-Caribbean religions is a belief in a unique Supreme Being—creator of the universe. This belief is complemented by belief in a pantheon of deities (*orishas*, *lwas*, and the like) who are emanations of the Creator and who serve as intermediaries between mankind and the supreme god.
2. These religious practices are also linked by a cult of dead ancestors and/or deceased members of the religious community who watch over and influence events from beyond.
3. In addition, Creole religions share a belief in an active, supernatural, mysterious power that can be invested in objects (mineral, vegetable, animal, human), a force not intrinsic to the objects themselves.
4. This belief is in turn linked to animistic beliefs in other spirits (often found in nature), beyond the divinities and the ancestors, who can also be contacted and who can exert a positive or negative influence over a person's life. Plants and trees, for example, have a will and a soul, as do all things under the sun.
5. Afro-Caribbean religions are centered on the principle of contact or mediation between humans and the spirit world, which is achieved through such numerous and complex rituals as divinatory practices, initiation, sacrifice, spiritual possession, and healing.<sup>15</sup>
6. These contacts are mediated by a central symbol or focus, a fundamental or philosophical foundation that serves as the dynamic organizing principle of spiritual worship: the sacred stones (*otanes*) of the Afro-Cuban Regla de Ocha and the *nganga* cauldron and sign tracings of Regla de Palo, the sacred Ekué drum of the Abakuá Secret Society, and the *poto-mitan* of the Vodou ritual space (the *hounfort*). These and other consecrated objects are not merely the symbols of the gods but are the material receptacles of divine power. The image of Catholic saints and the crucifix may appear to dominate altars or shrines, but, as William Bascom has noted regarding the Afro-Cuban religions, the stones, blood, and herbs of ritual offerings and sacrifice contain the “secrets” and are the real focus of religious power (1950, 1972).
7. Central to the ceremonies of Creole religions is music and dance: sound has the power to transmit action. Consecrated drums and the polyrhythmic percussion they produce, along with clapping, the spoken or sung word in

repeated chants, and dance (rhythms and dance are coded to the identities of the gods that are summoned in ceremonies and rituals), produce an altered state of consciousness that beckons the supernatural entities and communicates between worlds.<sup>16</sup>

8. Music and dance are also instrumental in strengthening the conscious sense of community and an institutionalized regrouping of Africans and their descendants, and the transference of African “space” into houses, temples, or rooms. Ritual communities are more than simply religious groups. Rather, they re-create the types of family ties and obligations to the deities and to each other that would have existed in Africa.

9. This re-creation relies on religious leaders responsible for the care of the religious space, sacred objects, and ritual implements and the general spiritual care of the community. The leaders represent “the depository of maximum mystical and initiatory powers and liturgical knowledge. The cult priest [priestess] distributes or ‘plants’ power by initiating novices and infusing them with the power of which he is the depository” (Dos Santos and Dos Santos 1984: 77). There is no central authority in Creole religions, however; worship is individualized and community-based. Devotees are members of a religion, but not of a specific institutionalized church.

10. In Caribbean Creole religions, spiritual power is internalized and mobilized in human beings who become, through the experience of possession, “a real live altar in which the presence of the supernatural beings can be invoked.”<sup>17</sup> In possession, the deities—*orishas*, *lwas*—manifest themselves through the bodies of the initiated.<sup>18</sup> “During the experience of possession, the entire religious system, its theogony and mythology, are relived. Each participant is the protagonist of a ritualistic activity, in which Black historic, psychological, ethnic, and cosmic life is renewed” (Dos Santos and Dos Santos 1984: 78). Ritual dramatizes myth and promotes the magic that responds to life's problems.<sup>19</sup>

11. Given the complexity of the practice of magic in the form of spells, hexes, conjurations, and ethno-magical medicine-healing, it deserves more extensive examination here.

## Magic, Witchcraft, and Healing

The logic, structure, and “technology” of magic in Creole religions follow the principles described by Sir James Frazer in his classic text *The Golden Bough* (1922): “homeopathic” or “imitative” magic, following the law of similarity in which like produces like and an effect resembles its cause, so that one can produce any effect by imitating it (a photograph or doll in the like-



ness of the person one wishes to influence); and “contagious” magic, which follows the law of contact, namely, that things which have once been in contact continue to act upon each other at a distance, a “magical sympathy” that exists between a person and any severed portion of his or her person (human remains or dirt from a grave invested with the power of the deceased, for example). Anyone gaining possession of human hair, nails, or other portions of the body may work his or her will upon the person from whom they were obtained, at any distance.<sup>20</sup>

In *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic and Commerce*, Carolyn Morrow Long uses the generic word “charm” to designate “any object, substance, or combination thereof believed to be capable of influencing physical, mental, and spiritual health; manipulating personal relationships and the actions of others; and invoking the aid of the deities, the dead, and the abstract concept of ‘luck’” (2001: xvi). Although the objects themselves may be commonplace and ordinary, faith and belief invest them with their true “power”:

More important than the magical principles of imitation and contact is the spiritual presence that governs the charm. In the African traditional religions, European folk Christianity and popular magic, and the African-based New World belief systems, charms are often believed either to be endowed with an indwelling spirit or to enable the user to contact and direct an external spirit. An African deity, God the Father, Jesus, the Holy Ghost, one of the saints, a folk hero, or the dead might be summoned through the use of charms. In African American hoodoo practice the religious concept of an indwelling spirit has sometimes been lost, and the user may believe that the charm itself performs the desired act. The principles of imitative and contagious magic, plus the spiritual presence behind the charm, work to achieve the intention of the charm user through choice of ingredients, charm type, and related ritual actions. (xvii–xviii)

Bastide notes that Europeans brought their own varieties of medieval magic with them to the New World, often in the form of witches and magicians who were no longer burned at the stake but rather deported to the new Western territories. (Recall that the major phase of the European witch trials coincided with the colonization of the Americas and that the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the handbook for witch-hunters and Inquisitors throughout late Medieval Europe, was published in 1487, five years before Columbus’s voyage.) “Of greatest importance was the folk Christianity and popular magic practiced by many Europeans of the sixteenth through the nineteenth cen-

turies. Characterized by veneration of the saints as minor deities, belief in spirits, and the use of sacramental objects as charms, folk Christianity was remarkably similar to the traditional religions of Africa. European popular magic and healing were also compatible with African magical and medicinal practices” (Long 2001: 9).

European magic retained the advantage, however, of representing the practices of the ruling class and was perceived to be superior in one major aspect: it guaranteed European hegemony, while African magic had not prevented enslavement. “This is why, though they never rejected any of their own African practices which proved effective, the black population would reinforce the unsuccessful one with some European formula” in a process referred to as “magical accumulation” which serves to strengthen the operative force of a given spell or remedy (Bastide 1971: 16). He also observes, “It remains to be said that, while Negroes may borrow European magic to strengthen their own spells, the reverse is also true. Europeans tend to regard Negro magic as more effective, because of its ‘weird’ character and the old colonial terrors which it inspired” (161). According to Eugene Genovese,

Magic, in the widest sense of the word, as Frazer, Tylor, and other pioneer anthropologists taught, is a false science with an erroneous idea of cause and effect, but it is akin to science nonetheless in its appeal to human devices for control of the world. . . . For peasantries magic, however petty many of its applications, has served the vital social function of providing some defense, no matter how futile in the end, against the natural disasters and forces beyond their control. (1976: 230–231)

Magic is typically associated with the religions and cultures of premodern societies. That notion, however, is contested by scholars who have noted the interconnectedness of cultures created by world economic systems and link the practices of magic and witchcraft in the Americas to modernity and to Western colonial and anticolonial processes. In *Wizards & Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity & Tradition*, Palmié argues for the “modernity” of Afro-Cuban religious and cultural adaptation to the transatlantic experience, establishing that the modern structures of power in the transition from the colonial period to the modern were located not only in the New World of colonial power, but within the very structure of religion itself. Both, he claims, are linked to Western rationality, emerging out of the relations of inequality and oppression in colonization that created modernity’s achievements, and, citing Swiss anthropologist Alfred Métraux’s 1972 state-

ment, “It is too often forgotten . . . that Voodoo, for all of its African heritage, belongs to the modern world and is part of our own civilization” (2002: 57). Magic and witchcraft have been linked to forms of political and cultural resistance but also, as in Raquel Romberg’s *Witchcraft and Welfare: Spiritual Capital and the Business of Magic in Modern Puerto Rico*, to the consumerism and the global flow of products and ideas in a postcapitalist world where *brujos* become “spiritual entrepreneurs” providing for the spiritual, emotional, and at times economic needs of their clients (2003: 14).

