

**Reclaiming African
Religions in Trinidad:
The Socio-Political
Legitimation of the Orisha
and Spiritual Baptist Faiths**

Frances Henry

**THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST
INDIES PRESS**

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*To my “spiritual father”, the late
Ebenezer “Pa Neezer” Elliott,
whose influence on my life I’m just
beginning to understand.*

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Preface

I STARTED THIS PROJECT as a fairly traditional ethnography that focused on the research questions that informed the project – the increasing socio-political legitimation of African religions in Trinidad and the attempt to explain why these changes are taking place. From the outset I felt that it would probably reach several audiences in the academic world and people interested in the development of African religions, especially in the Caribbean.

As the work progressed, the question of audience as well as my own perspective began to change. I realized that the changes in the Orisha faith were of the moment – happening in front of my eyes, so to speak – and that the whole movement was very much in the public discourse. Writing this book therefore began to take on a slightly different perspective.

There is dialogue and debate within the Orisha and, to a lesser extent, the Spiritual Baptist communities and I hope that this book will assist as that dialogue continues. My wish is that this book will further the debate and that my work can be used by devotees as a means of informing and continuing the process. I also wanted to present the community with an objective analysis of how their religion is changing. That might seem presumptuous on my part, but I have tried wherever possible to have people speak in their own voices so that it is their voices that inform and articulate the debate. Thus, the audience for this book became directed more and more towards the community itself and less towards the scholarly community. Naturally, I



also hope that the book will be of value to social scientists, Caribbeanists and scholars of comparative religion.

During the course of the fieldwork, it also became apparent to me that the Orisha religion is already over-researched. Two or three students and researchers from abroad, as well as many undergraduate and graduate students from the University of the West Indies who also are now interested in researching the Orisha and Spiritual Baptists, are busy studying aspects of the faith. The problem with much of this kind of work, however, is that it is rarely published; it remains buried in academic files. Some of the students are working on undergraduate and Master's theses that rarely if ever see the light of day. Aside from my earlier work, that of George Simpson and more recent books by James Houk and Kenneth Lum, very little has been published on Orisha, yet so much research is being undertaken.¹ The actual communities, many of whose members are so generous with their time, rarely receive anything in return from many of these researchers. In view of this situation, I wanted to make sure that my findings would come out fairly. By publishing it with a Caribbean publisher, I hope also to ensure that the book will be more readily accessible in the region.

Finally, I made an attempt to write the book in a manner that is accessible to many levels of readership, and have therefore attempted to avoid not only excessive jargon but also too much of the theorizing that is comprehensible only to academic specialists. I hope that members of the Orisha and Spiritual Baptist religions around the world will read this book because their issues of changing ritual, practice and behaviour are more than local – they are universal and speak to the human condition.



Acknowledgements

I AM DEEPLY GRATEFUL to the many members of both the Orisha and Spiritual/Shouter Baptist faiths who took the time and trouble to talk to me and answer my many questions. This book would not have been possible without their cooperation.

I need to express my special thanks to Eintou Pearl Springer, who not only was giving of her time throughout the course of this project but who read the manuscript in draft. Her many helpful suggestions and additional information made this a better book. Her assistant Merlyn Atwell-Dick provided help throughout the course of this project. Michael Cyrus also read several sections and corrected some mistakes. Bishop Carlotta John read and reviewed the chapter on the Spiritual Baptist religion.

Iyalorisha Melvina Rodney was warmly welcoming and helpful. Babalorisha Sam Phills was always ready with support and encouragement. Mrs Patricia McCleod, Ella Andall and Brother Oludari were exceptionally generous with their time.

Drs Ken and Sheri Deaver, long-time calypso fans and collectors, sent me some important calypsos that I used in chapter 7. I am happy to acknowledge the help of Dr Ann Lee in the research and writing of the chapter on calypsos and popular culture.

Two graduate students – Keith McNeal and Vincent Goldberg – were doing research in Trinidad during the course of my own fieldwork. I am



grateful to them for help, shared materials and particularly some of the photographs used in this book. I wish to also give special credit to Mr Lennox Grant, the then editor of the *Trinidad Guardian*, who made some photos available to me, and to the *Trinidad Express*, which also supplied some photos. Mr Chapman of the photography unit of the government information ministry was very helpful in finding more photos.