Religious and cultural development follows many paths; a true understanding of magic and its place in a society requires an appreciation of cultural context, as we will observe in the chapters that follow. A complex and thorny issue, magic can be used as a form of resistance or retaliation, a means of redressing issues within a group, of defining self with regard to others, or a mode of gaining a sense of security and empowerment.<sup>21</sup> On some level, magical thinking is common to all societies, but magic as a religious and spiritual practice is a category that is perhaps the most misunderstood, maligned, feared, and sensationalized of all identified with African-derived religions. Value-laden assumptions have been assigned to the category and definitions of “miracles” and “magicoreligious” practices as well as their legitimacy and authenticity; indictments of superstition and witchcraft are common.

Of course, the expression “magicoreligious” itself is problematic, usually assigned to the religions and the spiritual practices of the “Other” that the modern Western world considers archaic. Where does one draw the line between magic and religion? A straightforward definition can be found in Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic*: “If magic is to be defined as the employment of ineffective techniques to allay anxiety when effective ones are not available, then we must recognize that no society will ever be free from it” (1971: 667). It is a question that Yvonne P. Chireau also examines in *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*, a book concerning

[t]he creations that black people have woven into their quest for spiritual empowerment and meaning. It is about magic, as that term refers to the beliefs and actions by which human beings interact with an invisible reality. But it is also about religion, which may be defined as a viable system of ideas and activities by which humans mediate the sacred realm. In some African American spiritual traditions, ideas about magic and

religious practice can enclose identical experiences. . . . Individuals may utilize the rhetoric of miracle to characterize this kind of spiritual efficacy, or they may adopt a lexicon that is associated with magic. Or they may choose both. A fixed dichotomy between these ideas is not always apparent. It is clear, then, that we are dealing with contested notions of belief. (2003: 2–3)

### *Diasporan Religions and Religion in the Diaspora*

The “diasporan religions,” a term coined by Joseph M. Murphy,<sup>22</sup> share significant traits, but perhaps the most characteristic is their dynamism. The globalization process has created an “intense intra-Caribbean circulation of ritual specialists—a free-flow of *espiritistas*, *santeros*, *brujos* [witches or sorcerers]. . . . These encounters and the availability of ritual commodities from distant parts of the world yield incomparable opportunities for mutual learning and exchange. . . . These interactions have broadened the pool of saints, deities, and spirits” (Romberg 2005: 141–142).

In the 2001 edition of Karen McCarthy Brown’s ground-breaking ethnography *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, we learn that cultural pluralism and transnational contacts have expanded religious options for Alourdes, the Haitian mambo whose story is the focus of the book. In addition to Haitian Vodou, Alourdes has added Santería and was initiated into the religion by a friend who was born in Puerto Rico and lives in Oakland, California, where she hopes that “bringing Vodou and Santería together can help reduce the tensions between the Latino and black populations in Oakland” (399). Mama Lola observed the ritual similarities between the two religions and when asked why, if they are, in her words, “almost the same thing,” she would go through the expense and responsibility of adding Santería to her religious practices, her response demonstrates a practical and religious intent: she wants to add more spirits to insure protection for herself, her family, and her support network, living and deceased. “I do it because my grandmother . . . she used to travel to Cuba . . . in her trade. That’s how she get it. Now, I got Yemaya too” (400).

The religious and cultural influence of the Creole religions of the Caribbean and its diaspora has broadened its reach: to the African American and U.S. Latino population, and, interestingly, to the artists and writers of those communities who have demonstrated an affinity with and been inspired by the Creole spiritual traditions, an issue we will discuss further in subsequent



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## Obeah, Myal, and Quimbois

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there has been growing anxiety among former Vodou practitioners about their need to renounce Vodou practices that were never seen as incompatible with Catholicism but cannot be reconciled with these new forms of Christian worship. Leslie Demangles, in *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*, describes how, although the “two belief systems differ on the surface, these differences do not prevent [Haitians] from practicing both religions simultaneously with no attempt to resolve whatever paradoxes may exist between them. Religiously, they venerate the saints of the church and the Vodou lwas simultaneously” (1992: 5).

The growing conversions to Pentecostalism have made the religious terrain of Haiti a more complex and problematic space while threatening the richness of the material culture associated with Vodou practice (Vodou flags, ritual sculpture, and sacred drums, among other items) which must often be destroyed as proof of true conversion. For *Pannkotis* (Pentecostal), Butler writes, this type of “cultural collision—an unwanted rendezvous between Vodou belief and biblical doctrine”—is the source of profound anxieties, as the lwa “must either be dismissed as the imaginary product of superstition or be relegated to a strict moral dichotomy with no obvious neutral ground” (2008: xx). As early as the 1970s, Frederick Conway, in “Pentecostalism in the Context of Haitian Religion and Health Practice,” had documented how for many Haitians, conversion to Protestantism, with its concomitant abandonment of “backward” Vodou practices, was a sign that “the country is becoming more and more civilized,” since embracing Protestantism was in and of itself a contribution to progress and development (Conway 1978: 172). Since then, scholars like Karen Richman have recorded a growing trend toward “the masses’ abandonment of their peasant religion and identification as Protestants” (Richman 2008: 8). Butler, in his turn, argues that ultimately, despite Pentecostal pastors’ vigilance in safeguarding the ritual boundaries between evangelical Christianity and Vodou, the lwa “occupy a space within Haiti’s cultural sphere of practice” from which they may be impossible to dislodge.

### Obeah

Obeah—a set of hybrid or creolized beliefs dependent on ritual invocation, fetishes, and charms—incorporates two very distinct categories of practice. The first involves “the casting of spells for various purposes, both good and evil: protecting oneself, property, family, or loved ones; harming real or perceived enemies; and bringing fortune in love, employment, personal or business pursuits” (Frye 1997: 198). The second incorporates traditional African-derived healing practices based on the application of considerable knowledge of herbal and animal medicinal properties. Obeah, thus conceived, is not a religion so much as a system of beliefs rooted in Creole notions of spirituality which acknowledges the existence and power of the supernatural world and incorporates into its practices witchcraft, sorcery, magic, spells, and healing (Frye 1997: 198). In the contemporary West Indies, the term has come to signify any African-derived practice with religious elements, and despite continued criminalization, has come to represent a meaningful and rich element in the Caribbean’s ancestral cultural heritage that needs to be nurtured and preserved.

The etymology of the word has been traced to the Ashanti terms *Obayifo* or *obeye*, meaning, respectively, wizard or witch, or the spiritual beings that inhabit witches. The term was creolized in the Caribbean over the years as *Obeah*, *obi*, or *obia*. The Ashanti and kindred tribes, Tshi-speaking people brought to the Caribbean from the Gold Coast of Africa, formed the largest group of slaves in the British colonies. Considered to be too disposed to rebel—“more prompted to revenge and murder the instruments of their slavery” (McCartney 1976: 18)—they were shunned by planters in the French and Spanish colonies, who drew their chief supply from the Ewe-speaking slaves, exported from Whydah and Badogy (Ellis 1891: 651). Consequently, the Ashanti-derived practices known as Obeah are practiced primarily in the former British colonies of the West Indies, with the related practice of Quimbois prevalent in the neighboring French islands of Guadeloupe and Mar-

tinique. In recent decades, because of widespread migration of West Indians to metropolitan centers like New York, London, Toronto, and Miami (among others), Obeah practices have come into contact with other Caribbean belief systems like Vodou, Santería, and Espiritismo, contributing to the richness of healing and spiritual offerings available in the Diaspora.

Obeah practices had been identified in the British islands of the Caribbean—the Bahamas, Antigua, Barbados, Jamaica, and the colony of Surinam—as early as the seventeenth century, when the colonies became the first in the region to establish slave-dependent sugar plantations. Obeah, as a set of secret rituals intended to bring about desired effects or actions and promote healing, is thought to have provided the slave population with at least an illusion of autonomy as well as a familiar method of access to the world of the spirits, a measure of social control and medical care. According to Orlando Patterson, it was also used by the slaves as a system of intergroup justice in “preventing, detecting and punishing crimes among the slaves” (Patterson 1967: 190).