Professor John Stewart read the manuscript in draft, and I am hugely indebted to him for the many excellent revisions he suggested. His profound insights helped inform my thinking on many of the issues addressed in this book. My long-time associate in Toronto, Carol Tator, also read the manuscript and made excellent suggestions.

The Social Science Humanities and Research Council of Canada provided support for this project.

Finally, I always need to acknowledge with heartfelt thanks the contributions of my husband, Jeff Henry. Not only did he frequently come with me to some of these events but he also read every draft of this book. This book could not have been written without his constant encouragement.



Introduction

I FIRST TRAVELLED TO TRINIDAD in 1956 as a young doctoral student, hoping to do a study of what was then known as the “Shango Cult”. I was living in the United States at that time and studying at an American university. I had already completed a Master’s thesis on the forms of worship in a fundamentalist black church in Ohio and had developed a keen interest in the subject of New World African religious forms. One of my professors had studied the Vodou religion in Haiti, and suggested to me that I work on this as well. Since I had very little language facility in French, I looked for an English-speaking area in order to pursue my interest in African-derived religion. Reading Herskovits’s *Trinidad Village*, with its brief mentions of the “Shango Cult” in Trinidad, convinced me that I should go to Trinidad.

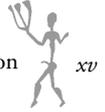
Accordingly, I arrived in Port of Spain in June of 1956 knowing no one, and certainly not any member of this religious group. I began to ask Trinidadians whom I met about Shango and was surprised to be greeted with horrific stares and exclamations. Most middle-class people I encountered and questioned said they knew nothing about it, but their shocked faces had already given them away. Working-class people I managed to meet said it existed but they were certainly not part of it because “they did the work of the devil”. No one would admit to any knowledge or experience of the group, least of all to knowing where their worshippers might be found. I

interviewed a few religious leaders who told me that they had vaguely heard that some misguided and ignorant people did still believe in “that sort of African belief” but, of course, no one of any respectability. I was also told, and later confirmed, that the Roman Catholic Church in some areas of the country at that time denied communion to any known practitioner of the “Shango Cult”. Members of the academic establishment were no help either, since no one had really looked into this form of religion. The friends I began to make viewed the subject of my inquiry with horror, saying that not only was this not a religion but it was shameful African barbarism. Moreover, it would be dangerous for a foreign white woman like me to even go to the areas where it was practised, much less participate in its rituals. But they could not, or would not, tell where these “areas” were. Gradually I began to get the idea that there was something very wrong in the way this “cult” was perceived by the majority of the population. People were so afraid of it that they would not admit to any knowledge or experience of it.

In those days I travelled in taxis and would always engage the driver and other passengers in conversation, and gradually would raise the subject of Shango. “No, no, madam, you don’t want to get involved in that” was the usual reply, until one day I ran into a bit of luck. I was in a private taxi and asked my usual question. The driver looked at me – I could see his surprised eyes in his rear mirror – and asked why I wanted to know. As I told him the reason for my inquiry, he admitted that he did know of a place and would take me there whenever I wanted to go. I said, how about now, and off we went. The rest, as they say, is history.

The driver took me to Tanti Silla’s *palais* on St François Valley Road in Belmont, and I immediately saw significance in the name of the road being the same as my own first name. I boldly walked into her yard, where I met Tanti’s husband who greeted me cordially and said that she was busy at the moment but would be out soon. She came out of the house a bit later and was somewhat suspicious of me at first. I pressed upon her the reasons for my interest, and she warmed up and invited me to attend her feast that, again luckily for me, was only two weeks away. In the meantime, I was free to speak with her and her associates at any time.

Thus began one of the most exciting, rewarding and beneficial periods of my life. In addition to Tanti Silla and the many other Orisha practitioners whom I met through her, the most important introduction was to Ebenezer



Elliott, “Pa Neezer”, the undisputed leader of this religion in all of Trinidad. He came to officiate at Tanti’s feast, and when I began talking to him, he was a bit suspicious at first. Later that evening we talked again and he asked me why I wanted to know about the religion. I said that it was unknown outside of Trinidad and I wanted to share the knowledge with my students and others in North America. I also mentioned that I already knew his knowledge was extensive; I told him that he knew more about Shango than anyone else. “It’s not Shango, it’s the African work, the Orisha work”, he said. I knew then that he had accepted me and shortly before he left, he invited me to come down and stay with him at Lengua.