The practice of Obeah, seen by British colonial authorities as a threat to the stability of the plantation and the health of colonial institutions, was criminalized early in the history of the Caribbean plantation. The British perceived it as one of the few means of retribution open to the slave population and quickly set in motion a number of ultimately ineffective deterrents. Joseph Williams, in his study *Voodoo and Obeahs*, cites laws against the use of poisons (1684), the beating of drums, and the congregation of slaves for feasts (1699), and the beating of drums, horns, gourds, and boards (1717), all linked to religious practices focusing on building communities (1932: 159–161). In 1787, for example, the laws governing the slaves included a clause stating, “Any slave who shall pretend to any supernatural power, in order to affect the health or lives of others, or promote the purposes of rebellion shall upon conviction thereof suffer death, or such other punishment as the Court shall think proper to direct” (J. Campbell 1976: 39). Moreover, Obeahmen, as practitioners of Obeah are known, were seen as potential leaders who could use their influence over the slaves to incite them to rebellion, as had been the case in the Jamaican rebellion of 1760. “The influence of the Professors of that art,” wrote the authors of the *Report of the Lord of the Committee of the Council Appointed for All Matters Relating to Trade and Foreign Plantations*, “was such as to induce many to enter into that rebellion on the assurance that they were invulnerable, and to render them so, the Obeah man gave them a powder with which to rub themselves.” Tacky, the leader of the

rebellion, claimed he had been “an African chief and that he had obtained the assistance of the obeah-man in battle. Tacky himself was invested with the power of catching any shots which were fired at him and of returning them to his opponent” (Morrish 1982: 41). Albert Edwards, in his study of Maroon warfare, writes of the persistence of the connection between Obeah and preparation for battle in the West Indies, citing ethnographic evidence focused on the incorporation of “music, dance and libations” traditionally associated with Obeah practices in Maroon warfare:

The drums, which were used in the dance, were ideal for focusing one’s attention on the task at hand. During the ceremony instructions could be easily passed on to persons preparing for battle. . . . The priest/priestess was no doubt a central part of the Maroon community. It was their role to justify to the fighters the reason and importance of the struggle they were waging. It was in the priest or priestess that the community looked for inspiration and morale building. (1994: 158–159)

From the Obeahmen, slaves had learned the usefulness of poison (particularly that of the manchenil tree) to bring about death of a broad variety of injuries and illnesses, the use of slivers of glass or ground glass in the master’s food or drink, and the production of fetishes for luck and protection. William Cartwright describes how in the “slave era many slave masters were afflicted with incurable sores, and many died, as a result of deadly potions sprinkled in Massa’s clothing or stirred into his food” (Hedrick and Stephens 1977: 10). Richard Hart cites the following testimony regarding the link between Obeah and rebellion in the early history of the British colonies in the West Indies:

Confirmation of the fact that the conspirators had received some guns was, however, provided by one of the last of their number to be arrested. This man answered to the name of Jack[,] and Corberand described him as “a Guinea negro” who “understood how to do everything and knew every sort of bush.” He was accused, in addition to the charge of conspiracy, of practising [*sic*] obeah and using his pretended supernatural powers to bolster the courage of his fellow conspirators. He did this, it was alleged: “by rubbing the said Negroes and certain Slaves with certain Bushes at the same time saying that such rubbing . . . would give them Strength and cause them to be invulnerable.” (1985: 236)

As the result of these perceived and actual threats, and the legal sanctions that followed, Obeah practices that had been part of community religious rituals incorporating song, dance, and offerings to the spirits (usually through animal sacrifice), went underground. Obeah, as a result, differs from Vodou and Santería in lacking the established liturgy and community rituals that mark the latter as recognized organized religions, although certain communities in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago are working on the recovery of communal practices in Obeah and practices in some islands demonstrate aspects of Afro-Caribbean community-based religiosity (veneration of the ancestors, spirit possession, animal sacrifice, and divination). The loss of the “codified, institutionalized, and consistent” elements of institutionalized religion, Diana Paton has argued, relegated Obeah to the proscribed realm of “witchcraft, magic, superstition and charlatanism,” leaving it on the wrong side of the line separating “supposedly ‘civilized’ peoples (who practice religion) and ‘primitive’ peoples (who practice superstition or magic)” and thereby “blocking a key potential argument for the decriminalization of obeah on the basis of freedom of religion” (Paton 2009: 2–3).

As a result of the widespread criminalization of practices associated with it, Obeah—a protean term that encompasses a rich tradition of practices that vary regionally—has become synonymous with “iniquity,” as Kenneth Bilby has argued. Its vilification has “formed an important part of the armament” organized religion has deployed “in the long struggle they waged against the understandings of the cosmos that Africans brought with them to the Caribbean” (Bilby 2008: 10). Despite efforts since the 1980s to decriminalize Obeah across the region, it remains illegal in most Caribbean territories, although enforcement is lax and the practices are tolerated unless the practitioners infringe other laws in the process. Most of the prosecutions against Obeah practitioners, as Claudette Anderson has demonstrated in her research on Obeah and the law in Jamaica,<sup>1</sup> center on accusations of charlatanism brought against individuals who have promised specific results in return for large fees and have not delivered on such promises. The movement to decriminalize Obeah has also run into opposition from Rastafarians across the region, since the Brethren strongly disapprove of Obeah practitioners, whom they associate with Babylon.

Unlike Haitian Vodou and Cuba’s Regla de Ocha, Obeah is not generally centered around a community of deities or spirits who manifest themselves among humans through possession or divination or who protect their “children” in return for offerings, sacrifices, and other forms of devotion. It is, instead, a remarkably heterogeneous and protean grouping of African-

derived practice that has benefitted from the circulation of people and ideas across the Caribbean region. As Lara Putnam has explained it:

The centuries-long coexistence and cross-fertilization in the Greater Caribbean of multiple traditions of supernatural manipulation—including but not limited to those of western Africa and medieval Europe—in conjunction with the frequent similarities of symbolic logic in magical systems of utterly disparate origin, and combined with Caribbeans’ ongoing engagement with North American and European commercial products offering knowledge and healing (from patent medicines to tarot cards), meant that magical practice could serve as a *lingua franca* in a region constantly on the move. (Putnam 2008: 13)

This heterogeneity and movement, however, has also meant that the practice of Obeah has flourished as one focused on individual practitioners who operate through consultations taking place on a one-on-one basis, the secrecy made historically necessary by the legal persecution to which they have been subjected. Since the practice of Obeah is limited to individual consultation, calculating the extent of the Obeahmen’s client base is difficult. Practitioners are numerous across the Caribbean, the United States, England, and Canada, many of them working out of storefront consultation rooms in urban settings or discreetly out of their houses. In islands like Trinidad and Tobago, Obeahmen and women regularly advertise in the classified columns of newspapers like the *Trinidad Express*, where we can find numerous ads touting the talents and accomplishments of a variety of practitioners: “Lovers need uniting? Call Madame Theresa. Want to pass that exam? Prof Ali for immediate results. Sickness? Court cases? Casting out evil spirits? There is a St Flemin Healing School” (Kissoon 2009).

Practitioners of Obeah, who can be either male or female, are known principally as Obeah man or woman, or Myal man or woman. Other appellations across the Caribbean region include Bush man or Bush doctor in the Bahamas, Wanga man in Trinidad, the Scientists in Grenada, Professor, Madame, Pundit, Maraj, and work-man in Guyana. Generally, an Obeahman is believed to have the power “to propitiate or deceive strong spirits, and by his own secret knowledge and experience is able to make weak ones do his bidding. He also by certain rites and magical arts professes to have control over persons and things so that he is able to bring about what he wishes or engages to do” (Udal 1915: 282). Practitioners are believed to be born with special powers—to be “born with the gift”—normally revealed to them

through visions or dreams in late childhood or early adolescence. Obeah powers are also believed to pass from one family member to another—most commonly from parent to elder child—as a family heritage. Some Obeahmen may acquire their powers through conversion, as a result of a radical change in beliefs or lifestyle or in response to a traumatic event. Maarit Forde, in her work on “The Moral Economy of Rituals in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Trinidad,” describes how Mother Cleorita, a Trinidadian healer she worked closely with, “received her gift of healing during the prolonged rite of passage of *mourning*”:

Travelling in the Spiritual world, Mother Cleorita found herself walking down a road. Soon she saw two cobra snakes dancing in front of her, beckoning her to follow. Despite her fear she forced herself to follow the cobras down a long set of stairs into a cave. There she encountered a man, who told her he had been trying to call her for a long, long time. He led her into a room, where she saw a skeleton lying on a table. It was disjuncting itself, pulling off bones joint by joint, all the way from one hand to the other, until it was completely shattered. Then it put the bones back to their places, deliberately, one by one. Once complete again, the skeleton greeted Mother Cleorita and said that it was her turn now! She had no choice but to try and disjoin the skeleton. Horrified, she managed to pull out the first finger with shaking hands, then the next one and so on, going all the way through. She then assembled the bones in the correct order. The man then led her to another place where a woman was about to give birth, and Mother Cleorita had to help to deliver the baby. After these lessons she found her way to the Zion Hospital, where she met the famous Chinese doctor, Dr. Lee. Dr. Lee told the exhausted Mother Cleorita that she was now qualified as a doctor herself and gave her a name tag and a chart; she also got a lilac dress. Her name on the tag was Dr. Su Ling. For forty years now she has been practicing her skills as a healer, including fixing dislocated ankles or knees just like the skeleton taught her. (Forde 2008: 14–15)

Once the powers are acknowledged, the youth is apprenticed to a seasoned practitioner whose role it is to teach him the specifics of herb knowledge and potion making, since Obeahmen are primarily skilled herbalists. Folk tradition speaks of a year of apprenticeship in the solitude of the forest—a version of apprenticeship with roots in African traditions and popular in Caribbean fiction. But in practice an apprenticeship can last as long as five to six years:

It is said that the whirlwind aja used to carry men away with it into the bush for one year or more. During this period the man thus carried away is fed and taught the art of making ju ju and prescriptions of various kinds by a supernatural being. When the man is discharged, he finds himself in his quarters without knowing where he has been and how he managed to get back to his quarters. Such a man is held in awe and respected, and is given a high title among the Olonasins (ju ju men), but such a case is very rare. (Ajisafe 1946: 42–43)

Modern-day prospective Obeahmen follow apprenticeships that differ little from traditional practices, as the experience of Nigel David Cobb, a young Jamaican training under a senior Obeahman in Balcarres, Portland, shows. Cobb, who began his five-year apprenticeship in 2004, “got a calling to seek the high physician” and explains that “The Lord sent me into the hills, He who has a clean hand and a pure heart” (Luton 2009). He has trained with a bush doctor known as “Mr. Murray,” with whom he has learned enough in five years to consider starting to practice on his own: “Five years ago, before mi come here, mi neva believe inna it (obeah), but I have seen his work and I know that he is a high physician” (Luton 2009). On an average day, he explains, he “registers up to 25 clients” and “spends his days learning to read, bathe and cure persons around whose ‘neck trouble hangs like an albatross’; young and old come every day ‘in droves for deliverance at his ‘teacher’ and mentor’s practice” (Luton 2009). For Cobb, his work as an Obeahman is not incompatible with his Christian faith, as from his point of view, “the *Bible* says seek the high physician and you have to find the highest knowledge,” Cobb relates. “A lot of people do it (indulge in Obeah) because it can give them benefits in life, which is true. But some people do it for money. I want to use it to help people and to know more about the natural mystic of God’s work” (Luton 2009).

Although there are no age limits placed on practitioners, older Obeahmen, perceived to have greater knowledge and experience, are usually more highly regarded than younger ones. As in the case of “Mr. Murray,” one of their main roles is the transmission of their knowledge to a new generation. Sometimes the degree of trust in a practitioner is linked to his/her having a physical disability—an impediment such as a blind eye, club foot, or deformed hand—in the belief that nature has compensated the Obeahman for the physical disability with a higher degree of psychic ability. As a rule, Obeahmen do not wear any distinctive clothing or other marks of their trade, although in the past, particularly in the period immediately preceding and

following slavery, Myalmen (closely identified with Obeahmen in Jamaica) were often portrayed as wearing waist belts from which hung a variety of knives, shears, and other weapons and instruments. Hart cites a description of an "obeah woman":

Thicknesse described Quao's obeah woman as an "old Hagg" wearing "a girdle round her waste which (I speak within compass) nine or ten different knives hanging in sheaths to it. (1985: 113)

### *Obeah Healing and Protection*

Accounts of Obeah practitioners, most of them by white visitors to the Caribbean in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have emphasized the menacing nature of the practice and practitioners. Charles Rampini, in his *Letters from Jamaica* (1903), asserts that there is "something indescribably sinister about the appearance of an obeah man" (1983: 213), while Bessie Pullen-Burry, writing in 1903, describes Obeahmen as "generally a most forbidding-looking person, craftiness and cunning being stamped on his features" (1903: 31). Nineteenth-century descriptions of Obeahmen also point to the consistency of the practitioner's role through the years. Fowles, traveling through the Bahamas in the latter part of the century, speaks of Obeahmen as a "species of African magicians, who, for a trifling consideration, will bewitch your enemies and charm your friends, so that any one stealing from them will be punished by supernatural agency without the intervention of the policeman or the magistrate" (1999: 238). Bessie Pullen-Burry, in her *Jamaica As It Is, 1903*, describes the Obeahman's functions thus:

He pretends to a medicinal knowledge of plants, and undoubtedly is well versed in the action of subtle poisons; his trade is to impose upon his simple compatriot. The negro consults him in case of illness, as well as to call down revenge upon his enemies for injuries sustained. . . . They always "set obi" at midnight. In the morning the stoutest-hearted negro gives himself up for lost when he sees the well-known, but much dreaded insignia of the Obeah man upon his doorstep, or under the thatch of his roof. This generally consists of a bottle with turkeys' or cocks' feathers stuck in it, with an accompaniment of parrots' beaks, drops of blood, coffin nails, and empty egg-shells. . . . The dread of supernatural evil, which he is powerless to combat, acts upon what nervous system he possesses, so that sleep

becomes an impossibility, his appetite fails him, his light-heartedness disappears as the ever-growing fear possesses his imagination more and more, and he generally dies. (1903: 135)

Hesketh Bell, a colonial official and later Governor of Dominica, in his *Obeah and Witchcraft in the West Indies* (1893), the first comprehensive study of West Indian Obeah available, describes an Obeahman's hut in some detail, pointing with particular interest to the paraphernalia of the practice:

The dirty little room was littered with the Obeah man's stock in trade. A number of vials containing some sort of unholy liquor were lying ready to be handed over to some foolish negro in exchange for their weight in silver. In every corner were found the implements of his trade, rags, feathers, bones of cat, parrots' beaks, dogs' teeth, broken bottles, grave dirt, rum and egg shells. Examining further, we found under the bed a large conarie or earthen jar containing an immense number of round balls of earth or clay of various dimensions, large and small, whitened on the outside and fearfully and wonderfully compounded. Some seemed to contain rags and were strongly bound round with twine; others were made with skulls of cats, stuck round with human or dogs' teeth and glad beads. There were also a lot of egg shells and numbers of little bags filled with a farrago of rubbish. In a little tin canister I found the most valuable of the sorcerer's stock, namely, seven bones belonging to a rattlesnake's tail—these I have known sell for five dollars each, so highly valued are they as amulets or charms—in the same box was about a yard of rope, no doubt intended to be sold for hangman's cord, which is highly prized by the Negroes, the owner of a piece being lucky. (1893: 9)

As in the past, contemporary interactions between an Obeahman or woman and the rest of society are primarily individual in nature. Unlike the group ceremonies and public initiation rituals of community-oriented practices such as Santería and Vodou, there are few group rituals, dancing, drum playing or singing connected to Obeah practices. The systematic repression of African cultural expressions on the part of the British had forced these practices underground, and they had ultimately been lost, except in some pockets of religious activity like Myalism in Jamaica (particularly the Convince-Bongo practices) or the Trinidadian Orisha tradition (also known as Shango), which retain African-derived rites, sacrifices, feasts, and musical traditions meant to establish spiritual contact with African gods. In Trini-



dad, locals remember fondly an Obeahman known as Papa Neza as an influential leader of the Shango movement. Papa Neza (Samuel Ebenezer Elliot, 1901–1969), a “Merikin or descendant of freed American slaves who arrived in Trinidad in 1812, was 32 years old when his powers as an Obeahman were revealed. He was particularly known for the ritual feasts he organized four times a year (June, August, September, and New Year’s Eve), especially that of the Feast of St. Michael (Michaelmas or September 29), when his many followers would bring offerings of goats, fowl and cows which were cooked and distributed among the villagers after rituals were completed” (Kissoun 2009). His rituals, known particularly for their innovative use of drumming and singing, attracted people from as far away as Venezuela, while his popularity was such that at times “hundreds would line the street outside his home to get a dose of his infamous bush medicine” (Kissoun 2009). Lorna McDaniels, in her study of memory spirituals of former slave American soldiers in Trinidad, sees Papa Neza as “an essential musical link between the American black Baptists and the Orisha religion” for the role he played in bridging the world of Christian and Obeah practitioners in Trinidad (McDaniel 1994: 133).

Papa Neza’s experiences as leader in Shango or Orisha practices find an echo in the Convince-Bongo practitioners of Jamaica. Convince, one of the oldest surviving forms of Myalism—although Creolized with Kumina and the teachings of nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries—retains nonetheless a pantheon of African spirits organized hierarchically according to their “degree of removal from the present generation, the more powerful being the Bongo spirits from Africans, Jamaican slaves and Maroons” (Payne-Jackson and Alleyne 2004: 62). The spirits, which are followed by recently-departed Obeahmen and the spirits of Convince believers, may possess or “mount” devotees, who, in turn, are expected to honor them with ceremonies that include the sacrifice of goats (Payne-Jackson and Alleyne 2004: 62). In return for animal sacrifices, the spirits will teach Bongomen the secrets needed to help humans, offer protection, and assist them in performing magic or Obeah. As an example of African spirituality in the Caribbean closely related to Obeah, Convince has shared in the vilification of its practices that has followed Euro-Christian cultural domination. In a conversation with Kenneth Bilby, a long-time practitioner of Convince acknowledges the need to defend Obeah practices as a positive force in Jamaican culture: “Obeah, it don’t sound good in the English. But the work from it is pretty fine . . . We no rate it fe go out deh [in public], go seh [the word] “obeah.” We just say it local [i.e. among ourselves]” (Bilby 2008: 5).<sup>2</sup>