I lived in his house on the Moruga Road for many months, and was able to observe at first hand his spiritual and medical “healing practice”, as he was a renowned bush doctor. He also invited me to accompany him when he went to the numerous feasts given by his many spiritual children. We became quite a familiar sight, as a taxi driven by one of Pa’s associates containing him, one or two of his special drummers and me would pull up at the home of some Orisha leader. Although occasionally a few eyebrows would be raised, being in Pa’s presence meant that I had been given the stamp of approval. Through him I met other leaders and attended many ceremonies, and my ethnographic research went very smoothly for the remainder of my time in Trinidad.

Background to the Present Study

I returned to Trinidad in 1958 for some follow-up research and also spent time in Grenada studying the Orisha religion there. On my many subsequent trips to Trinidad I spent time with Orisha people, and completed a re-study of changes in ritual, practice and observances in 1984. In the early 1990s it became increasingly clear that the Orisha religion, as it was now officially called, was again evolving. The major change was that people were beginning to take notice of it, were less suspicious and were more accepting. Moreover, the government was beginning to take the group seriously and was discussing some policy decisions regarding its status as a religion.

Accordingly my interest was sparked by this new and growing relationship between not only Orisha and the government but also the other major African-derived religion practised in Trinidad: Spiritual and Shouter



Baptism. The relationship between politics and African-derived religions became increasingly interesting, especially when the government allotted a day of official holiday to celebrate the Spiritual and Shouter Baptist religions while declaring a day of celebration for Orisha. I began seriously thinking of undertaking research on this dynamic relationship, developed a research proposal and began fieldwork in 1997 that carried through to 2000.¹

As so often happens during the course of anthropological fieldwork, as I began my inquiries into the political legitimation of African religions, another dimension of interest began to emerge. As I visited and spoke with Orisha leaders and members it soon became apparent that a major dynamic of change was also taking place particularly *within* the Orisha religion. This was the move towards Africanization or Yorubaization of the ritual, and the elimination of its syncretic Christian elements. What these changes in ritual and doctrine involve is the issue of authenticity – a topic of great importance in the anthropological literature, particularly in the anthropology of religion. It is a major point of contestation within all religions that have had to change as a result of colonization, foreign influences, diffusion, differing interpretations of their own dogma by different leaders and the like. The authenticity or inauthenticity of beliefs, practices and rituals is especially contested in modern and postmodern societies experiencing massive social change, globalization and transnationalism. Although in earlier times Orisha worshippers were not especially concerned with issues of authenticity, that topic has surfaced recently because a group of “innovators” are attempting to develop an infrastructure for this formally decentralized and atomistic religion. Today is a period of transition between the traditional syncretic and the more “modern” African approach to the religion. Both the increasing public or *external* legitimation of African religions by the government and their growing presence on the public agenda, as well as the *internal* processes and dynamics of authentication are influenced by the larger societal changes taking place in the country as it modernizes.

This book therefore presents two levels of analysis. On the one hand there is the macroscopic societal level, in which the development of the socio-political changes with respect to marginalized African religions takes place. It provides the overarching framework within which the African religions, especially the Orisha movement, are also changing in structure and ideology. At a more microscopic level, the changes within the religion, especially

with respect to administrative structures and theological and ideological understanding of the ritual, will be examined.

The focus of this book is therefore twofold:

- The growing political and social legitimation of African-derived religions, primarily the Orisha movement, as they move from oppression and marginalization to occupying a more accepted role in mainstream Trinidad society;
- The dynamics of change with respect to the challenge of authenticity within the Orisha religion.

A number of research questions inform this book. These are:

- Why have these formerly despised religions become almost mainstream?
- Why are they increasing their membership and their activities, both ceremonial and secular?
- Why has the government, in terms of both benefits and legislation, increasingly recognized them?
- How has public legitimation affected the internal dynamics of the religions, especially the Orisha movement?
- What motivates the need to Africanize or Yorubanize the Orisha religion?