Unlike practitioners of the Orisha tradition or Shango like Papa Neza, or Convince, however, a typical Obeah practitioner may chant or sing or go into a trance in the treatment of an individual client, but the practice bears little resemblance to the complex rituals of possession and summoning of the spirits through music and dance characteristic of other African-derived Creole practices. Typically, a consultation with an Obeahman comes as the result of an individual wishing to effect some change in his or her life: reach a specific goal, awaken someone’s affection, seek revenge for an evil done, obtain protection from a “fix” by another Obeahman, attain success in a business deal or legal case, or change his luck. The practitioner listens to his client’s description of the situation and recommends a remedy. Baths, massages, or healing prescriptions can be applied to physical maladies, while pouches or bottles made of various substances—herbs, earth, animal or human body matter (hair, nail clippings, blood, and other bodily fluids), articles of clothing (placed in strategic places or worn about the body)—are recommended for other problems. The desired results are usually linked to the client’s faithful adherence to these recommendations. Among the most frequent prescriptions for physical maladies are “bush baths,” regarded as particularly therapeutic in the treatment of fevers. Bessie Pullen-Burry describes bush baths as consisting of

equal proportions of the leaves of the following plants: akee, sour sop, jointwood, pimento, cowfoot, elder, lime-leaf and liquorice. The patient is plunged into the bath when it is very hot, and is covered with a sheet. When the steam has penetrated the skin, the patient is removed from the bath, and covered with warm blankets, leaving the skin undried. A refreshing sleep is invariably the consequence, and a very perceptible fall in temperature. (1903: 141)

The Obeahman’s role as a herbalist or bush doctor has traditionally been considered his or her main social function. This function involves considerable skill and knowledge of the pharmaceutical qualities of the leaves, bark, seeds, and flowers of certain plants and herbs for the treatment of common ailments, the methods of preparation of particular medicines, and their administration, including dosages and potential side effects. Preparations include poultices, teas, and baths, used in the treatment of a full range of maladies, including heart and kidney disease, headaches, boils, sores, fevers, diabetes, tuberculosis, rheumatism, and AIDS. According to Joseph McCartney, Obeah practitioners subscribe to the idea that “plants absorb the cosmic

properties of the sun, moon and planets and whether they are taken internally, used as a poultice or worn as a fetish or amulet, they convey to you the desired results" (1976: 98).

The modern practitioner's consultation room includes a broad variety of substances for the preparation of these remedies, although nowadays there is a preponderance of commercially produced items, especially as Obeahmen throughout the Caribbean have found the forests and savannahs that were their principal source of herbs and materials depleted by increasing development and the concomitant deforestation, particularly in the service of the tourist industry. A broad variety of substances aid in contemporary Obeah consultation. The eggs of white fowls are used to communicate with water spirits and help in divination. Uncooked grains of white rice and cloves are used with milk to feed the spirits. Brooms made from the manicole palm are placed over the threshold to ward off evil spirits. The bean caper known as beana is planted around the house to bring prosperity to the home. White lilies are used to appease the spirits. The tree of life is buried in a bottle near the doorstep to preserve the life of the owner (J. Campbell 1976: 18–19). Candles are used to "dress" or cleanse the consultation room of evil or harmful spirits. The commercial products used include imported herbs, processed soaps and lotions, and items manufactured especially for use in Creole practices, frequently found in herb shops or botánicas. Among these items are a variety of incenses and scented candles, and combinations of herbs and oils such as "Holy Spirit Bath," "Lucky Dream Remembering Oil," "Lucky Dream Incense," and "Fast Success Powder" (McCartney 1976: 122). In the practice of modern "literary Obeah"—which incorporates religious or mystical texts as an aid in advising or divination—a number of books on religion, astrology, the occult, and mysticism are used, particularly the Bible; *The Sixth and Seventh Book of Moses: Or Moses' Magical Spirit Art Known as the Wonderful Arts of the Old Wise Hebrews, Taken from the Mosaic Books of the Cabala and the Talmud for the Good of Mankind*; James Dillet Freeman's *Prayer, the Master Key*; Lewis de Claremont's *Seven Steps to Power: A Study of Beliefs, Customs, of Traditions of People in Various Ages*; and *Black Guard*, the newspaper of the African Descendants Provisional Government, a black militant organization from San Francisco.

Many of these substances are used in the preparation of fetishes—inanimate objects that are supposed to have special powers and are carried as protection or revered. Parts of the human body (hair, fingernail clippings, blood, sometimes menstrual blood, or other body fluids) or parts of an animal (fur, feathers, bones), objects of clothing (underclothes, handkerchiefs, socks or

stockings), and dirt (preferably graveyard dirt) are extensively used in the preparation of fetishes in Obeah. Hair, particularly, is thought to make "a very dangerous obeah" (Beckwith 1929: 115).

The practice of placing fetishes as objects of protection in homes and yards is of long standing. Clement Penrose, writing about the Bahamas in 1905, observed that "at some of the islands we found hanging to various trees, fantastically draped bottles and sticks, which, we were informed, were charms to frighten away thieves and evil spirits. It is believed by the negroes that if anyone but the rightful owners, should eat the fruit from a tree on which this spell has been placed, he will swell up and burst" (1905: 415). Likewise, Hesketh Bell speaks of having found many Caribbean gardens "dressed with obeah . . . to prevent the theft of their contents." In Jamaica Kincaid's collection of Antiguan vignettes, *At the Bottom of the River*, the mother instructs her daughter not to pick people's flowers because the daughter "might catch something" (1983: 5).

These substances and objects release their power when placed in strategic locations around the house, garden, or person. Substances can be sprinkled around the house or yard, buried in the walkways leading to the house, hung from trees, doorways, or windows, placed under pillows and beds, or sewn into clothing. An obeah flag, "a diagonal red cross on a black background," may be displayed in some Caribbean gardens as a guarantor of protection from thieves and Obeah spells (Hedrick and Stephens 1977: 22). Diane Stewart speaks of the practice of sacrificing a chicken or pigeon and pouring the blood on the perimeter of a building's foundation prior to construction to ensure success, protection, and blessing (Stewart 1997: 22).

When deployed according to the Obeahman's instructions, the measures involved in "setting Obeah" (placing a charm somewhere to do a person harm) and "work for me" (the use of Obeah charms to do a person good), are expected to lead to the desired results. Hedrick and Stephens, in their study of Obeah in the Bahamas, list the loss of hair, unexplained swelling of the stomach or limbs, headaches, ringing in the ears, unexplained boils and festering sores, deformity, blindness, and occasionally death as among the most common effects of Obeah spells. The effects of Obeah are also said to be capable of producing madness. Martha Beckwith, in her study of Jamaican folk life, reports an interview with a victim who described how under the effects of a spell, "You begin to creep . . . go naked. The spirit will argue with you in your mind" (1929: 140).

The problems upon which Obeahmen are called to bring their skills to bear are varied and involve goals that are often outside the client's direc-

control. Rupert Missick, in his study, *No Cure for Sure: Obeah Stories of the Bahamas* (1975), offers a comprehensive list of common goals that includes gaining the love of the opposite sex, finding lost articles, bending individuals to one's will, securing the love of an indifferent person, resolving legal issues, getting people out of prison, revenge, and obtaining luck in games or gambling (1975: 45). Obeah is frequently used to effect changes in male-female relationships. Joseph McCartney describes a practice to assure marital fidelity in which a client provides a lock and a key. The practitioner sets the lock and instructs the client to put the lock and key under his wife's pillow. During the sex act, the client should "close the lock and lock it with the key," thus assuring his partner's fidelity (1976: 160).

Numerous reports on the use of Obeah in the West Indies involve an individual's efforts to use fetishes to influence the outcome of trials and lawsuits and obtain favorable verdicts in court. Claudette Anderson, in her research, argues that in Jamaica "it is the Obeahman, as retained by Judge, Jury, defendant, lawyer and the host of other parties to the case, who uses dynamic power to control the power dynamics in the Jamaican House O'Law" (2008: 27). The following example, taken from an incident in Guyana, where (as in Trinidad) indentured servitude brought large numbers of East Indian immigrants in the nineteenth century, shows not only the link between Obeah and the manipulation of court cases, but also the ways in which Obeah practices have syncretized with Hindu mysticism. John Campbell, in his study of Obeah in Guyana, tells of a Hindu priest on the lower Corentyne region who moved back and forth between his Hindu temple and a home in the same compound where he held daily consultations with non-Hindu Obeah clients. He had gained a reputation for treating clients embroiled in criminal cases, using a mixture of Obeah and *downtah*, as East Indian "witchcraft" is sometimes called. Once, when his consultation room was raided by the police,

he was caught at a table filled with aerated drinks, roti and a brass pan with burning pitch pine-sticks and a lota (brass goblet), with mango leaves and hibiscus flowers. He passed the brass pan and lota alternately over the head of a man who had been charged with allegedly cutting out the tongues of six calves belonging to a village farmer and stealing and slaughtering a stud ram belonging to the Government. In the lota, emersed [*sic*] in water, was a slip of parchment on which was written in red ink, the names of the Policeman who instituted the charge, the Police officer in charge of the sub-division, a police key witness and the Magistrate who was due to preside over the preliminary inquiry into the matter. (1976: 8)

Other strategies for affecting the outcome of legal proceedings involve writing the prosecutor's name on a piece of paper wrapped around an egg and secured with a pin. The accused places the paper and egg under his armpit and presses on them as the prosecutor speaks. The rubbing of certain oils on the body of the accused is also said to affect the prosecutor's ability to build a successful case. Among the numerous cases cited by Anderson which involve the rubbing or application of various oils, is the following:

A young man who had broken into a shop of a neighbouring village went to an Obeahman named Clarke to get him out of his trouble, and to prevent the police from catching him. Clarke told him not to fret at all, and that he would give him something so that the police shouldn't catch him. The young man then stated that "Clarke took down a paper parcel and threw something from it over my head. It was something like fine ashes. He was jumping about and speaking in a language I didn't understand. He told me to jump and while he jumped I jumped too. He then gave me a canister of water to put to my nose and say 'God Save the Queen.' I did so. He gave me then a black powder to put in the water I drank and the food I ate. He said it would carry away the policeman who caught me. I paid him two shillings. He also gave me a tin of water to throw away at the crossroads. (Anderson 2008: 14)

The Obeahman's services—whether medical, psychological, moral, or legal—are rendered in exchange for an agreed fee that is often connected to the client's ability to pay.<sup>3</sup> An Obeah practitioner's success is directly related to the reputation he has established as a herbalist, his skills as a listener, and his ability to achieve the expected results. These in turn establish his clients' belief and confidence in his magical powers. Prestige, and the influence he or she can wield in the community, is linked both to the practitioner's reputation for skill as well as his or her own economic position. The latter in turn is partly dependent on the clients' social class, since fees are determined by the client's available resources, but also on a "performance" of prosperity that can reassure clients in advance. In addition to fees for consultations, supplemental income is derived from the sale of prescribed drugs (either prepared especially for the client, pre-packaged by the Obeahman, or commercially prepared) and paraphernalia such as candles, soaps, or reading materials). Maarit Forde, in her study of contemporary Obeah practitioners in Trinidad, finds that

although creole religions and healing in the Caribbean have developed in societies forged by and contributing to global capitalism and other facets of modernity, the ritual practice classified as obeah in the colonial Caribbean, or the spiritual work done by present-day ritual specialists does not align with the logic of commodification, short-term gain, anonymity and impersonality of exchange typical of capitalism. Money is a standard object of exchange in the ritual sphere of exchange, and moral debates of ritually earned money do not question the legitimacy of monetary transactions themselves. (Forde 2008: 16).

What we know about traditional practices confirms her conclusions. The popular Papa Neza, for example, was known never to take money as payment for his services. Whatever money was left by clients was reportedly invested in the feasts he organized periodically and, as such, returned to his community of followers. Cobb, the young apprentice learning with “Mr. Murray,” explains that “a lot of people do it (indulge in obeah) because it can give them benefits in life, which is true. But some people do it for money. I want to use it to help people and to know more about the natural mystic of God’s work” (Luton 2009).

### *The Spirit World*

Central to the practice of Obeah is the relationship between humans and spirits. The Obeah concept of the spirit is different from that of the tutelary spirits of the ancestors found in Santería and Vodou, since spirits in Obeah manifest themselves primarily as ghosts—sperrids, spirits, or duppies—that can be “called” or summoned as helpers in the process of revealing mysteries, affording protection, or inflicting harm. A spirit or duppy can be “either the soul of a dead person, manifest in human form,” “the soul of the dead manifest in a variety of fabulous beasts, and also in the forms of real animals like lizards and snakes,” or “an order of supernatural beings only vaguely associated with the dead” (Leach 1961: 207–215). Linked to the notion of manipulating the spirits is the Obeah practitioner’s reputed ability to control an individual through his shadow (Morrish 1982: 44). The practice of “catching shadows” involves capturing a dying person’s last breath in a bottle or jar. Since the duppies are the conduits of numerous charms—particularly of evil spells—“working Obeah” is often synonymous with “setting a duppy for someone,” while “pulling” (or “taking off”) Obeah means “to extract the

obeah set by another,” usually by removing the duppy that had served as conduit (Beckwith 1929: 104, 107).

The world of the spirits includes belief in the sudden apparition of a variety of animal figures in the night sky. Among these the most feared is the lowing cow or rolling calf, a most dreadful harbinger of evil, who “keeps the secrets of the duppy world” (Beckwith 1929: 119). Bessie Pullen-Burry writes that “those who have witnessed the awful phantom describe it as a huge animal with fire issuing from its nostrils, and clanking chains as it rolls down the mountain-side, burning everything in its path” (1903: 138). In Herbert De Lisser’s early Jamaican novel, *The White Witch of Rose Hall*, the eponymous sorceress displays her formidable powers by summoning a rolling calf to terrorize her slaves. Other frequent apparitions involve those of a cat as large as a goat with eyes like burning lamps.

Among the creolized variants of Obeah, the Shaker rituals of Guyana incorporate notions of exorcism of devils and spirits as part of their claim to heal chronic illnesses. The rituals usually take the form of beating the affected person and administering bush baths. In group ceremonies—which are not found among practitioners of Obeah in other Caribbean regions—practitioners dance frenetically to the rhythm of African drums until they are exhausted, then lie prostrate on the floor. The accompanying feasts include unsalted foods, milk, honey, and white rum, the remnants of which are gathered carefully along with a portion of white rum or high-wine and deposited on the seashore as an offering to a water spirit known as “fair maid” or “water mama” (J. Campbell 1976: 7–8). East Indians in Guyana, in a further syncretism, have added chiromancy or palm reading to the divination functions of Obeah.

### *Jamaican Myalism*

Myal, a version of Obeah practiced only in Jamaica, retains aspects of African-derived religiosity that have been lost in other parts of the Anglophone Caribbean. Scholars working on Jamaican religious traditions have established a somewhat simplistic distinction between Obeah and Myal, which assumes a close connection between Obeah, poison, witchcraft, and the antithesis of Christianity—in short, bad or black magic—and a correlation between Myal, healing practices, ecstatic worship, and spirit possession—Myal as good magic. This distinction was initially established during the Myal Revival of the 1860s, when Myal practitioners engaged in a systematic anti-Obeah campaign.

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## Notes

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### PREFACE

Aisha Khan (July–December 2007: 191).

### INTRODUCTION

1. The spelling of Vodou (also Voodoo, Vodoun, and Vaudon) is, like many other terms of African origin used to describe various practices and beliefs, a constant source of debate among scholars and believers. The text reflects our preferences; citations naturally maintain the individual preference of those cited.

2. See Charles Stewart, ed., *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory*, “Introduction,” for an excellent historical overview of the use of the term (2007: 1–25). In the same volume, “Creole Colonial Spanish America,” by Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, examines the political use of the term by Latin Americans who contrasted their Creole status as a tactic against Spanish “Peninsulars” in the struggle for independence (26–45).

3. Aisha Khan, “Creolization Moments” (2007: 237–238).

4. Stewart 2007: 5.

5. For an interesting discussion on the global preoccupations of Caribbean authors and the issue of postcolonial cultural identity, see Patricia Krüs, “Myth and Revolution in the Caribbean Postmodern” (2006: 149–167).

6. Torres-Saillant notes that when Benítez Rojo was questioned during a lecture at Syracuse University in 2001 by Puerto Rican author Mayra Santos-Febres as to why he relied on Chaos Theory, “given the availability of similar paradigms in the cosmology of Santería in his own native Cuban culture, he immediately agreed with her and proceeded to explain his choice in terms of what he thought would be preferred in the U.S. academy.” (Torres-Saillant 2006: 87)

7. *Créolité*, as we note in our discussion, is a French Antillean literary term for Creole identity. *Métissage* (French) and *mestizaje* (Spanish) both relate to the mixture of race and/or culture.

8. Desmangles (1992: 172). In “Trans-Caribbean Identity and the Fictional World of Mayra Montero,” Fernández Olmos argues for yet another category of religious syncretism, exemplified by the *Gagá* cult in the Dominican Republic. *Gagá* is a Vodou-derived practice brought by emigrating Haitian sugarcane workers to the Dominican Republic, where it was transformed and reinterpreted by local folk practices and beliefs. It is “an interesting example of nontraditional Caribbean syncretism: instead of a hybridity between the European and the colonized, *Gagá* exemplifies a secondary type of syncretism, one between (ex)colonized peoples” (1997: 273).