Legitimation Processes

Political Legitimation

The political legitimation of the African religions can be studied from several perspectives. In the first instance, official or legislative actions are a good indicator of how change is effected. In recent times there has been some significant legislation with respect to the religions; one of the most important is the granting of a public holiday to the Spiritual Baptists that involved changing the legislation regulating public holidays in the country. Most recently, the government legislated a marriage act for the Orisha faith. Other official benefits have been granted to both religions.

Public Ceremonies

These are events that are developed by the religions but that include the full participation of government and officialdom. The Orisha religion now cele-

brates a public Family Day to which members of government and officials, the public at large, and notable people are invited, and many attend. The public celebration of the Spiritual Baptist holiday, in which large numbers of political and other notables participate, is another example.

Media Coverage

The extensive coverage by the media of all Orisha and Spiritual Baptist events is a relatively new phenomenon and reflects the growing legitimization of these groups. The media coverage can be used as both an indicator of legitimization and a creator of it, in the sense that the more the media participates in these events, the more attention and legitimization the groups receive.

Popular Culture

Contributing to the growing acceptance of these groups is the way in which their portrayal in the popular culture, especially in calypso music, has changed. In early calypsos the religions were mocked and reviled, but in more recent times their image has changed in positive directions. Also, several outstanding exponents of this popular art form are themselves members or supporters of the religions. The importance of the African religions to the development of the steelband and their relationship to Carnival are only now beginning to be explored.

Internal Changes

Identity

As public or official changes are taking place the religions, and especially the Orisha, are undergoing significant internal changes. At the level of organization, a group of younger innovators are attempting to develop a centralized infrastructure for the management of the religions. With respect to social organization, the religion is continuing to attract younger members who are concerned with their personal and cultural identities and are trying to establish a connection to the African origin of their ancestors.

These more private or internal aspects of the process appear to relate to the need, in postmodern societies, to re-establish personal and national iden-



tities. At the personal level, particularly among younger people, the need to establish an identity apart from that which was imposed during the colonial era becomes an important part of the socialization process. Black nationalism and the Black Power movement brought this into sharp relief. It is not surprising therefore that African-derived people look back to their historical origins and the culture from which they were taken to reshape their identities. In Trinidad the most dominant African cultural form has been the Orisha religion, which has survived, albeit with changes, over the many years of its suppression. Thus, it is through the belief in African religion as it is practised here that a growing number of younger people are attracted to it. The need to reaffirm African identity is made all the more urgent in recent times, since an “Indian” government has come to power and there is a resurgence of Indianness in Trinidad society. Afro-Trinidadians have become quite apprehensive about what they perceive to be Indian favouritism and a loss of power within their own group. Reaffirming African identity, through commitment to an African religion, has become even more crucial today.

Authenticity and Syncretism

As newer members are reclaiming their African identity through involvement with Orisha, they are also attempting to transform some ritual and ceremonial practices to conform more closely to the religion’s African origins. One of the most important of these is the desire to eliminate or reduce the Christian syncretism that affected the religion from its beginnings in the Caribbean. The need to become more African and “authentic” has become a sharply contested discourse within the largely amorphous group. It pits the younger innovators against the older and more traditional members of the faith, many of whom cling to their learned ways and continue Christian practices. This new movement within the Trinidadian group has, however, also resulted in the addition of ritualistic and ceremonial practices derived from its African Yoruba source. It also raises the question of how “authentic” the Orisha religion is as practised in a changing Nigeria where its source, the Yoruba, were exposed to missionaries under colonial rule.

The components of legitimation and the internal dynamics of change will be discussed in subsequent chapters. Both dynamics must be understood within the context of the general and more overarching impact of

globalization on Trinidadian society and its political and socio-economic infrastructures. In addition to being influenced by the economic and political dynamics of globalization, the society of Trinidad and Tobago is characterized by some particular and even unique elements that play a role in motivating some of the external and internal changes taking place in the Orisha and Spiritual Baptist faiths. The fact that Trinidad is a plural society in which two ethnic groups, virtually equal in numbers, compete for place, power and resources must also be considered in understanding the strong position taken by the government in granting benefits and guaranteeing rights to these religious groups.

The oil boom of the late 1980s had a great impact on Trinidad. It has become a modern, even a postmodern society, characterized by the challenging of tradition, rapid rates of change and the importance of materialism and consumerism. Modernism also brings with it an increased focus on issues relating to national and personal identity. At the national level, this plays out in the often tense relationship between the two main ethnic groups, and the role that politics plays in trying to maintain a stable and accommodating society. This brings into play the need for any government to win the support of members of both ethnic groups. The present government of the United National Congress (UNC), headed by Prime Minister Basdeo Panday, is widely perceived to be an “Indian” government largely favouring its own ethnic group at the expense of the Afro-Trinidadian community.²

The government is therefore eager to demonstrate that it also grants benefits to the Afro-Trinidadians, who make up the majority of worshippers in African-derived religions. Certainly one way of demonstrating support, as well as, in all likelihood, trying to gain electoral support from this community is by appealing to the deeply felt religious fervour so characteristic of Trinidadian people and by providing them with assistance.

Theoretical Orientation

In attempting to present some systematic analysis of the research questions that frame this book, several theoretical perspectives have been drawn upon. In general terms, religion is viewed as part of a *cultural system* constantly constructed and reconstructed in response to human experience and the changing socio-political realities of society.³ Religion as such cannot be understood



as a static institutional category because religious practices are in a state of constant change and are influenced by the social and historical contexts in which they are found. Like any institution in society, religion is a constructed and interpretative category.⁴ As such, studies of religion must take into account the power relations and ideological structure of a society. As John Nelson notes, “anthropological studies of religion can not be separated from the study of power, ideology, or semiotics any more than heart surgery can proceed without a knowledge of the interrelation of the body’s circulatory, nervous, and muscular structures”.⁵

While it has been assumed that modernism and its reliance on science and technology would reduce the need for religion,⁶ in fact, social scientists who study religion and modern social movements have found that there has been an increase in socio-religious movements even in technologically advanced countries. It has been suggested that such movements fill a need because of the fragmentation and alienation produced in modern and postmodern societies. People feel insecure and in need of ideological assurance. As well, they feel increasingly marginalized from the centres of power. Many of the new religions therefore are committed to finding new ways and a new ideology in order to “empower the individual” and to seek “a direct correspondence between human action and a meaningful context for its expression (often in the embrace of a sanctioned institution), and at providing a sense of community, support, and guidance”.⁷

While Orisha and Spiritual Baptism cannot be considered new religious movements, their new status of legal, political and social acceptance almost puts them into that category. These religions are, moreover, empowering individuals in new ways. What the innovators in Orisha are attempting in bringing back Africanisms is not only to reaffirm African identity and ideologies but also to empower the group and its members. These formerly despised religions, whose members were mocked and powerless, are now positioning themselves in new spaces within their society.

Earlier it was mentioned that globalization plays a role in the transformation of African religions in Trinidad. Globalization theory therefore also informs this project. How is this international dynamic relevant to the present study of religious change? The term “globalization” is used loosely in public discourse, but a more concise definition is required here. Scholte defines the dynamics of globalization as “the emergence and spread of a

supraterritorial dimension of social relations. It impacts all the institutions of society through the growth of transnational corporations and regulatory agencies, round the world financial markets' production lines and consumption patterns."⁸ As Lorne Dawson (quoting Jan Aart Scholte) explains, it also influences the values of society by establishing common scales of measurement and universal human rights, as well as

“non-territorial networks of collective solidarity (e.g., among women, the disabled or indigenous peoples.)” . . . A comprehensive shift in the basic conditions of social relations is being effected, whereby the world is becoming a “single place” . . . growing cognizance that our identities, both as individuals and as societies, are now being shaped to an ever greater extent by a larger interactive order of societies stretching around the globe.

Globalization has also affected the relationship of individuals to society, and it has therefore

produced a heightened cultural and individual comprehension of the socially constructed character of particular identities . . . [and] heightens the need felt by individuals and their governments to self-consciously fashion strong collective identities. Fostering such group identities is, of course, another of the conventional functions served by traditional religious belief systems and more recently by systems of civil religion.

Thus, the changes taking place within and to African and especially the Orisha religions in Trinidad and Tobago today can be seen as part of a larger dynamic of international globalization and its impact on both societal institutional restructuring and the often stressful relationships between individuals and society.