9. “[T]he concept of syncretism has been used in many different ways since Plutarch wrote the history of the Cretans. During the period of expansion of European colonialism, for instance, when ethnography was deployed to describe colonized peoples, syncretism defined a stage of evolution (progress), serving to explain the ways “uncivilized” societies “assimilated” more “advanced” cultures. . . . [W]e propose a reinscription of the contact between, for example, European and African symbolic systems in syncretic articulations, not as contradictory but as *antagonistic*, i.e., in relations which are animated by the partial presence of the other within the self, such that the differential identity of each term is at once enabled and prevented from full constitution. These relations, which, depending on the configurations of power in contingent historical conditions, may or may not crystallize into oppositionalities, exist both horizontally (in equivalential alignments among diverse groups united in struggle, as in the Cretan example) as well as vertically (in dominant/subaltern confrontations, as in colonialism). Antagonistic relations, then, indicate the limits of absolutist conceptions of culture based upon a closed system of unalloyed, hetero-topic differences, and thereby expand the logics of struggle” (Becquer and Gatti 1991: 70–72).

10. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith believes that the syncretic process in Haitian Vodou deviates from that of other “Neo-African” religious expressions in the Americas for historical reasons: “Vodou is a heteroclitite compendium of many African cults ‘rendered’ in a Haitian historical and sociological context. It appears perhaps as the most creolized of African-derived systems in the Americas. Its liturgical language is Haitian (Creole), not Fon, Ewe, Yoruba, or Lingala. Cut off from the source of ‘fresh’ Africans, paradoxically because of its early independence, and abandoned to itself, Vodou has become the least ‘pure’ of the new religions, neither Nago or Kongo, yet African in its essence. Early contacts with islamized Africans—and these had transformed Islam—had long ended. Government- and church-sponsored endemic persecutions tended to reinforce the conflation between *lwa/orisha* and Roman Catholic saints, but these functional equivalencies remained tenuous. Deities, after all, are cosmic energy, archetypes, and moral principles. Saints, however, are dead (white) people whose edifying life stories remain in darkness for almost all Haitians. . . . [F]ew of the adepts [have] any knowledge of the lives of the saints whose images they revere as representations of their gods. The saints have disembodied spirits, as the person who is ‘mounted’ by the spirit does in the ritual. Each *lwa/orisha* has multiple aspects, represented by *different* saints (unconnected to each other in time and space), a situation so complicated that only one with the patience of a saint could hope to unravel it, but they would not succeed. Camouflage was *one* consideration” (2005: 62–63).

11. In *Voice of the Leopard: African Secret Societies and Cuba*, Ivor L. Miller notes that the nineteenth-century Afro-Cuban religious leader Andrés Petit introduced the Christian crucifix into the Abakuá lodges to meet a need at that historical moment—to defend the practices from official repression. This “illustrates the intentional fusion of distinct practices by innovators with a community-based tradition, who are often criticized by the traditionalists. . . . Church purists have consistently characterized non-Christian practices as ‘syncretic,’ therefore false. The various traditions emerging from this activity evidence why traditions like Abakuá, Santería (Ocha), and Palo Mayombe cannot be contained within a ritual recipe book, because their ceremonies are never stagnant reproductions, but ritual theater and artistic enterprises that develop according to the mastery of those present” (2009: 116).

12. For a discussion of legitimacy and religious syncretism in Latin America, as well as power and empowerment via the articulation of syncretic elements, see Benavides (1995).

13. In his study of the Abakuá Society in Cuba, David H. Brown (2003) notes that, although Creole syncretisms are typically believed to result from the encounter of African and Catholic belief systems, those interpretations preclude individual idiosyncratic agency in the creation of religious cultural meaning and the significant influence of popular and mass culture in the transformation of religious symbols. Altars serve as an excellent example: “Abakuá objects and signifying practices, no less than those of any other group, are produced as the ongoing outcomes of struggles and exceed the ‘results’ of any imagined initial ‘encounter’ of ‘Europe’ and Africa’. . . . Altars are examples of ‘synthetic’ knowledge production and aesthetic creativity par excellence, assemblages from fragments or streams of multiple cultures as opposed to direct representation of nature” (6).

14. Based primarily on Castellanos and Castellanos, *Cultura afrocaribana* (1992, 3: 16–18). Just as the insights regarding the creolization process described above have crossed the boundaries of the geographic region—Brazil and other Latin American countries, and even such U.S. cities as New York and Miami reveal the type of cultural amalgamation characteristic of the region—it should be noted that Creole religious beliefs have gone beyond geographic, racial, and class boundaries as well. Their devotees are found throughout South America—including areas of Brazil with Italian, Polish, and German immigrants and in countries like Uruguay and Argentina with an insignificant number of persons of African descent—and in the United States outside the Cuban and Latino communities (Barnes 1989: 10).

15. See Cros Sandoval (1995), and Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert (2001).

16. Juana Elbein Dos Santos and Deoscoredes M. Dos Santos (1984: 78).

17. African-derived practices are often described in the scholarly literature as “spiritist” religions due to the element of possession of followers by the spirits. In this book only Espiritismo is referred to as “Spiritism” or spiritist, as identified in the Caribbean. Of course, to some degree all religions that believe in the spirits can be identified as spiritist; the Christian Pentecostal rituals that attempt to achieve a direct experience of possession by the Holy Ghost are one example of a Christian spiritist practice, albeit one with a more “mainstream” spirit.

18. Spirit possession exists throughout the world in one form or another and can be defined as an “altered state of consciousness indigenously interpreted in terms of the influence of an alien spirit” (Crapanzano and Garrison 1977: Introduction, 7).

19. Joan D. Koss has written of the creativity of Caribbean cult rituals and the “transformation of the mundane through the use of possession-trance” (1979: 376). When ritual participants are possessed by the *dramatis personae* of a particular belief system, rather than follow the limited stereotypical patterns associated with the supernatural character incarnated, numerous variations (the multiple avatars of the *orisha* and the *lwa*, for example, and the portrayal of the more typical spirit guides in *Espiritismo*) allow for individual variation of their characterization in possession. A successful cult leader, she claims, must be flexible and creative in combining meaning and aesthetics to the cult ritual “performance.” Koss cites Métraux (1972: 64), who describes the ideal *hungan* as “at one and the same time priest, healer, soothsayer, exorcizer, organizer of public entertainment and choirmaster:”

Ritual as a creative forum is most clearly seen, in my opinion, in these cult cases. Two important attributes of cult activity provide for this condition: first, cult rituals, as distinct from those of most established religions, attract their participants through the offer of direct contact with supernatural beings. Even though this contact may be achieved initially only through a third party, the cult adept, priest, or spirit medium, there is a process of democratization of the “power” to communicate with the supernatural world which is both ideal and actual—that is, that any believer can become an adept, even though not all develop sufficient powers to do so. Second, cult ideologies in the Caribbean are, in terms of their basic patterns, deceptively simple. They consist of good and bad *loa*, *orisha*, spirits or powers who “work” according to the dictates of their human communicants but can as often manifest their own characterological attributes to disturb the behavior of those who lack the knowledge and power to deal with them. Those who become adepts and can organize their own groups acquire their leadership status by successfully dealing with the multiple, variable expressions of the personal disturbances of their followers. Their manipulative techniques of divining, healing, and advice-giving cannot possibly respond to set and detailed formulas, pedantically derived by arduous interpretation over years of discussion. To be a successful cult leader or adept, creative ability is requisite (376–377).

20. Following in the path of Edward Tylor, one of the earliest anthropologists who developed an evolutionary theory of religion in his *Primitive Culture* (1871), Frazer’s work (1922; 1966) was influential in its time, viewing magic as part of a progressive development of societies on the developmental path to religion and ultimately to science. However, Frazer’s unilinear evolutionary approach, his clear bias against religion, and his ethnocentric methods and use of ethnographic sources have been criticized and are viewed as problematic today and of little value to scholars of religion.

21. Magic is also a means to a political and social end, as we see in the Haitian Revolution that famously began with a Vodou ceremony and a solemn oath or pact to gain liberation. African slaves were convinced that they would overcome their French oppressors due to the power afforded them by Vodou’s ritual magic and the protection they would receive from the African deities, the *lwas*. The belief that persons can assume an animal form to escape the bullets of the enemy, lycanthropy, is a type of metamorphosis or magico-ecstatic transformation accomplished through the use of ritual possession, ointments, or charms: “El propósito del Pacto Solemne que figura en *El reino de este mundo* de Carpentier es precisamente poner a los esclavos bajo la protección de las divinidades africanas. . . En general los hechos relacionados con el vodú se saben ya que hasta ahora lo mencionado en la obra de Carpentier se realiza cada día en las campañas de Haïti; quiero hablar del poder licantrópico, de personas que no pueden ser alcanzadas por las balas etc. Todo esto es moneda corriente hoy día en Haïti.” (Personal correspondence with Haitian Joseph Pierre-Antoine.)

In “Romantic Voodoo: Obeah and British Culture, 1797–1807,” Alan Richardson (1997) describes a similar role of Obeah in slave revolts in the British West Indies regarding oaths of secrecy and fetishes that promised invulnerability. Yvonne P. Chireau (2003) observes that spiritual oaths were administered by priests and other appointed religious functionaries for various motives. In the well-known historical event, the New York Conspiracy of 1712, an insurrection of a diverse group of “American-born blacks, native American Indians (or mestizos), and Africans of the Nations of Caramantee and Pappa,” the participants had sworn an oath and used an enchanted powder to ensure their invul-

nerability, “The conspirators were bound together by the act, having sealed a covenant between themselves and the invisible forces of the supernatural world.” Nearly all were apprehended, tried, condemned, and executed (2003: 61).