Another useful approach is provided by the literature on “popular” religion, defined as a religion of the people that “flourishes on the margins . . . and is always peripheral to institutions”, as opposed to an official state religion.⁹ “Popular” religion is one that is continually being redefined and reinterpreted, appeals primarily to the masses as opposed to the elite in society, and emphasizes problem solving and survival strategy for its largely disadvantaged followers. Popular religion has many uses, one of which is to minimize the distinction between it and the official religions. In so doing, the popular religion loses some of its marginal appeal and becomes more official in perspective. Some of the changes in the societal positioning of both



Spiritual Baptism and Orisha worship in Trinidad can be understood from this perspective.

Another useful orientation is that provided by the literature on cultural and national identity. Stuart Hall's distinction, between cultural identity understood as shared culture and history and cultural identity viewed as always in flux and in a state of becoming rather than being, is extremely useful.¹⁰ Cultural identities have histories but are also constantly undergoing transformations as they are subjected to the continuous play of history, culture and power. Cultural identities are not always integrated into a national cultural identity. Membership and participation in Spiritual Baptism and Orisha are important to the way in which people define themselves. However, it is clear from the marginalized histories of both religious groups that they have never been defined as part of the national culture that "imagines" itself as constructed solely from denominational Christian origins and South Asian-derived religious traditions, including Hinduism and Islam. There was no identified role in the national culture for African-based religions until recently. Africanization, which started with the Black Power movement in the 1970s and 1980s, is today being given impetus by the politics of identity as a counterforce to the resurgence of Indian ethnicity, culture and political power. This leads to greater involvement of young people who need to reaffirm their black African identity and Orisha, as an African-based religion, provides one such vehicle. Thus, the increasing political legitimation of both groups can also be understood in terms of the recognition of the vitality of these religions in defining individual cultural identity and as part of the emerging reconstruction of Trinidadian national cultural identity.

Of particular interest in this project is the role of younger innovators who are at the forefront of attempting to change and Africanize the Orisha religion. Basic to their motivation is the need to reaffirm black African identity, in addition to their national identity as Trinidadians. The notion of identity is also related to the notion of representation. New, younger members of Orisha want to represent themselves as "Africans" rather than, or in addition to, Afro-Trinidadians, and Orisha presents one mechanism for such representation. Rahier stresses the changing nature of black identity when he notes that

Black identities cannot be defined once and for all by pointing to – more or less vaguely – "their origin", as some sort of immutable entities. . . . Black identities

are defined and redefined, imagined and re-imagined, performed and performed again within the flux of history and within specific, changing, spatially determined societal structures.¹¹

Black identity formation and its changes relate strongly to black cultural forms as being the site of resistance. Throughout history, black resistance has taken many forms and cannot be essentialized. The notion of resistance, therefore, is also important to the analysis of legitimation. Keeping Orisha traditions alive during the periods of slavery and colonialism was an important form of black resistance in the Caribbean. The current attempt to eliminate the Christian elements brought into it because of slavery and colonialism can also be considered a form of resistance through insisting that Orisha should only be practised according to its original Yoruba source.

Another important dimension of the theoretical analysis is how the various ideological, doctrinal and ritual changes that have occurred in these religions, and especially within the Orisha movement, can be analysed from the perspective of the notions of *authenticity* and *inauthenticity* as contested sites within the study of African-derived religions.

The topic of authenticity can be fraught with difficulty. Authenticity is self-evident to believers in a tradition who know that their form of religious expression is not only authentic and true but also hegemonic because it is the right and only path to follow. Thus, authenticity also means that “divergences from the tradition are *inauthentic*” (italics mine). (Some religions are, however, “henotheistic” in that they accept the interpretation of not only other religions but also members of their own faiths whose interpretations of an event, text or statement may differ from that of others. Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism are examples of such faiths.)¹² Many scholars in this field state that they do not study the metaphysical claims to authenticity but rather the “authentication process”.¹³ This is defined as “the processes through which orthodoxy or legitimacy is determined and this can be studied independently of theological claims and theological categories”. These processes constitute the legitimate inquiry of sociological analysis and include “the status of religious views, institutions, personnel, texts, behavior patterns, sacred sites . . . when understood and practised as authoritative by individuals and/or groups”.¹⁴ This book stays within this sociological perspective. It does not challenge the supernatural or metaphysical bases of the claims to authenticity made by members of these African-derived religions.



Rather, its focus is on “authentication processes” that involve the work of living human beings today.

The issue of authenticity is not new to Caribbean studies. As Glazier notes, early controversies between Herskovits and Frazier revolved around the issue of whether African survivals could be found in the New World. Herskovits spent his scholarly life searching for them and was the first to recognize that in the area of religions Orisha (Shango, Candomblé and so on) was among the purest of these survivals. Today the participants themselves conduct the battles over authenticity.¹⁵

The need for African authenticity on the part of the innovators in the Orisha movement is powerful but so is the resistance of average worshippers, especially older members, who wish to worship the way they initially learned to. Arguments take place between members and even between elders over this issue, and it is clearly a major site of contestation. (Chapter 6 explores the case study of a congress held in 1999 in which this issue surfaced as a major dynamic.) And, as Glazier also notes, African religions have changed, and therefore the question must be raised as to what is authentic. In view of the work of missionaries in African societies, it is highly doubtful that the Yoruba Orisha religion as practised in Nigeria today is what it used to be.¹⁶ Africans travel to the New World because they believe that some of the Caribbean versions of their religion, which date back in time, are more authentic than what is practised in Nigeria today. The president of the World Orisha Steering Committee stated publicly at a conference held in Trinidad that he travels to Brazil every year and has been doing so for twenty years in order to learn and relearn his religion. Moreover, the African delegates to the congress, including the chair and leading executive committee members, are themselves Christians. The Ooni of Ife, titular and symbolic head of the Orisha religion worldwide, is a Methodist. This raises questions about the meaning of “authenticity” and, if that construct is contested, how “inauthenticity” can be defined (see chapter 5).

A Note on Methodology

The main data-gathering instruments during the course of this fieldwork consisted of approximately one hundred hours of participant observation at Orisha and Spiritual Baptist events and intensive interviewing of leaders,

members, politicians, notables and others associated with either religion. Formal interviews were conducted with forty-five persons but many more were informally questioned or interviewed at the many events that I attended. I tried to talk to every major figure in the Orisha movement as well as a sampling of Baptist leaders and practitioners. I would estimate that I talked to hundreds of members over the course of the fieldwork period of nine months (spread out over a three-year period).

Another very important source was archival records. These included transcriptions of Hansard covering the various parliamentary debates over the Orisha and Spiritual Baptist holidays and celebrations. In addition, back issues of the main newspapers, the *Trinidad Guardian* and the *Trinidad Express* going back to the early 1980s, were searched for their coverage of events that took place prior to the fieldwork. I collected a newspaper file of nearly seventy articles.

For the analysis of African religious representation in calypsos, several collectors were contacted who searched through their collections of materials and supplied lyrics. Musicians such as Andre Tanker, David Rudder and Ella Andall were interviewed and they also supplied some lyrics. Their views and perceptions were especially useful in framing the analysis of the role of popular culture in legitimating African religions.

Finally, a very important aspect of the methodology involves my own historical involvement with Orisha and Spiritual Baptism, which spans over forty-six years – half a lifetime! This gives me a sense of the development of the religions and a time perspective rare in anthropological fieldwork. Some of my early respondents were the very “ancestors” virtually worshipped today by the modern generations of believers. I met Bishop Griffith, the force behind the abolition of the Shouters Prohibition Act (see chapter 2), personally while he was on a crusade mobilizing support for these political objectives. He discussed with me the need for the repeal of this repressive legislation and he also allowed me to take photos of him and some of his colleagues. Today, Bishop Griffith is only a historical icon to this generation of Baptists.

This early involvement has stood me in good stead in conducting this study. I was remembered by Mother Rodney, the current spiritual head of the movement, from my time with Pa Neezer. She reminded me that she used to work in his kitchen during feasts and at that time she kept shyly in



the background. She knew well the “white, foreign lady who Pa uses to talk to – she lived in his very house”, she explained to one of her associates when I first came to visit her. Some of the younger members were amazed that I knew their mothers or grandmothers.