22. *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (1994: 6–7). See our *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean* (1997: 3).

23. Also of interest in the area of African American expressions of religious pluralism, globalization, and sexual diversity is Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (2008).

24. Some Mexican Americans refer to themselves as Chicano/a, usually considered a more politically identified term, popularized as a result of the Mexican American social justice movements of the 1960s.

25. Duke University Press (2009). Also see Gloria Anzaldúa, *Interviews = Entrevistas* / (2000).

## CHAPTER 1

1. Long (1774, 2: 451–452, 473). Quoted by Alan Richardson in “Romantic Voodoo” (1997).

2. Figures from Knight (1970: 10) based on Aimes (1907) and von Humboldt (1969). See also Curtin (1969). The slave trade continued illegally in Cuba until the mid-1860s. Abolition was formally decreed in 1880 with an eight-year “apprenticeship” of freed slaves which ended in 1886. On abolition, see Knight (1970: chapters 7–8).

3. For a description of the conditions of life in the sugar mill, see Moreno Fraginals (1976: 142–153). On Cuban slavery, see H. Thomas (1971: chapter 13).

4. Estimates on the number of slaves imported to Cuba vary. Curtin (1969) describes the difficulty of arriving at an accurate number and offers the following estimates: to 1773 (based on Aimes 1907) 13,100; 1774–1807, 119,000; 1808–1865, 568,500 (Curtin 1969: 44); for the entire period of the slave trade in Spanish America, 702,000 (Curtin 1969: 46). Manuel Moreno Fraginals (1976) places the number at over one million but many agree that Curtin’s figures underestimate the count (Castellanos and Castellanos 1988, 1: 25).

5. For defense and concealment purposes, maroon communities took advantage of the harshness of their natural environment. Many of their villages were surrounded by palisades or, in Spanish, *palenques*; hence the generic name.

6. For a more general discussion of maroon societies in the Americas, see Price (1973), especially the Introduction, 1–30.

## CHAPTER 2

1. The terms will be used interchangeably here as they are with many practitioners.

2. Palmié believes that the African-derived practices formed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and that grew to be the Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian religious formations seen today in Cuba and Brazil were “resultants of erratic shifts in the larger Atlantic matrix that temporarily linked places like Havana or Salvador da Bahia with specific African source origins. And it was this matrix that generated what, at times, must have been stunningly diverse patterns of circulation of heterogeneous African cultural forms in single New World localities” (2002: 142).

## CHAPTER 5

1. See Claudette A. Anderson's "Judge, Jury or Obeahman? Power Dynamics in the Jamaican House O'law" (2008).
2. Guyanese Comfa is a comparable practice. Comfa, as Michelle Asantewa describes it, is "the generic term used to define the manifestation of spirits. Anyone who becomes spiritually possessed on hearing the beating of drums is said to 'ketch Comfa'" (2008: 1). The practice, she explains, is linked to "Okomfa"—the traditional /"fetish" priests and the dance of Akom in Ghana, West Africa, which in Guyana was associated with the worship of the "watermamma" spirit brought to Guyana by African slaves:  
Comfa ceremonies were held when there was a misfortune in the village or in a family when information was needed to give account of certain inexplicable travesties. The "Watermamma" spirit was invoked to provide solutions to problems or to remove evil manifesting in an individual, family or community. The main feature of a Comfa ceremony which was held to honour the "Watermamma" was a dance sometimes called "cabango," "cumfo" or "catamarrha." (2008: 1)
3. Interestingly, Cobb, the young apprentice learning the craft from "Mr. Murray, indicated in an interview that he intended to set up his practice in an affluent neighborhood: His destination is uptown, among the more well-to-do Jamaicans. 'I am going to set up in Eastwood Park Gardens. This is where the calling says that I must go,' discloses Cobb with a wide grin" (Luton 2009).
4. George Blyth, *Reminiscences of Missionary Life. With Suggestions to Churches and Missionaries* (Edinburgh: William Oliphant & Sons, 1851), 172–175. Quoted by Diane Stewart (1997).
5. The name Zambi is also used by practitioners of the Cuban Congo religion, Regla de Palo, who share similar practices and traditions.
6. The Obeah practiced in Dominica, with its emphasis on gaddé zaffés and belief in soucouyants, is very close to Martinican and Guadeloupean beliefs. Jeffrey Mantz, in his work on accusations of Obeah practice in Dominica, has found an interesting link between reports that individuals practice some form of witchcraft and accusations of homosexuality. In these instances, the condemnation of Obeah practitioners is transferred to individuals who may or may not be homosexual, in a manifestation of the persistent homophobia that characterizes Dominican society:  
Homosexuality does not replace Obeah as a 'modern' or digital age object of scorn; rather it complements it as something that indexes newly emergent cultural fears and anxieties. As a complementary discourse, *mépwí* about homosexuality follows many of the same structural patterns as that about Obeah, focusing on behavioral practices and a predisposition for intentional malice, rejecting any possible assertion that the practices might be innate, inborn, or otherwise out of the control of the accused. (Mantz 2008: 10)

## CHAPTER 6

1. Rastafarian notions of an ancestral homeland is based on a complex set of notions known as Ethiopianism, an ideology derived from biblical references to all black peoples as Ethiopians. These references underscore the African peoples' proud cultural heritage, shown to predate European civilization. Ethiopianism has been used to express the

political, cultural, and spiritual aspirations of blacks throughout the Diaspora since the eighteenth century. As a unifying metaphor for African brotherhood, it has provided the basis for shared notions of destiny and identification between African peoples.

2. Haile Selassie (1892–1975), Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974, was born Tafari Makonnen, son of a chief advisor to Emperor Menilek II. He is best known for his efforts to modernize Ethiopia. After a successful early career as a reform-minded provincial administrator, he had come to represent the most progressive elements of the Ethiopian elite. His marriage in 1911 to Wayzaro Menen, a great-granddaughter of Menilek II, brought him into the royal family. Tafari became the rallying point for the Christian resistance against Melinek II's successor, Lij Yasu, whose close ties to Islam were resented by the primarily Christian population. In 1916, after Lij Yasu was ousted and replaced by Zauditu, Melinek II's daughter, Ras (Prince) Tafari was named regent and heir apparent to the throne. In 1930, at Zauditu's death, he was crowned emperor, taking the name of Haile Selassie ("Might of the Trinity").

The early years of Haile Selassie's reign were marked by progressive reforms in education, the justice system, the burdensome system of feudal taxation, and the centralization of the government. He was forced into exile in 1936, after Italy invaded Ethiopia, and did not resume his throne until British and Ethiopian forces invaded the country in 1941 and recaptured Addis Ababa. Opposition to Haile Selassie's autocratic rule, however, began to surface in the 1950s, as he failed to heed increasingly strident calls for democracy. A new constitution granted in 1955 failed to limit his powers. Overt opposition surfaced in 1960, when a dissident wing of the army secured control of Addis Ababa, and was dislodged only after a sharp engagement with loyalist elements. Haile Selassie ruled Ethiopia until 1974, when widespread famine, ruinous levels of unemployment, and the government's perceived inability to improve conditions prompted the army to mutiny. He was replaced by a provisional Marxist military government and was kept under house arrest in his palace, where he died a year later. He was said to have died of natural causes, but it was later revealed that he was strangled on the orders of the military government.

3. Haile Selassie, a devout Christian, was not himself a Rastafarian, and what he thought of his deification in the faraway land of Jamaica has never been entirely clear. He is said to have refused to see a group of Jamaican Rastas who went to Ethiopia to honor him and who found themselves turned away at the palace gates. Many Rastafarians refused to believe the reports of his death, regarding it as a trick of the media to challenge their faith. They believe that Haile Selassie has moved on to a state of perfect flesh, and sits on the highest point of Mount Zion, awaiting judgment.

4. Disillusioned by this failure, Edwards and his followers founded the Bobos, a Rasta group of believers in black supremacy who live in an organized commune in Jamaica and have been recognized by the United Nations as an independent flag-bearing nation (D. Stewart 1997: 144). The Bobo Rastas, known for their radical adherence to the principles of black nationalism, live in ascetic contemplation of Rastafarian principles, closely observing a series of taboos (see below) that they believe will lead to a pure and selfless community.

5. The term Nyabinghi also describes an Afro-Jamaican drumming style.

6. The Nyabinghi struggle against the British in Uganda, led by their valiant Queen Muhumusa, raged for twenty years from 1917 to 1937 and was followed closely by the press in Jamaica, particularly after rumors had spread in 1935 that Haile Selassie had taken over the leadership of the Nyabinghi movement.