In writing this book, I have attempted wherever possible to cite the actual words of respondents as they talked to me or were quoted in the press. The danger of appropriating the culture of others and attaching meanings to their behaviour not necessarily applied by them presents a constant threat to social anthropologists. I have consciously tried to steer away from interpretations and explanations that would not be consistent with the beliefs of the people I have studied. I have also tried not to be offensive to any members of the religious groups that are the object of this book and hope that, for the most part, I have been successful. If my words are taken wrongly, however, I apologize and state unequivocally that no offence was meant. I have included a substantial number of case studies taken directly from interviews and many actual quotes, so that the voice of the people can be heard clearly throughout the work.

Finally, I need to state my own subjective biases with respect to these religions and especially Orisha. Because of my lifetime experience with it, I feel very close to the religion and its adherents. Although I have never been initiated because I cannot in honesty profess faith, I strongly believe in the Orisha as part of the supernatural forces that dwell in the universe. Although I was born Jewish I have never practised this religion with any fervour. I do define myself and part of my identity as Jewish, and am committed to its culture though not necessarily to its religious practices. I do not believe in a God as such, but do believe in supernatural forces of which the Orisha, in my personal cosmology, are included.

I also identify myself as an advocate for African religions in Trinidad and elsewhere because their adherents and practitioners were, and to some extent still are, oppressed, marginalized and excluded from the religious structure of this society. I firmly believe in their right to worship as they choose, and welcome the changes brought about by legislative and social action to bring them into the mainstream of society.

Outline of the Book

Chapters 1 and 2 provide the reader with the ethnographic background to both religions, describing their ritual practices then and now. History, ritual, ceremonials and doctrines of Spiritual Baptism and Orisha worship in Trinidad are described.

Chapter 3, “The Formal Processes of Political Legitimation”, begins the analysis by examining, in detail, the societal or external level within Trinidad society in which the growing legitimation of African religions has taken place. It describes the various governmental and legislative changes that are helping to bring them from the margins towards the mainstream of religious life in the country.

Chapter 4, “The Orisha Religion from Sacred to Secular: The Evolution of the Shango Cult into the Orisha Movement”, continues this theme by describing how the religions are reorganizing and restructuring themselves by moving towards more centralized and standardized forms of decision making. It focuses on the need to develop the secular aspects of these organizations.

This chapter discusses the structure and organization of the two religions as they are practised today. It contains an analysis of the attempt to create a national infrastructure in both groups, and the difficulties faced by them as they attempt to modernize and move away from the traditionally individualistic form of organization. The establishment of the Council of Elders and nominating official public relations officers and other administrative personnel are part of this process.

Chapter 5, “Contested Theologies in the Orisha Movement: Discourses of Authenticity and Inauthenticity”, provides a detailed discussion of contested areas within the Orisha movement, beginning with the notions of Africanization centring around the ideas of authenticity and inauthenticity.

This chapter describes in detail the Yorubanization of what used to be called “the Shango Cult” into its present form of the Orisha movement. Using my earlier ethnographic study of Shango, the changes that have taken place in the intervening years will be described. Most of these involve the increasing Africanization of the religion and the attempt, by some groups, to decrease the number and extent of Christian elements.



Chapter 6, “The Role of Syncretism in the Orisha Religion Today”, continues this analysis by examining in more detail the nature of syncretism – how syncretic the religion still is, as well as the need on the part of the innovators who want only African ritual to remove its syncretisms. The move towards Yorubaization has inspired the contested issues of authenticity and syncretism, discussions that occupied most of the proceedings of a world congress of Orisha worship held in Trinidad in 1999. These proceedings will be presented in this chapter as a case study.

Chapter 7, “African Religions and Popular Culture: Calypsos, Steelband and Carnival”, returns to the more overarching societal level by showing how African religions are featured in popular culture, especially calypso. The roles of Orisha and Spiritual Baptism in the popular art form of calypso are explored, showing that, while most references to these African religions in earlier times were extremely negative, increasingly they are being praised by calypsonians as true and authentic. Calypsos dating back to the 1930s and up to the present day, in particular some of the Orisha-framed songs of David Rudder, are analysed in this chapter. As well, the important role of Orisha in the development of *ole mas* characters in Carnival and the influence of these religions in the development of the steelband are discussed.

The concluding chapter addresses the issue of whether these African traditions as they exist in Trinidad today can properly be classified as “religions”.